

CHAPTER FIVE

CARVING OUT A HOMELAND

As early Jewish pioneers moved to Palestine at the beginning of the twentieth century and focused on growing crops and establishing communities, Zionist politicians continued to fight for the establishment of a Jewish state in the region ruled by the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. Even as the Zionists pushed for a homeland, several European countries were vying for control of the area, especially Great Britain. As World War I began, the British and French were determined to dismantle the

Ottoman Empire and expand their own growing empire in the Middle East. To achieve their goals, they began negotiating with both Zionists and Arabs in regard to Palestine and the surrounding areas, exploring ways to seize power.

Chaim Weizmann, a Russian-born Englishman, was a leader in the Zionist movement. He encouraged the British to support the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The British were interested in helping the Zionists, but mostly for their own reasons. They especially hoped that if American Jews saw Britain helping to create a Jewish homeland, then those Jews might prod US leaders to join the fight against the Germans in World War I. The Zionists believed they had won a great victory when, on November 2, 1917, the British issued a letter from Lord Arthur Balfour, foreign secretary to Lord Walter Rothschild, which came to be known as the Balfour Declaration:

Have You Heard of Chaim Weizmann? (1874-1952)

Born in Motol, Russia, in 1874, Weizmann received his education in biochemistry in Switzerland and Germany. In 1905 he moved to England and was elected to the General Zionist Council. Weizmann's scientific assistance to the Allied forces in World War I brought him into close contact with British leaders and enabled him to play a key role in encouraging the Balfour Declaration. In 1921 Weizmann was elected president of the World Zionist Organization.

Almost thirty years later, in 1947, Weizmann addressed the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine and influenced US president Harry Truman to recognize Israel. Weizmann became the first president of Israel in 1949, serving until his death in 1952. Today, one of Israel's premier scientific research institutions, the Weizmann Institute, is named after him.



His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours 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.

But the British also believed they needed help from the Arabs in Arabia to defeat the Ottomans and made promises to their key leaders even while they were making promises to the Zionists. The British high commissioner for Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, secretly negotiated with one of the key leaders of the Arabs, Hussein ibn Ali. If ibn Ali would lead his people in a revolt against the Ottoman Empire, McMahon promised, the Arabs would be granted independence in territories taken away from the Turks. Ibn Ali agreed, and he and some of his followers were involved in a revolt against the Turks that helped lead to their downfall.

Look Closer

The Arab connection to Palestine did not begin until after the death of Muhammad in the seventh century, and most Palestinian Arabs arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

STRAIGHT from the Source

"I am convinced that this declaration will assure you beyond all possible doubt of the sympathy of Great Britain toward the aspirations of her friends the Arabs and will result in a firm and lasting alliance, the immediate results of which will be the expulsion of the Turks from the Arab countries and the freeing of the Arab peoples from the Turkish yoke, which for so many years has pressed heavily upon them."

—EXCERPT FROM A LETTER FROM SIR HENRY MCMAHON TO HUSSEIN IBN ALI

DIVIDING OTTOMAN TERRITORIES

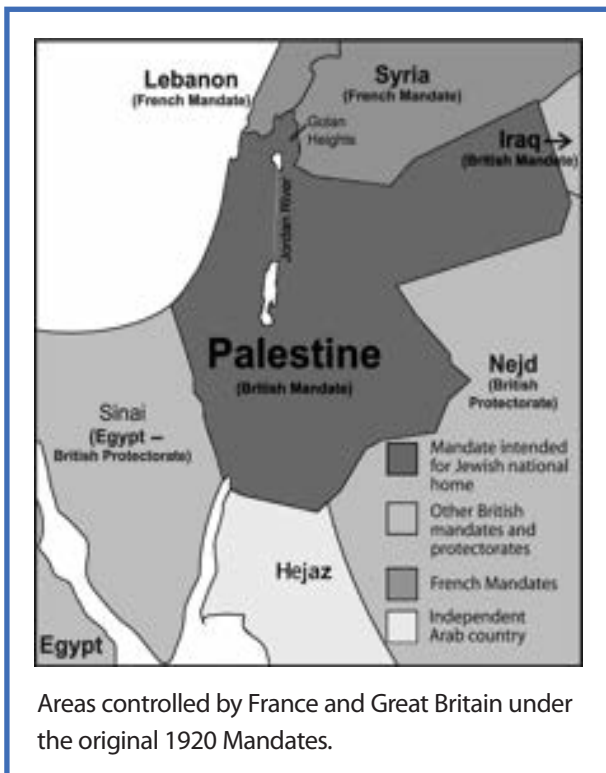
By the time World War I ended in 1918, both Jews and Arabs believed they had been promised self-government in Palestine by the British. The Jews pointed to the Balfour Declaration, while the Arabs said letters exchanged between McMahon and ibn Ali proved their claims to independence. However, Palestine was never mentioned in those letters, and the British subsequently told the Arabs their promises to them had not included Palestine. To complicate matters further, the British and French had made their own secret agreement to divide the Ottoman territories after the war.

