

Focus Question: What are the roots of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians?

Your group will read and discuss the Documents below. Each Document is meant to help you answer the Focus Question.

Note for Document A: In 66 C.E., Rome controlled Jerusalem and the land that surrounded the city. In that year, the Jews revolted against the Romans. During the struggle, the Romans destroyed much of Jerusalem, including the Second Temple (a place very sacred to Jews). After this defeat, most Jews settled in other places, while some remained in Palestine. By the late 1800's, there were about ten million Jews scattered throughout the world. In many of the places they lived, they were discriminated against and cruelly **persecuted** or mistreated. In Eastern Europe and Russia, where more than half of the world's Jews lived, they faced increasing oppression.



Afraid of what lay ahead, many Jews believed that the only way to solve the problem of persecution was by returning to the place they believed to be their homeland—Palestine (modern day Israel). These Jews hoped to start a country of their own in Palestine. Their cause, the idea that Jews should create a nation in Palestine, became known as **Zionism**. The term Zionism comes from the name of Mount Zion, which was the hill in Jerusalem where Jews wished to return. A man named Theodor Herzl (pictured above-right) is considered to be the founder of Zionism.

Herzl believed that the only way for Jews to be free from European **anti-Semitism** (prejudice against Jews) would be for Jews to create their own country in Palestine; the land that Jews believed that God had promised them. The first group of Zionists moved to Palestine in 1882. By 1914, there were 85,000 Jews living in Palestine.

Document A: Excerpts from the Israeli Declaration of Independence (1948)

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped....After being forcibly exiled from their land [by Ancient Rome], the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

...Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses...

...In the year (1897), at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish State, Theodore Herzl, the First Zionist Congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country.



Note for Document B:

Although the Zionists claimed that Palestine was their homeland, over 600,000 people, known as the **Palestinians**, were already living there and had been for hundreds of years! Who are the Palestinians? The Palestinians are people of Arab descent who are mostly Muslim (at the time: 535,000 Palestinians were Muslim and 70,000 Palestinians were Christian).

For hundreds of years, a group of Muslim Turkish warriors known as the Ottomans ruled over the Palestinians. The Ottomans expanded their territory into a large empire (see map above); however, by World War I this empire had been weakened.

During World War I, the Ottomans fought against the British. Many Arabs, including the Palestinians, saw World War I as an opportunity to win their independence from the Ottomans. The British wanted to encourage the Arabs to revolt because this would help the British in their war against the Ottoman Empire. Some Arab leaders hoped that if the Ottomans were defeated it would mean they would be able to establish their own countries (including a country for the Palestinians). Following its defeat in World War I, the Ottoman's lost most of their territory; including Palestine. The British were given control over Palestine.

Document B: The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence 1915-1916

During the First World War, Sir Henry McMahon (a British official) and Ali Ibn Husain (an Arab leader) exchanged a series of ten letters. The letters were written in 1915 and 1916. In these letters, McMahon encouraged Arabs to revolt against the Ottoman Empire. He promised that if the Arabs supported Britain in their war against the Ottomans, then the British government would support the creation of the following countries: Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, and Iraq.

Although there was no formal agreement or treaty between the British and the Arabs, Husain did launch a revolt against the Ottomans. Many Arabs point to the letters between McMahon and Husain as proof that the British promised the Palestinians land to start their own country in Palestine.

Note for Document C: Document C is a letter written by British Foreign Minister James Balfour to Baron Rothschild (Rothschild was a famous British citizen who was Jewish). The letter was meant to try and win Jewish support for Britain and its allies during World War I. The letter has become known as the Balfour Declaration. Following World War I, the British took control over Palestine.

Document C: The Balfour Declaration

November 2nd, 1917

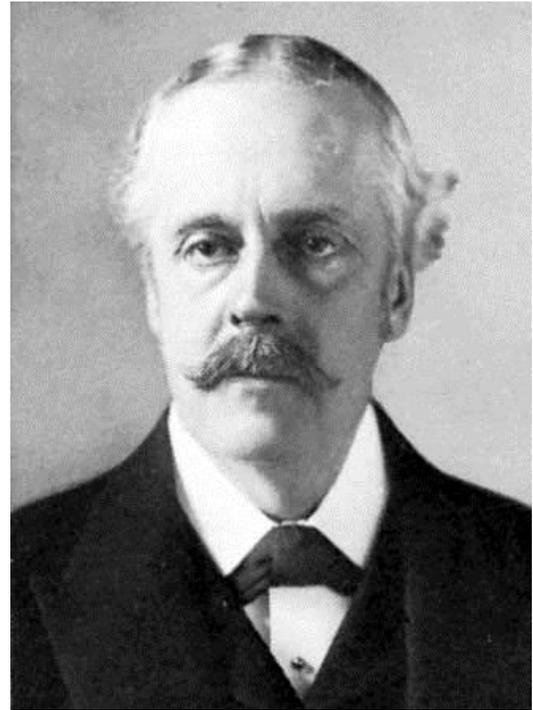
Dear Lord Rothschild:

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government [Great Britain], the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet:

“His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours,
Arthur James Balfour



James Balfour

Document D: Impact of the Holocaust

Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi political party, came to power in Germany in 1933. Hitler believed that Germans were “racially superior” and that Europe’s Jews were not only “inferior” but also a threat to Germans. In the years that led up to and during World War II, Hitler ordered the persecution and murder of Europe’s Jewish population. This event became known as the Holocaust (from the Greek word to “sacrifice by fire”). By the end of World War II, Nazi Germany had murdered nearly six million European Jews.

