
Jerusalem was originally a hilltop village, fortified for protection during the millennia of incessant warfare before the current era (BCE). Its location had no strategic or trading importance. The rich Mediterranean plains to the east were one of the earliest sites of the neolithic transition from hunter-gatherers to permanent settlements. Located between the first civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the area was continuously occupied for thousands of years. According to the Hebrew Bible, King David, around 1,000 BCE, united the tribes of Judah and Israel in Zion—the City of David. His son, Solomon, built the Temple on the highest point (Mount Moriah, or the Temple Mount). The site of animal sacrifices and the Divine Presence of Yahweh (Jehovah), this would henceforth be the holiest place for the Jewish religion.

These and subsequent events were preserved in the folklore of Judaic oral traditions until later recorded in the Bible. The ensuing centuries witnessed internecine warfare among the Jews and periodic conquests by more powerful neighbors—Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, which in the sixth century destroyed the city and the First Temple and removed its inhabitants. Jerusalem and the Temple—the repository of the community’s gold—were sacked and looted numerous times. What is noteworthy beyond these events is the cultural unity and continuity of the Jewish people and the centrality of Jerusalem and the Temple to their religion. Also, in these and subsequent centuries, the dispersion of Jews throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East produced widespread communities which retained their connection with Jerusalem over time, occasionally through pilgrimages to celebrate Passover.

Jerusalem remained a pawn in the geopolitics of the era, for better and for worse. The tolerant Persian Empire of Cyrus allowed Jews to return and rebuild the Second Temple in 515 BCE. In the 4th century, the region was conquered by Alexander the Great and disputed after his death among his surviving generals, ending as part of the Ptolemaic Egyptian empire. Centuries of intermittent warfare, accompanied by murders, massacres, and dynastic treachery followed. Jewish rule was reestablished for a century by the Maccabees (164-66), but the Romans would ultimately decide Judea’s fate. Romans control followed the competition over Egypt among Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, and Cleopatra. Marc Antony conquered Jerusalem from the last Maccabean before losing the civil war to Octavian (the first Emperor, Augustus). Augustus then appointed the half-Maccabean Herod as King of Judaea under Roman oversight. But Jews continued to govern Jerusalem under the high priest of the Temple.

Jerusalem thrived under Herod the Great (37-4 BCE). He rebuilt the Temple in extravagant fashion and added palaces and fortresses of monumental luxury. The city continued to prosper under his descendants, who ruled as kings (also named Herod)
along with Roman administrators. But in year 66, during the misrule of Emperor Nero, a corrupt Roman procurator made outrageous demands upon the city. Within Jerusalem, Jewish factions disputed among themselves and with aggressive warlords over how to respond. Deliberations degenerated into civil war, and the victorious extremists were determined to rebel against Roman domination. In 70, with civil order now restored in the Empire under Emperor Vespasian, four Roman legions (c. 60,000) besieged Jerusalem. The extremist factions refused Roman offers for surrender. Under the universal practice of ancient warfare, armies had the right to sack a resisting city. And so they did when they finally stormed the city, inflicting enormous destruction. The entire population of more than one-half million either starved, were killed, or enslaved. Most of the city was consumed by fire. The Roman general then undertook the complete deconstruction of the Temple and other major structures—a process requiring considerable engineering effort. “Except for a few brief interludes, the Jews would not rule Jerusalem again for nearly 2,000 years” (12). However, the destruction of the Temple had even wider ramifications.

More than three decades earlier, Jesus of Nazareth had been arrested, tried, and crucified in Jerusalem (c. 33 CE). Well versed in Judaic prophecy, Jesus had been preaching love, tolerance, and the immanence of the apocalypse for 1-3 years. Jesus vividly condemned the well-known corruption of the priests and predicted the Temple’s complete destruction, presumably in conjunction with the imminent apocalypse. Jesus apparently came to Jerusalem expecting to be martyred, and the events that followed became the foundation of the Christian story. His followers were subsequently led by Jesus’ brother, James, until he was murdered by the Temple high priest in 62. These Jewish Christians accepted Jesus as a messiah, the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy, and they continued to pray at the Temple as observant Jews. But they left Jerusalem before its destruction, and henceforth practiced a faith no longer tethered to the Temple and Mosaic law. And they were not alone.