THE MANDATES

On April 24, 1920, at a conference in San Remo, Italy, France and Great Britain unveiled their agreement, and a system called Mandates was created that

allowed France and Great Britain to control the former Ottoman territories. France was given the Mandate for Syria, which included Lebanon, and Great Britain was put in control of Iraq and Palestine. The Mandate for Palestine was formalized by the League of Nations on September 23, 1922.

British officials knew many Arabs, especially those who had fought to topple the Turks, had expected an independent state after the war and were infuriated by the Mandates and the Balfour Declaration. Consequently, the British government did every-



thing possible to placate the Arab leaders who had participated in the revolt. To reward one of those Arab leaders, and to prevent the French from expanding their influence in the region, Britain created an entirely new province, severing almost 80 percent of historic Palestine on the eastern bank of the Jordan River and calling it Transjordan. Much of this area is now the country of Jordan.

But the Arabs weren't the only ones who felt betrayed by the British; many Jews felt the British were not living up to their obliga-



Transjordan, the province created by Great Britain in 1923.

Word Work

Mandates *Mandates* were systems created after World War I by the League of Nations, the forerunner to today's United Nations. They allowed member nations to govern former German colonies and other conquered lands, including those in the Middle East that had been part of the Ottoman Empire.

tions under the Mandate and were especially angry that the British had chopped up the land they planned for their state and given the biggest piece to the Arabs to create Transjordan. Still, the British at first seemed prepared to endorse a national home for the Jewish people, which many Zionists believed would give their community in Palestine greater political legitimacy.

BUILDING A JEWISH STATE

With the official approval of the British, the Jews began developing the structure for a



Word Work

Histadrut The *Histadrut* was the Jewish Labor Federation created in 1920 as a trade union to organize the economic activities of Jewish workers. The Histadrut's goals are to ensure employment and job security for all.

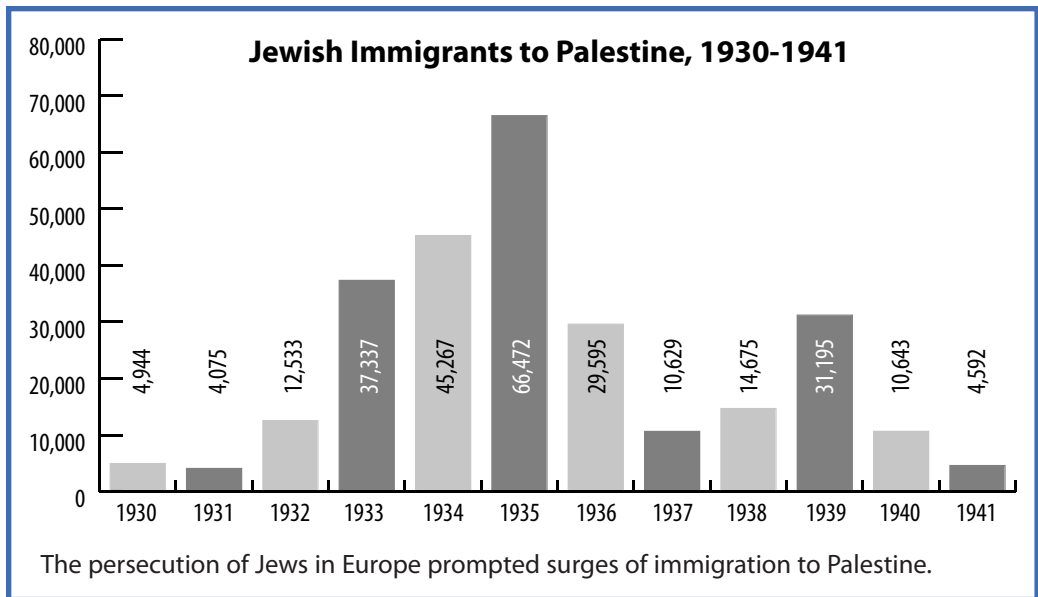
The Jewish Agency *The Jewish Agency* was established in 1929 as the formal representative of the Jewish community to the British Mandatory government. It gradually became a government in all but name, and its leaders formed the first Israeli government in 1948. After the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish Agency focused on issues common to the state and to Jewish communities abroad.