During the Holocaust, thousands of Jews looked to escape Europe. Many European Jews decided to flee to Palestine. By 1939, there were as many as 445,000 Jews living in Palestine (compare that to the 85,000 who lived there in 1914). The soaring population of Jews in Palestine alarmed the Palestinian population who still expected to establish a country of their own.

Following World War II, some countries supported the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Thousands of Holocaust survivors had no place to live. During the Holocaust their property had been taken and many Jews simply did not want to return to their previous homes (where they had been persecuted). The establishment of a Jewish country in Palestine seemed to make sense to some world leaders.

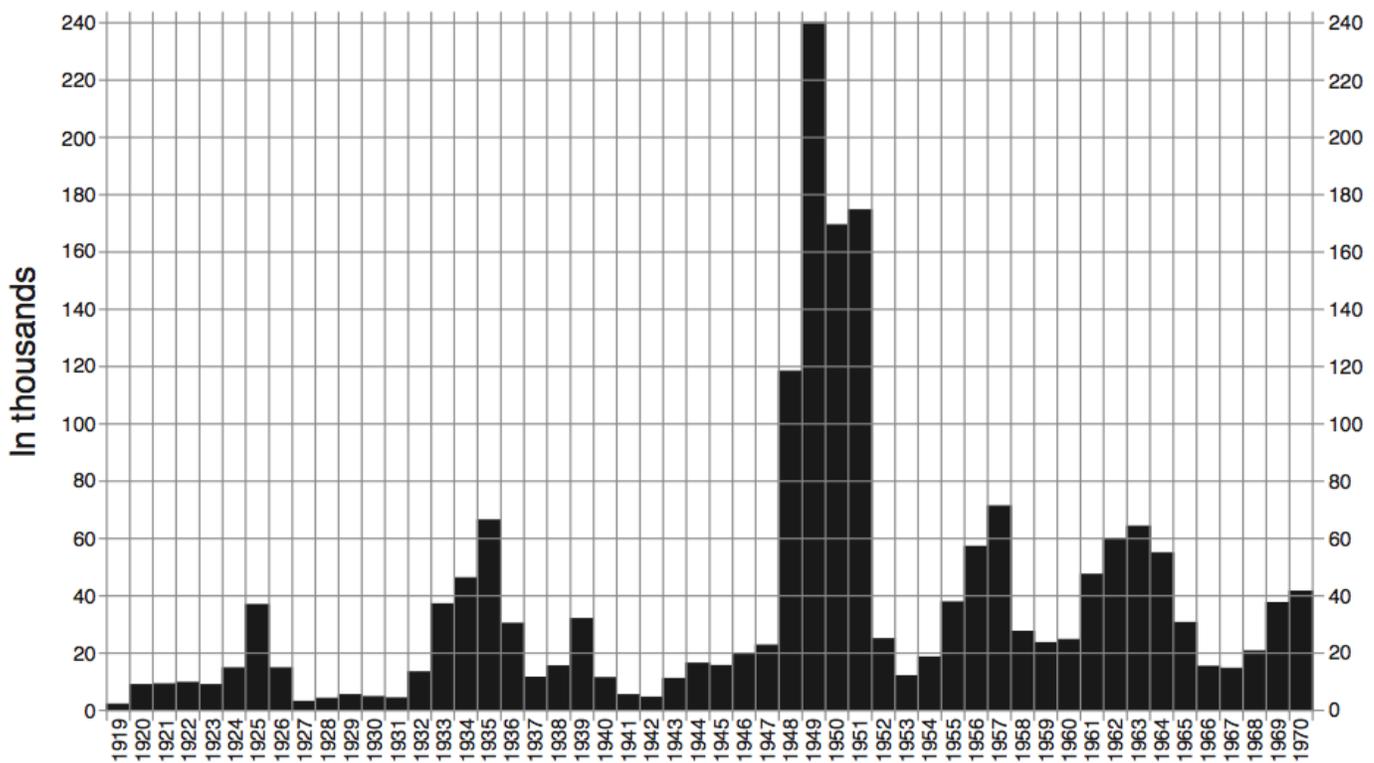
Document E: Palestinian Claims to the Land (and Chart)

As more Jewish immigrants settled in Palestine (see chart below), the Palestinians felt threatened and grew more and more fearful of losing the land that would form their new country. Violence broke out between Jews and Palestinians. The Palestinians boycotted Jewish businesses and destroyed Jewish property. The Jews retaliated. People on both sides were killed.

The Palestinian claim to the land was based on the fact that they had lived in Palestine for hundreds of years and the fact that they were the majority (Palestinians made up 70 percent of Palestine's population). They were bitterly opposed to the creation of a Jewish country in Palestine. Why should they give up their land because a Jewish kingdom existed there in ancient times? Why, they wondered, should they give up their land because of what the German Nazis had done?

The Palestinians argued that they deserved the right to establish their own country. The surrounding Arab countries (including: Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) supported the Palestinians in the opposition of a Jewish nation in Palestine.

Document E (continued): Immigration of Jews to Palestine/Israel (1919-1970)



Source: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Volume 9, Keter Publishing House Jerusalem (adapted)