The four Gospels of the New Testament, which describe the life of Jesus and are the foundation of Christianity, were written in the years following the annihilation of Jerusalem. In fact, they allude to it. Earlier, Paul of Tarsus initiated proselytization of Christianity among Gentiles, but the status of the latter in relation to Jewish law provoked a running controversy with Jewish Christians. However, the latter were undermined by the destruction of the Temple, and this was likely the case with Jews elsewhere. Sociologists have argued that before 200 CE Christianity spread mainly among the Empire’s large, Hellenized Jewish population—“Greek Jews” who spoke the lingua franca of the Empire (i.e. Greek), which was also the language of the Gospels. Thus, the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE was a pivotal event in the formation of Christianity.² It was also the beginning of modern Judaism—without the Temple and focused instead on sacred texts. Subsequently Muslims too interpreted the destruction
of the Temple as a sign that God no longer favored the Jewish people. But for all three Abrahamic religions, Jerusalem would be a uniquely sacred place.

The Romans sought to extinguish such sentiments. In 130 the emperor Hadrian founded a classic Roman town amidst the rubble, named Aelia Capitolina. However, the Jews in the region managed to organize another rebellion. In response, Hadrian unleashed the legions with intent to eradicate the Jews. The entire inhabitants of Jewish settlements were massacred or enslaved, while others hid and died in caves. Hadrian forbade surviving Jews from even approaching Aelia. He “wiped Judaea off the map, deliberately renaming it Palaestina.” (143). For the next two centuries Jews—and Christians—were periodically persecuted, but this must have been done selectively given their large populations within the Empire.

This changed when Constantine became emperor in 312 and promptly converted to Christianity. He dispatched his mother, Helena, an earlier convert, to Jerusalem, where she dedicated herself to finding and commemorating the life and death of Jesus. She located the site of the crucifixion and (with ample funding) erected a suitably spectacular edifice—the Church of the Holy Sepulcher—perhaps the holiest site in Christendom. Within ten years, Aelia was “already transformed into a bustling Christian temple-city,” drawing pilgrims. But all was not settled. After Constantine’s death, two decades of civil war led to the accession of his nephew, Julian the Apostate. Julian not only reversed the favored treatment of Christians, but ruled that Jerusalem should be restored to the Jews (362 CE). Anti-Jewish laws were rescinded, and he directed them to rebuild the Temple. However, the following year Julian was killed during his invasion of Persia. Religious laws were reversed, and Jerusalem continued to become ever more piously Christian. The Jews who lived and prayed around the city were generally despised, and their access to the Temple Mount was restricted. In 391, Christianity became the empire’s official religion, enforced with typical Roman ruthlessness.

Jerusalem was now part of the Eastern (soon, Byzantine) Roman Empire. The Western Empire disintegrated in the 5th century, but the Byzantine Empire attained a peak of power and prosperity under Emperor Justinian (527-565). Jerusalem too prospered under Orthodox Christianity. Justinian built an enormous church there, second only to the breathtaking Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. But Byzantine rule disintegrated in the next century. Jerusalem was conquered and sacked by the Persians, supported by Jewish allies, who now massacred Christians. The Jews controlled the city for only three years before the Persians returned it to Christians, who again reversed the persecutions. The Byzantines stormed back and regained the city, now rather diminished from these repeated conquests. But neither Persians nor Byzantines were a match for the next aggressors.

The Prophet Muhammad died in 632 shortly after gaining full control of Mecca and Medina. His successors organized Bedouin Arabs into formidable warriors who soon
routed both Persians and Byzantines. Jerusalem negotiated a surrender in 636 that granted religious toleration and exacted a regular tax. The religion of Muhammad, which was not yet recorded in the Koran, was monotheistic and Abrahamic, drawing considerably from both Judaism and Christianity while rejecting certain other features. Jews, Christians, and Muslims mixed freely at this early stage given doctrinal similarities. But Muslims also regarded Jerusalem as their own sacred city, the most holy until the subsequent elevation of Mecca, and they ensured their ascendancy in the ecclesiastical pecking order.

