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ISRAEL'S CONTESTED SPACE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In a crowded world employing precise means of measurement in order to define and represent boundaries, it is understandable that the past is scrutinized to provide historical credence for such frontiers. However, for most of human history, major empires, instead of clear lines, had zones of authority in their border areas, zones in which the pretensions of imperial power did not always match the situation on the ground. And so for the Ottoman empire which overthrew its Mamluk counterpart in 1516-17 and thus gained control not only over what is now Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and the Hijaz, but also a degree of authority over the Bedouin and other tribes in what is now Jordan and the bulk of Saudi Arabia. There was no hard-and-fast border, but rather a position of military dominance presented by lines of forts that guarded major routes, notably from Egypt to Mecca and from Damascus to Mecca. As such, fortifications as the defence against threats from the east replicated the situation seen with the earlier Romans, Byzantines and Crusaders and prefigured that which was to be seen more recently, and in a different context, with Israel.

The Ottomans maintained this approach to the Arab population and, indeed, used troops to advance the frontier in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in a process dependent on the legitimacy of force and physical presence, rather than on lines on the map. Thus, in what is now Jordan, the Ottomans established forts and outposts in the second half of the century, and in 1867 forced the submission of the Balqa Bedouin with an armed expedition, collecting unpaid taxes, and ended the Bedouin extortion of tribute from the villagers who were the source of Ottoman revenue. Far from seeing any economic divide on the River Jordan, the Ottoman presence was consolidated with agrarian settlement, and, subsequently, with the building of the Hijaz railway from Damascus to Arabia in the 1900s.

The accession of the reformist Young Turks to control over the Ottoman Empire in 1908 brought new energy to Ottoman government, which was manifested in an expansion into Jordan. The Jabal Druze there was subjugated in 1910, and, further south, the Ottomans suppressed a revolt in Karak. Ottoman control was defended by military force, fortification and bribery.

As a result of military success in World War One, again showing the central role of force in establishing and affirming control and boundaries, Britain became the imperial power in the region. The conquered Ottoman territories were divided by the League of Nations into mandated territories, for which the ruling power was answerable to the League. This peace settlement was determined by the victors, which meant, for the Middle East, Britain and France. France became the mandate power in what became Syria and Lebanon, while the British mandate was divided between Palestine and Transjordan. Separately, the British were also in control in Iraq and

Egypt, and thus more generally able to determine boundaries. Again force played a key role, and notably as the British prevented expansion from Arabia by Ibn Saud in part by using air attacks. Palestine initially presented the British less of a military problem than Transjordan, although, in neither case was it necessary to employ the shelling and bombing used by the French in and around Damascus in 1925-6. In Transjordan, the British found themselves faced by internecine tribal conflict and having to adopt the Ottoman role of defending settled areas against nomadic raiders. As a result, a force of cavalry and machine-gunners recruited from Circassians used by the Ottomans to this end was established by the British in Amman, the 'Reserve Force'.

The British relied also on mapping as a means to affirm and use rule. Indeed, the clarification of imperial boundaries was important to the process by which colonial governments went about their business of collecting taxes, planning railways and administering territories. As a result, Palestine was surveyed by Britain. Moreover, thanks to this surveying Britain was able to produce the 1:100,000 topographical map of Palestine, in 16 sheets, between 1934 and the end of the British Mandate in 1948. As a demonstration of the use intended from such material, these maps were only printed in England. During World War Two, the plates were handed over to army units serving in Palestine, for updating and printing for military needs.¹

The British ability to deploy information, however, was challenged by the rise of competing nationalisms in Palestine, each of which drew on ambitions fired by the new possibilities apparently offered by the fall of the Ottoman empire. Indeed, the late 1910s on were a peculiarly complex period because they saw both Western imperialism carried to an unprecedented territorial height, notably with the British empire, and also, in contrast, the rise of nationalisms seeking the overthrow of these empires. In the case of Britain, contradictory assumptions and promises that owed much to the exigencies of the Great War she had nearly lost greatly complicated the situation.

Competing claims posed a problem for Britain which it sought to deal with by compromise. Arab disorder had been a problem for much of the 1930s but it gathered force in 1937 after the Peel Commission, which had been established to tackle the linked issues of Jewish immigration and the violently hostile Arab response, recommended the partition of Palestine between Arab and Jewish states. The boundaries chosen essentially reflected ethnic preponderance but it was assumed that there would be a forcible exchange of people between states as part of the settlement as had been done between Greece and Turkey in 1923. This process outlined by the Peel Commission did not reach an actual partition, and it is therefore difficult to assess the nature of the use of maps had one ensued.

Instead, the report was rejected by the Arabs and fuelled the Arab Revolt of 1936-39. It placed a major burden on the British military, one that coincided with the Muslim *jihadi* rebellion under the Faqir of Ipi on the North-West Frontier of British India. This opposition directly assisted the Fascist dictators in putting pressure on Britain. In 1938-9, the British used 50,000 troops to suppress this rising. Concern about Palestine was accentuated by Mussolini's attempts to exploit Arab nationalism, notably in Egypt and Palestine, as an aspect of his drive for Mediterranean hegemony, a drive that entailed the overthrow of the British position. The Arab Revolt posed a serious problem for the British, not least as, in response to sniping and sabotage, and short of information about the rebels, they were unable to maintain control of much of the countryside. However, the opposition lacked overall leadership and was divided, in particular between clans. The British also used collective punishments to weaken Palestinian support for the guerrillas and sent significant reinforcements in the winter of 1938-9. The Revolt was essentially over by March 1939.

In the event, the Arabs were to reject another partition scheme in 1947 and to be left defeated and, thereby, in a far worse territorial position. This failure is recorded in maps, as that of 1967 was to be. These maps are of consequence but they recorded rather than shaped change. The key element maps record, and go on recording, is Arab rejectionism and a related reliance on violence. Thus, the current cartographic situation is a product of Arafat's inability in 2000 to negotiate in good faith and the extent to which the turn to violence leaves Israel understandably concerned about its security.

Looking back underlines the extent to which Jewish settlers (and earlier British administrators) did not arrive in a self-governing elysium but rather became key players in a crisis of imperial power, a crisis provoked by the strains of successive world wars. Like other crisis situations, this one was contested and Israel emerged the victor. Instead of

¹ D. Gavish, 'Foreign Intelligence Maps: Offshoots of the 1:100,000 Topographic Map of Israel', *Imago Mundi*, 48 (1996), pp. 175, 177.

adapting to the situation and seeking to derive what benefit they could, the defeated preferred a rejectionism directed not only at Israel but also both at the USA and at a supposedly malign history. If it was malign, however, that in large part was due to a repeated turn to violence on the part of the Arabs. Like all states and societies, Israel has problems, faults and dilemmas. They are made far more understandable by the nature of its opposition.

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