Yishuv The Jewish community of Palestine before 1948 was referred to as the *Yishuv*.

state, including a political body to make decisions for the community, the expansion of rural and urban development, and, most important, the growth of the population. At the end of World War I, the Jewish population in the land of Palestine was only about sixty thousand, compared with six hundred thousand Arabs. After the war, the Third Aliyah, stimulated largely by the Russian Revolution, brought another forty thousand Jews to the area. This group helped develop the country, draining malarial swamps and building towns. During this period, the underground military defense force known as the Haganah was created, as was the first Jewish labor union, the Histadrut.

In the 1920s, the goal of increasing the Jewish population was again aided by a combination of anti-Semitism and economic hardship, this time primarily in Poland. This fourth wave of immigration brought in about eighty thousand more Jews, mostly from the middle class, who subsequently helped build the economy of Palestine.





A final large surge of 250,000 immigrants arrived primarily from Germany and Eastern Europe in the decade from 1929 to 1939. This group, which included many professionals who helped build towns and industry, came largely as a result of Adolf Hitler's persecution of Jews.

ARABS REVOLT

The Arab population of Palestine felt threatened by the increasing Jewish population and perceived these immigrants to be foreigners invading their country and stealing their land. They complained bitterly, first to the Turks, and then to the British Mandatory authorities. The Zionists made some efforts to negotiate with the Arabs and to find a way to coexist but did not succeed in placating the Arabs, who turned to violence, instigated by the religious leader of the Jerusalem Muslims known as the mufti, Haj Amin al-Husseini.

Beginning in 1920, the mufti of Jerusalem provoked riots against the Jews in an effort to force the British to terminate the Balfour Declaration and restrict Jewish immigration. A major riot in 1929 led to the massacre of Jews from the

Word Work

mufti A *mufti* is a Muslim leader responsible for interpreting Muslim law. A mufti is generally held in high esteem in his community, and his opinion can be expressed in a document called a fatwa.

ancient town of Hebron, where the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah) are believed to be buried. The Jews who survived left the city and did not return for more than four decades. In 1936, the Arabs began a more sustained revolt that lasted for three years.

Throughout these years, each time the Arabs rioted, the British would launch an investigation. A commission would go to Palestine and hear Arab complaints that the Jews were stealing their land

and driving them out of Palestine. In fact, the Zionists preferred to purchase land that was inexpensive, which usually meant it was uncultivated, swampy, and had no one living on it. By 1930, the Jewish population owned about three hundred thousand acres, of which approximately 40 percent was purchased from foreign landowners and 57 percent from local owners of large estates. Less than one percent was sold by small Arab landowners.

While many local Arabs complained, British commissions found that the Arabs actually benefitted from the rising standing of living and better health care Jewish immigration brought. Some Arabs chose to immigrate to Palestine. The British government's White Papers—statements of British policy—were encouraging to the Arabs because they recommended curtailing Jewish immigration.

Dividing Palestine

A 1937 British commission led by Lord Peel concluded that the best solution to the problem was to divide Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state. To British officials, it seemed logical that if two peoples were fighting over one land, it should be divided between them. But the Arabs rejected the plan, declaring they would never share the land with the Jews. Many Yishuv leaders, headed by Ben-Gurion, were willing to accept the compromise solution, but others



Have You Heard of Haj Amin al-Husseini? (1893-1974)



Haj Amin al-Husseini was the most prominent Arab figure in Palestine during the Mandatory period. Al-Husseini was born in Jerusalem in 1893 and went on to serve in the Ottoman Army during World War I. He began to organize groups to terrorize Jews in 1919 in the hope of driving them out of Palestine; in 1920, he was sentenced to ten years in prison by the British for inciting riots against Jews. He fled to Transjordan, but the British pardoned him and allowed him to return to Palestine.