Abd Al-Malik (685-705) emerged from the Muslim civil wars first as commander of Damascus and Jerusalem and then caliph of the Muslim empire of the Umayyad dynasty. He unified control and centralized the administration of the vast Muslim conquests. In a sense, he institutionalized Islam by having the sayings of the Prophet collected and transcribed into the Koran, and by constructing the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount. The Byzantines had despised and desecrated the Temple Mount ruins as Jewish, but Abd Al-Malik recognized its significance. The author describes Dome of the Rock, erected on the refurbished site, as “one of the most timeless masterpieces of architectural art [and] one of the most successful sacred-imperial edifices ever built” (192). Further building, including the al-Aqsa Mosque, “turned the Temple Mount into a holy Islamic shrine and Jerusalem into an imperial Umayyad city” (193).

This last distinction was short-lived. In 750 the Abbasids seized the Caliphate, securing their rule by murdering every blood relative of the Umayyads—a foretaste of what was to come. The Abbasids practiced a more puritanical interpretation of Islam and had little interest in Jerusalem. They moved the Caliphate to Baghdad which, for the next centuries, became the center of an empire extending from Spain to Afghanistan. With the revenues from this vast empire, Baghdad soon nurtured an efflorescence of Moslem culture and learning known as the Islamic Enlightenment.

Abbasid rule over Jerusalem gradually eroded, resulting in three centuries of chaotic conditions. Control of the region passed to Egypt, and in Jerusalem relative stability was punctuated by attacks and pillage from various aggressors. During more tranquil years of the 11th century, the popularity of pilgrimages grew—Orthodox and Armenian Christians and so-called “Franks” from Western Europe—as well as Jews and Muslims. The Byzantine emperor even had the Church of the Holy Sepulcher restored despite Muslim rule. But pilgrims were increasingly preyed upon by bandits and Bedouins, and the region was conquered by Turkoman forces, who once again sacked Jerusalem, now massacring resident Muslims.

What followed was in some ways worse—the Catholic Christian Crusades. Despite the instability of the region, the number of pilgrims from Western Europe had continued to grow, which reflected greater religiosity as well as the expanding travel and trade of a growing economy. The political impact of the Church also grew, as
monarchs expressed greater piety and as the political power of Pope grew. In 1095 Pope Urban II beseeched the European nobility to undertake a crusade to liberate Jerusalem.

The warriors of the First Crusade encountered little resistance in an “Islamic world ... fragmented into small warring baronies ruled by princelings dominated by Turkish generals.” Through bribery and small skirmishes, they reached Jerusalem in 1099. They stormed the city and slaughtered the inhabitants with savage barbarity, perhaps the most appalling massacre in the city’s bloody history. Such was ‘holy war’ that the Crusaders took pride in their indiscriminate killing. They established the Kingdom of Jerusalem and transformed the city from Muslim to Catholic.

The Kingdom of Jerusalem was just one of several Crusader kingdoms established along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, all of which engaged in recurrent warfare and dynastic intrigues. The tumult highlighted the inherent contradictions of the Crusades—the quest was regarded with immense sacredness and significance in Europe, but undertaken with a rapacious grasp for plunder, glory, and power in the Holy Lands. Additional crusades were preached by successive popes and inspired the kings of France, England, and two Holy Roman Emperors to campaign there. The leaders, both Christian and Muslim, treated one another with chivalric etiquette in non-military relations, but victories in battle, when they occurred, often resulted in butchery. Jerusalem thronged with pilgrims from every part of Western Europe, as well as Syrians, Greeks, Armenians, and Georgians (but no Jews were allowed in the city). Religious services were “intensely theatrical” to heighten religious fervor. But the crusading states were “the medieval version of the Wild West: murderers, adventurers and whores came out to make their fortunes.” (236)

Concerted military resistance against the Crusaders began in the 1140s, but did not affect Jerusalem until Saladin became Sultan of Egypt (1175-1193). In 1187 he defeated the army defending the city and forced the Christians to surrender. No massacre this time; all Christians had to either purchase their freedom or be enslaved. This victory was soon challenged by England’s King Richard the Lionheart and the 3rd Crusade. But he and Saladin battled to exhaustion, and Saladin retained Jerusalem in a peace treaty. Christians regained control of Jerusalem in 1229, but not for long. In 1244 a mercenary army of Tartar horsemen invaded and brutally sacked Jerusalem, then departed. “Jerusalem, now half-deserted and half-ruined, [endured] ten chaotic years tossed between different warlords and princelings.” (283)

