

Zionism and Arab Nationalism: Background Information

A **nation** is a large group of people associated with a particular territory who share common attributes, such as language, history, and culture, which make them into a distinct group. *Nation* is not synonymous with *country*, which is a political division of an area, nor is it synonymous with *state*, which refers to a self-governing political entity. The terms *state* and *country* can be used interchangeably.

Nationalism is the idea that nations have the right to self-determination, the ability to form independent states, called **nation-states**. This understanding of nationalism should not be confused with popular usages that equate the term to “super-nationalism” or extremist ideologies. Nationalism in this context is a neutral term that can be applied to democratic or autocratic forms of government.

Nationalism began in Europe in the early nineteenth century. Before this time, most people were loyal only to their own town or locality and many governments were empires that included people of various nationalities. From Europe, the idea of nationalism spread around the world. Today, states across the globe, ranging from Italy to Uzbekistan, base their legitimacy on being expressions of national identity. Two important movements that were shaped by this idea are Jewish nationalism, known as **Zionism**, and **Arab nationalism**.

Zionism

In spite of the dispersion of most Jews after the Roman reconquest of the Land of Israel in 135 C.E., Jews continued to consider themselves a nation even though they had no country or state. They did not lose their religious, cultural and national connection to the Land of Israel and to Jerusalem, the central location of Judaism where their temple once stood. Communities of Jews lived continuously in their homeland and those living elsewhere expressed their hope to return through prayer, folklore, artwork, and song.

Modern Zionism began in Europe in the late nineteenth century, when both nationalism and antisemitism were on the rise. The father of modern Zionism was Theodor Herzl, whose ideas were influenced by witnessing the antisemitic elements in the trial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, who was falsely convicted of treason (he was exonerated in 1906). Herzl witnessed French mobs shouting “Death to the Jews!” during the trial.

The Dreyfus trial, compounded by ongoing anti-Jewish violence in Eastern Europe, led Herzl to conclude that the only solution to the persecution of Jews was to re-establish a Jewish state. He developed modern political Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, which is the belief in the right to self-determination for the Jewish people in their ancient homeland, the Land of Israel.

Before World War I, the ancient Jewish homeland (the Land of Israel) was a region of Ottoman Syria known as Palestine. Jews around the world donated money to purchase land in Palestine from Arab and Ottoman landowners. To escape persecution in the late 1800s, Eastern European Jews began immigrating to these properties and developing agricultural communities and the infrastructure of a modern nation with schools, hospitals, and theaters.



In 1917, during World War I, the British government issued a public statement known as the Balfour Declaration. It declared that the British government viewed with favor the establishment in Palestine of a homeland for the Jewish people. This document supported Jewish nationalist aspirations in Palestine and was endorsed by the U.S. Congress in 1922.

Arab Nationalism

Before World War I, the Ottoman Empire ruled Arab lands from a central government in Turkey. The majority of Arabs shared the Muslim religion with the Turks. However, the Turks were not Arabs and nationalist ideas began to spread to Arabs in the late nineteenth century. Arab interest in nationalism began as a literary and cultural movement to re-establish the prominence of Arab culture and to promote a positive ethnic identity. As time passed, Arabs increasingly felt that they should have greater self-rule.

During World War I, Arab nationalists popularized the idea of independence from the Ottoman Empire. Arab discontent with Ottoman rule was fueled by the conscription of Arab youths into the Ottoman army, famine due to the conflict, labor shortages, and the Ottoman government's repressive policies which included arresting Arab leaders on the suspicion of treason (some were executed). Arab nationalists believed that life would be better if Arabs were united under an independent Arab government. One influential Arab leader at this time was Hussein ibn Ali, the Sharif of Mecca.

Between 1915 and 1916, Hussein and Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner for Egypt, wrote a series of correspondences. McMahon agreed that Hussein would become the ruler of Arab lands formerly controlled by the Ottoman Empire if he helped the British war effort. However, McMahon excluded certain sections of land from that which was promised to Hussein. Over the years there has been significant debate about whether the land promised to Hussein included or excluded Palestine. In 1919, Hussein's representative, his son Faisal, signed an agreement with Chaim Weizmann, the president of the World Zionist Organization that supported the Balfour Declaration's call for a Jewish national home in Palestine as long as the British fulfilled their promises to the Arabs.

Broken Promises and the Creation of News States

At the conclusion of World War I, both Zionists and Arab nationalists felt betrayed. Instead of granting independence to either, the League of Nations divided the region between France and Britain to administer the territory as mandates. Britain received the mandate for Palestine. The Palestine Mandate document included a declaration of support for the Balfour Declaration's promise of a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine. Soon after the Palestine Mandate was established, Britain divided off the part lying east of the Jordan River, named it Transjordan (now Jordan), and declared that Jews could not live there. The Zionists felt betrayed yet again because almost 80% of the original mandate was no longer available for their homeland.

By 1946, the Arab states of Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan had all gained independence. However, the western portion of the Palestine Mandate remained under British control. In 1947, the United Nations voted to partition this area into a Jewish state and an Arab state. The Zionists accepted the partition plan and Israel became an independent state in 1948. The Arabs rejected the partition plan arguing that no part of the Palestine Mandate should be allocated to a Jewish state. Five Arab states invaded in an attempt to destroy Israel and the eventual armistice agreement gave Egypt and Jordan much of the land allotted for an Arab state. Israel gained control of this land (East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza) in the Six Day War in 1967. The future of these areas plays a central role in both Palestinian nationalist goals and Israel's goal of security for its citizens.