In 1921 he was appointed mufti of Jerusalem by the British, who hoped his appointment would placate the Palestinian Arabs. He used that position to expand his power gradually. One of the mufti's most successful projects was the restoration of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

But al-Husseini provoked violence and bloody riots against Jews in 1929 and 1936 as he campaigned for the unification of Palestine with Syria. The mufti's uncompromising views forced the Zionists to abandon their efforts to reach an agreement with Arabs in Palestine. Following the Arab riots that broke out in 1936, the mufti was dismissed from his position and fled the country. During World War II, the mufti met with Hitler and tried to mobilize Muslim support for the Axis powers but never returned to Palestine or regained his influence.

opposed it because they believed they were entitled to a state in all of Palestine. The British shelved the plan.

One Jewish leader who viewed Peel's partition idea as another step away from the Balfour Declaration was Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, head of the Revisionist

Word Work

Haganah The *Haganah* was a clandestine Jewish organization for armed self-defense, initiated in Palestine under the British Mandate. This group eventually became the nucleus of the IDF.

Irgun The *Irgun* (Irgun Tzva'i Le'umi, National Military Organization) was founded in Palestine in 1931. This underground Jewish military force fought against both the Arabs and British.

Zionists, who insisted the Jews were entitled to a state in all of the historic land of Israel, including the part that had been sliced away to create Transjordan. Jabotinsky did not believe the British would ever fulfill their promise to create a Jewish homeland and argued that the Jews would have to fight to win their land. Some of his followers split off from the Haganah, which had functioned purely as a self-defense force, and created a more militant organization known as the Irgun, which began to take offensive actions against the Arabs and later the British.

The British Close the Door

With the failure of the Peel Plan, the British returned to their policy of proposing restrictions on Jewish rights to property and immigration. As the Arabs continued to revolt against Zionist

advances, Jewish immigration in 1939 more than doubled as Jews fled Nazi Germany and World War II began with the German invasion of Poland.

The British then issued a new White Paper, declaring that the government intended to establish an Arab state in Palestine within ten years. Furthermore, Jewish immigration would be limited to seventy-five thousand people over five years and no immigration would be allowed after that without Arab permission. The policy completely abandoned the Balfour promise and imposed a death sentence for thousands of Jews trying to escape the Nazis.

The British move was in part calculated to prevent the Arabs from supporting Germany at the dawn of World War II. Even though the Jews felt

Think about It

Why did the British restrict the number of Jews entering Palestine, especially after the Holocaust began?



Have You Heard of Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky? (1880-1940)

Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky was born on October 18, 1880, in Odessa, Russia. At the age of eighteen, he left for Italy and Switzerland to study law and later served as a correspondent for several Russian newspapers. The pogrom against the Jews of Kishinev in Russia in 1903 spurred Jabotinsky to undertake Zionist activity.



After the outbreak of World War I, he became a war correspondent, later working for the establishment of a Jewish unit in the British army, the Jewish Legion, and ultimately serving as a lieutenant in it.

In 1920, Jabotinsky was part of the Haganah force defending Jews in Jerusalem against Arab riots. He was arrested by the British for his activities and sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor. Following public outcry against the verdict, he received amnesty and was released. In 1925 he established the Union of Revisionist Zionists, which called for the immediate establishment of a Jewish state in all of historic Palestine, which included Transjordan.

In 1929, he left the country on a lecture tour but was not allowed to return. From outside Palestine, Jabotinsky led three organizations aimed at establishing a state and bringing Jewish immigrants to Israel. The New Zionist Organization maintained contacts with governments and political officials, the youth movement Betar developed support for the establishment of a Jewish state, and the Irgun was the military arm that fought against enemies of the Zionist enterprise.

Before he died in 1940, Jabotinsky requested that his remains be interred in Israel when a Jewish state was created. His wish was granted by Levi Eshkol, Israel's third prime minister, in 1964.

betrayed by the new policy, the British knew they would never support the Nazis, but they were worried that the Arabs would make alliances with Germany, as some ultimately did.

FIGHTING TWO BATTLES

Jews in Palestine were torn. As the war in Europe expanded to a world war, and the fate of the Jews in Europe became more precarious, the Jews in Palestine were determined to fight Hitler. At the same time, they could not tolerate the repudiation of the Balfour Declaration. Therefore, the leader of the Jewish community, David Ben-Gurion, announced, “We must assist the British in the war as if there were no White Paper and we must resist the White Paper as if there were no war.”