Some degree of order was only established when the Mamluks seized power in Cairo. The Mamluks were Turkic slave-soldiers who overthrew and replaced their sultan employer. Essentially warlords, they were the first army to check the implacable advance of the Mongols in 1258. However, their incessant wars, external and internal, perpetuated instability. As overlords of Jerusalem, they were capricious, periodically persecuting Christians and/or Jews, and doing little to improve conditions. Two
centuries later the city was described as “desolate” and “ruined.” Renewal would only come, haltingly, under the Ottoman Turks, who captured Constantinople in 1453. Ottoman control of Palestine and Jerusalem was only achieved under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566).

Suleiman and his successors took steps to restore Jerusalem while ensuring that control remained firmly in Muslim hands. However, as Ottoman nominal authority weakened in the following centuries, a succession of regimes dominated Egypt, Palestine, and Jerusalem. A considerable degree of continuity was preserved in Jerusalem by the emergence of dominant family dynasties, whose authority stretched from previous centuries to the present day. “Virtually every position of honour in Jerusalem was hereditary,” (321) in a handful of Muslim Families. This included lucrative control over churches, holy sites, law courts, and festivals. The family in charge of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, for example, charged pilgrims an admission fee.

Ottoman Jerusalem was prey to incursions from bandits, Bedouins, and occasional warlords, and the beleaguered population shrank to near 8,000. But the Ottoman policy of tolerance with subordinate legal status permitted greater presence of non-Muslims. Many Sephardic Jews found their way to Jerusalem in the centuries after their expulsion from Spain. Impoverished and often persecuted, Jews were allowed to pray at the Western Wall, sometimes for a fee. An increasing flow of Christian pilgrims was a financial bonanza. “The Christians hated each other more than the infidels,” and precedence in the holy places gave them much to quarrel over, often physically. But the city itself remained decrepit and underpopulated until the end of the 18th century, when Napoleon brought the Holy Lands once again into world politics.

Napoleon’s invasion and conquest of Egypt in 1799 brought English intervention to prevent French domination of the region by upholding the Ottomans. Napoleon was thwarted first by the British Navy and then in Palestine by a British-led force. But the clash placed Jerusalem back in the European imagination. Following the war, religiosity and romanticism brought a succession of prominent visitors whose writings fanned further interest. The British were most prominent, imagining both returning Jews to Jerusalem and converting them to Christianity. However, regional politics remained turbulent. In 1831 the Albanian Mehmet Ali seized power in Egypt and proceeded to conquer much of the Ottoman Empire, including Jerusalem. Ali was a tolerant modernizer. In 1839 he invited the European powers to establish consulates in Jerusalem. He was soon driven back to Egypt, where his dynasty would rule until the 1950s. But Europeans leaped at the opportunity for permanent representation in Jerusalem, led by the British.

The city was soon beset (even more than usual) by a bewildering juxtaposition of religious and national cross-purposes. British interests were shaped by the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews, but the English consuls assumed
larger roles, becoming “almost as powerful as the Ottoman governors.” (351) The first American consul, described by others as “a religious maniac and madman,” (352) felt his mission was to prepare for the Second Coming, due in 1847. When Roman and Orthodox Easter fell on the same day in 1846, a battle between Orthodox and Franciscans in the Holy Sepulcher left 40 dead. And the majority of the 20,000 annual pilgrims were now Russian, promoted by Czar Nicholas’s mystical piety and his designs on Ottoman lands. The latter prompted the Crimean War (1853-1856) which further raised interest in the Holy Lands. The victorious French and British induced the emperor to broaden religious toleration. Pilgrims were now joined by secular tourists attracted by Jerusalem’s mystique—and appalled by its squalor (Herman Melville, Gustave Flaubert, Mark Twain).

Curious writers were soon followed by European royalty, apparently seeking publicity and religious bona fides: the Prince of Wales, Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, the Russian Grand Duke, and in 1898 an extravagant expedition brought Kaiser Wilhelm and a huge entourage. Jerusalem grew as a destination for tourists of all kinds, and for new residents as well. Pilgrims were now assisted by travel agents, lodged in the city’s first hotels, and arrived via railroad from the Mediterranean port of Jaffa (later Tel Aviv). A burgeoning population built ‘new cities’ outside the walls. These, like the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Armenian Quarters in the city, were segregated into national groups of Greeks, Germans, and Arabs, as well as nine Jewish suburbs, including one of ultra-Orthodox Jews. Jewish immigration increased after 1900 in reaction to the persecution and pogroms of Jews, particularly in Russia. As early as 1890 there were 25,000 Jews among the city’s 40,000 inhabitants. The Ottoman sultan banned Jewish immigration, and the city’s powerful Families complained, but to little effect.

As antisemitism became more overt and vicious across Europe, Theodore Herzl began to argue that Jews needed a state of their own. In 1896 he published The Jewish State, and the next year presided over the first Zionist Congress. Herzl and the early Zionists hoped to achieve their cause through one of the great powers, first Germany, then Britain. But their cause—and the fate of the entire region—would be decided in the First World War.

World War I in this region is scarcely known and exceedingly complicated—three fronts, six combatants, and multiple nationalities over four years. Jerusalem, for a change, was untouched by hostilities, but the war changed everything about its status and future. A more complete understanding of the war is provided by another exemplary study—The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East by Eugene Rogan.³

Long known as the ‘sick man of Europe,’ the Ottoman Empire experienced successive calamities in 1908-1913: three wars, internal revolts, sectarian massacres, the loss of its North African and European territories, all of which led to the assumption
of dictatorial power by a triumvirate of “Young Turks”—Jemal, Talat, and Enver. Assuming the title of pashas, they were strident Turkish nationalists dedicated to salvaging what was left of the Empire and asserting Turkish hegemony. The Great War provided a hiatus from the preceding Balkan conflicts, but the Ottomans could scarcely stay out. Since Britain and France were allied with their age-old enemy, Russia, the Ottomans belatedly (November 1914) opted for the Germans.

The Ottomans were engaged on three fronts: Eastern Anatolia (present Turkey) against the Russians; Mesopotamia (present Iraq) against an Anglo-Indian army; and in the Sinai (present Egypt) against the British (who in 1882 had assumed control of the autonomous territory of Egypt, still nominally in the Ottoman Empire). Initial clashes on each of these distant battlefields were disastrous. However, with German assistance these losses were subsequently reversed. The greatest victory was repelling the Anglo-French invasion of the Gallipoli Peninsula. Through 1917, the Ottomans were winning their portion of the Great War, but success only exacerbated the enforcement of Turkish hegemony. The most brutal assertion of Turkish nationalism was the murder of more than one-million Armenians. In the southern territories, Turkish autocracy collided with growing Arab nationalism.

Jemal Pasha was made commander of the lands from Syria-Palestine to the Egyptian front, and he made his headquarters in Jerusalem. A brutal authoritarian, he sought to discourage disloyalty by regular public hangings of selected Arabs as well as the banishment of Arab leaders to Anatolia. This, while scheming for the support of independent Arabian warlords and conscripting common Arabs. Christians and Jews were mobilized in labor crews. Otherwise, Jerusalemites merely suffered the many privations of wartime.

Looming over this theater of the war were British and French ambitions to claim the spoils of Ottoman territories. As these schemes became known (embarrassingly) they felt pressure to accommodate to some extent the claims of people who lived there. During the war all decisions, good or (mostly) bad, were made solely for their likelihood of contributing to victory. Thus, the British won the allegiance of the Arab warlords, with some assistance from T.E Lawrence [of Arabia], with assurance that they would be able to form their own nation. The Arab Revolt against the Ottomans, then, contributed to the eventual Allied victory but also mobilized Arab nationalism.