Many Jews from all over the world joined the fight against the Nazis. Participants from a variety of Zionist organizations also gathered at the Biltmore Hotel in New York in 1942 to reaffirm their commitment to the establishment of a Jewish state and call for unrestricted immigration to

Have You Heard of Hannah Senesh? (1921-1944)

A young woman, Hannah Senesh (or Szenes) was a World War II Zionist hero. Responding to anti-Semitism in her native Hungary, Senesh moved to Palestine in 1939. She fought for the Haganah in a special unit that parachuted behind German lines to rescue allied prisoners and organize Jewish partisan activity. Senesh was captured and tortured by the Nazi-controlled Hungarian police. She was tried by a secret court and executed by firing squad on November 7, 1944. Her body was reburied on Mount Herzl in 1950.



Word Work

Mossad The *Mossad*, which is short for *Hamossad L'modi'in U'l'tafkidim Miyuchadim* (the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations), is the Israeli government's intelligence agency. Originally derived from an organization that brought Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe to Israel, the Mossad's current function is to collect intelligence, conduct covert operations, and fight terrorism.

Palestine. As the news of the Holocaust began to leak out of Europe, Jews in Palestine did everything they could to smuggle immigrants into the country. The British were equally determined, however, to prevent more Jews than allowed by their quota from entering Palestine.

Even as the Jews were supporting the British fight against the Nazis, some Jews became more militant in their fight against the British in Palestine. A splinter group known as the Stern Gang (after its leader Avraham Stern) or Lehi (a Hebrew acronym) began to terrorize the British and assassinated Lord Moyne, Britain's minister of state for the Middle East, in Cairo in 1944, further enraging the British. The violent attacks by the Irgun and Lehi were condemned by the Jewish

leaders in Palestine, who still used the Haganah primarily as a defensive force to protect Jewish communities from attacks by Arabs.

The Battle after the War

When World War II ended, the British made clear they would not implement the Balfour Declaration. They also continued to restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine, preventing now stateless Jewish Holocaust survivors from coming to what they believed was their homeland. Violence escalated as some Jews in the region stepped up attacks on the British, demanding a homeland for the Jewish people.

In the most dramatic attack, the Irgun bombed the British military headquarters in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946, killing ninety-one people, including Jews and Arabs. Irgun leaders had warned the British of their

impending attack, but their early warning was not taken seriously.

Challenges to Immigration

Often ships carrying Jewish immigrants who were trying to get to Palestine were turned back or sunk, or their passengers were arrested and imprisoned on Cyprus. The most famous case, which was immortalized in later years by the Leon Uris novel and subsequent movie, was that of the *Exodus 1947*, a ship that left France on July 11, 1947, carrying forty-five hundred immigrants. It was challenged and boarded by the British Navy, and three Jews were killed. While the world watched in horror, the remaining immigrants were forcibly transported back to Germany in British ships.

But the British could not stop everyone. Thousands of Jews wanted so desperately to return to their homeland that they walked, stowed away, crammed themselves into the holds of unseaworthy ships, and did everything possible to reach their Promised Land. The total number of Jewish immigrants, legal and illegal, from 1922 to 1948 was approximately 480,000. Nearly all came from Europe.

THE UNITED NATIONS



STRAIGHT from the Source

“Squeezed between a green toilet shed and some steel plates were hundreds and hundreds of half-naked people who looked as though they had been thrown together into a dog pound. Trapped and lost, they were shouting at us in all languages, shattering each other’s words. The hot sun filtered through the grillwork, throwing sharp lines of light and darkness across the refugees’ faces and their hot, sweaty half-naked bodies. Women were nursing their babies. Old women and men sat weeping unashamed, realizing what lay ahead.”

— JOURNALIST RUTH GRUBER DESCRIBING THE PASSENGERS OF THE *EXODUS*
AFTER THE SHIP WAS ORDERED TO RETURN TO GERMANY



The British people became increasingly distraught by the violence and disturbing scenes coming from Palestine. The Arabs continued attacking the Jews, and now the Jews were fighting back. Previously, the violence in the region had not particularly upset the people in England because their citizens remained largely above the fray; now, however, the Jews were increasingly attacking British targets.

By February 1947, the British government decided to turn the question of what to do with Palestine over to the United Nations, which had been founded in 1945 as an international

body to help resolve conflicts between countries. The United Nations sent a delegation to investigate the conflict between Jews and Arabs and listened to their respective positions. At that time, the Arabs constituted a majority of the population in Palestine—1.2 million Arabs versus 600,000 Jews. The Jewish population, however, had been severely limited by the restrictive immigration policy of the British, while the Arabs had been free to come—and thousands did arrive, taking advantage of the rapid development stimulated by Zionist settlement in the first half of the twentieth century.