In London, Chaim Weizmann, a Russian-born scientist and Zionist, gained a hearing among the leaders of the British government through his munitions work. British leaders had all been raised on Bible stories, and Weizmann encouraged their basic sympathy for the idea of ‘the return of the Jews.’ The result was the Balfour Declaration of 9 November 1917:
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. (Rogan p.348)

The Declaration was intended to rally support from Jews generally, but particularly those in the United States and Russia (unaware of the simultaneous Bolshevik coup). It specifically upheld “the civic and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities,” but Palestine had also been tacitly promised to the Arabs.

Jerusalem surrendered peaceably to British forces one month after the Balfour Declaration. The British rolled back the depleted Ottoman armies until the final surrender in 1918. The disposition of the former Ottoman Empire was then left to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The Arabs felt they had been promised a pan-Arab confederation governing most of the Near and Middle East, but the British and French had no intention of relinquishing their imperialist designs. In fact, it took two more years of diplomatic maneuvering to reach a complicated settlement. Rogan writes, “in the Middle East more than any other part of the world, the legacies of the Great War continue to be felt down to the present day.” (406) Nowhere more than Palestine.

The British achieved their goal of controlling Palestine in the form of a League of Nations “Mandate” (perhaps a good example of ‘be careful what you wish for’). Arabs had protested the Balfour Declaration from its date of issue, often violently. A full-scale riot occurred in Jerusalem even before the Mandate was official. Inept British administration never softened these animosities. It obliviously appointed an extreme Arab nationalist and antisemite, Amin al-Husseini, as Grand Mufti, the office controlling the holy places. He restricted Jewish access to the Western Wall, and encouraged periodic attacks on Jews, often ignored by the British. This latent conflict festered in the 1920s alongside other aspects of the city’s multifarious developments.

As the economy thrived, a kind of colonial high society flourished, uniting British administrators and hangers-on, the wealthy, cultured Muslim Families, and passing aristocrats. They entertained one another with lavish parties and entertainment. At the same time, immigrants poured into Palestine, slightly more Arabs than Jews. In the 20 years after 1919, the Jewish population grew by 340,000 and the Arabs by 420,000. Jerusalem had a population of 133,000 in 1931. The suburban ‘New City’ continued to expand, segmented into discrete religious/national units. Chaim Weizmann, the elder statesman, called Jerusalem “a modern Babel.” In 1935, David Ben-Gurion was elected as leader of the Jewish Agency, the highest authority for the Jewish community, just as rivalries burst into open conflict.

In 1936 a prolonged Arab revolt commenced, fomented by the Grand Mufti. Arabs were split between moderates and extreme nationalists, who soon resorted to terrorist attacks on Jews. The Mufti’s followers then turned on Arab moderates,
assassinating leaders and silencing appeals for peace. Among the Jews, Ben Gurion and the Jewish Agency sought to avoid overt conflict, but more radical Zionist nationalists formed defense militias in response and made reprisal attacks on Arabs. After losing control of most of Palestine, the British Army conducted a brutal counterinsurgency against the rebels, killing at least 4,000 Arabs and arresting 50,000. The Mufti fled to Lebanon and ultimately to Nazi Germany.

Seeking a durable peace, the British in 1937 proposed a ‘two-state’ solution, splitting Palestine between Jews and Arabs and internationalizing Jerusalem. Jewish leaders were willing to obtain a state on any terms, but the Arabs refused. By 1939, with European war looming, the British for strategic reasons desperately sought to neutralize Arab resentment. A London Conference abandoned the Balfour Declaration and proposed a settlement on terms exceedingly favorable to Arabs: restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchase, Palestinian independence within ten years, and no Jewish state. “This was the best offer the Palestinians were to receive from the British or anyone else during the entire twentieth century, but the Mufti, displaying spectacular political incompetence and megalomaniacal intransigence, rejected it from his Lebanese exile.” (474) However, for the Jewish leadership Britain now became the enemy, and the defense forces previously organized against Arab terrorism prepared for war against the British. But first World War trumped all else.

The sympathies of Palestinian Arabs favored Germany, but the Jewish attitudes toward Britain were conflicted. When Nazi advances in North Africa threatened the very existence of Jews, their defense forces assisted the British. But after that danger had passed, Jewish extremists led by Menachem Begin resolved to fight the British. Moderate Jewish leaders condemned the subsequent bombings and assassinations, but the situation deteriorated. The British alienated the entire Jewish community by refusing to reconsider their prewar limitation of Jewish immigration, even refusing to admit survivors of Hitler’s death camps. British governors in Jerusalem socialized readily with the aristocratic Muslim Families and were overtly antisemitic. They launched another military counterinsurgency, this time against the Jews, but to little effect. The conflict intensified—Jewish terrorism versus British military domination.

Britain sought a way out of this bloody stalemate by appealing to the United Nations in 1947. A Special Committee devised a two-state partition with Jerusalem entrusted to the UN. Ben-Gurion accepted but the Arabs, backed by the surrounding now-independent Arab nations, rejected the plan. This failure meant that there could be no peaceful resolution. The civil war immediately intensified with larger and more brutal atrocities committed by and against both sides. Now the British simply gave up, renouncing their Mandate and preparing to withdraw. The population of Palestine then consisted of 1.2 million Arabs, now called Palestinians, and 600,000 Jews. Jerusalem had
100,000 Jews, 34,000 Arabs, and 30,000 Christians. Their fates would now be decided by war.

The day of British withdrawal, Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Agency declared the Establishment of the State of Israel, which was recognized by President Truman for the U.S. and Stalin for the USSR. Just as quickly, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon formed the Arab League and invaded. The forces of the latter four were filled with mujahidin, determined to not only defeat, but exterminate the Jews. Jordan was led by King Abdullah, the sole Arab to achieve an independent state in the jockeying following the Great War. He was above all a pragmatist, a survivor in a treacherous region, but with a religious zeal to rule Jerusalem. And he possessed the most effective army of Israel’s invaders. The Jordanians occupied the West Bank and conquered most of the Old City, but were then fought to a standstill by the Israelis. Elsewhere, the Egyptians were routed and the other Arab League forces were ineffectual. In 1949 the new state signed armistice agreements with all five Arab countries.

There were two victors in this war. The state of Israel had defended its existence and now became a real home for the Jewish people, the first in two millennia. And King Abdullah gained the West Bank and most of the holy city for Jordan. He declared himself King of Jerusalem, but not for long. For cooperating with Israel, he was assassinated in al-Aqsa mosque in 1951.

The single crossing point between Israeli and Jordanian Jerusalem was likened to Berlin’s Checkpoint Charlie, but otherwise a welcome calm prevailed. Jews were denied access to the Western Wall, but overall Jerusalem was the religious heart of Israel while a modern secular city grew in Tel Aviv. Iraq expelled 600,000 Jews, mostly to Israel, but also notable was the increasing numbers of ultra-Orthodox, whose multiple sects kept entirely to themselves. The number of Christians in the city steadily declined, but not the centuries-old quarrels among the Catholics, Orthodox, and Armenians (and Copts and Ethiopians). In another enduring quarrel, the Cold War rivalry between Americans and Soviets was superimposed on Israel. And the surrounding Arab nationalists were unwilling to tolerate a hybrid Jerusalem or an independent Jewish state.

Montefiore brings his ‘biography’ to a close with the Six-Day War in 1967. The Egyptian dictator, Gamal Abdul Nassar, was determined to destroy Israel. He organized the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1959 and fanned Arab nationalism. He reconstituted the Arab League, including a reluctant King Husein of Jordan, grandson of Abdullah and well-aware of his grandfather’s fate. But Israel succeeded in repulsing invasions on three fronts. This time the chief loser, other than Nassar’s reputation, was Jordan, which was driven from Jerusalem and the entire West Bank, creating the borders of Israel that have endured for more than 50 years.
The book’s Epilogue brings the history up to 2010. The author recounts days as a young boy “spent with Palestinian and Israeli friends in their houses in Jerusalem and the West Bank.” (525) But such amity was fleeting. Implacable Arab hostility was inevitably reflected in Jerusalem and toward Israel generally. As this is written, Israeli soldiers recently removed Muslim rioters from al-Aqsa Mosque. Although a minor incident, each side typically alleged that the other was intending to change the “status quo,” which factions on both sides detest and reject. Nothing new. For the last 2,000 years, one uncompromising faction or another has sought in one way or another to change Jerusalem’s status quo.

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