After studying the situation, the majority of the UN delegates came to the same conclusion as Peel had a decade earlier: The only fair way to resolve the dispute was to divide Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state.

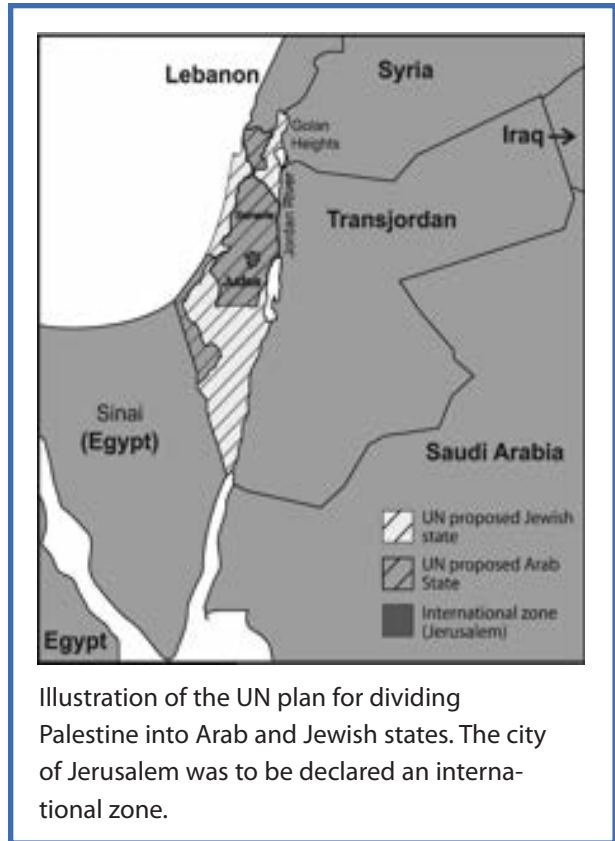


Illustration of the UN plan for dividing Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. The city of Jerusalem was to be declared an international zone.

Divided Reaction to Idea of Division

Look Closer

The UN partition resolution would have failed without the support of the United States. While many members of President Harry Truman's administration opposed the creation of a Jewish state—fearing the move would hurt America's relationship with Arab countries and threaten US oil supplies—nonetheless Truman supported the Zionist movement because he believed the international community was obligated to fulfill the promise of the Balfour Declaration to provide the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust with a home.

Many Western nations were sympathetic to the proposal. Hitler's murderous actions had also persuaded many Western countries that the Jewish people needed a home of their own. The United States threw its full weight behind the partition of Palestine and vigorously lobbied nations to support the resolution.

But the Arabs and their allies were bitterly opposed to the plan and demanded a single Arab state in Palestine. Jamal Husseini, a spokesman for the Palestinian Arabs, warned the United Nations that Arabs would fight to prevent the creation of a Jewish state and would drench "the soil of our beloved country with the last drop of our blood."

Although they did not react as violently as the Arabs, many Jews were not enthusiastic about the partition resolution either. They believed the Jewish homeland had already been partitioned when the British had created Transjordan, and they were now being asked to accept statehood in an area that was a fraction of the size of the original land promised by Balfour. Though they were offered about 60 percent of the territory of Palestine excluding Transjordan, most of that was the infertile land of the Negev desert. The popu-

Think about It

Why did the Arabs not want to accept the partition plan?



lation of the Jewish state would consist of 538,000 Jews and 397,000 Arabs, while the Arab state would have 804,000 Arabs and 10,000 Jews.

Furthermore, the UN plan called for the internationalization of Jerusalem to guarantee free access to the holy places of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The Jews felt this plan forced them to give up their ancient capital and meant that the 100,000 Jews who lived in the city would be isolated—surrounded by the Arab state that was to encircle the internationalized area.

Think about It

Debate whether or not the Jewish attacks against the British authorities in Palestine were justified; explain your arguments.



Plan Wins Approval

The UN General Assembly approved the partition of Palestine on November 29, 1947, by a vote of 33 to 13, with 10 abstentions.

Despite what the Zionists viewed as an unsatisfactory offer, they decided to accept the plan because it meant the establishment of a Jewish state with the backing of the international community.

The Arabs, however, insisted that they were entitled to all of Palestine and started an undeclared war to prevent the implementation of the UN decision.

