

The Palestine Problem: It's All in a Name

By Sidney Zion

"... Everybody agrees that there has never been a Palestinian nation. But there *has* been one since 1946—called Jordan..."

The only thing about the Middle East that goes without argument and even without saying is that the Palestinian Arabs are a stateless, homeless people.

You can't pick a fight on that anywhere in the world, including Tel Aviv. The fact that four wars have been fought for the ostensible purpose of resolving the plight of the Palestinians has solidified this consensus. Everyone believes it.

And today, the Sadat peace initiative lies in near ruin over the inability of Israel and Egypt to agree on a formulation of principles concerning the right—or lack thereof—of the Palestinians to determine their own future on the West Bank of the river Jordan, the area universally regarded as the historic, political, geographic, and demographic landmass of Palestine.

But even as the arguments rage over whether or how this should or can be accomplished—a state, a homeland, an entity?—*everybody* agrees that there is not now and never has been a Palestinian nation.

The problem with this notion is that it is not true. There is and *has been* a Palestinian nation since May 14, 1946—only two years to the day before there was an Israeli nation.

Originally called the Kingdom of Transjordan, that nation is now the Kingdom of Jordan. It lives on the East Bank of the Jordan River and comprises 80 percent of the historic, political, geographic, and demographic landmass of Palestine. It has a population of 2 million people, virtually all of whom were either born there or arrived there from the other 20 percent of Palestine—Israel plus the "occupied territories" known as the West Bank.

Palestine, then, includes *both* sides of the Jordan River, bounded on the west by the Mediterranean, on the east by Saudi Arabia and Iraq, on the south by Egypt, on the north by Syria and Lebanon.

These boundaries were universally acknowledged from the end of World War I until 1946, when Great Britain created by fiat the independent Kingdom of Transjordan—thus lopping off four fifths of Palestine and handing it to the Arabs, in direct violation of the mandate over the territory granted to Great Britain by the League of Nations.

In the years since, Jordan has been recognized as a nation separate and apart from Palestine, its only connection being its role as the principal "host country" for Palestinian refugees displaced by the creation of Israel.

While Israel won its independence through revolution against the British mandatory, it is viewed as a creature of the United Nations, owing its existence to a world guilt-ridden over the Holocaust. Since its victory in the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel—it is said—now controls the whole of Palestine. Its re-

WIDE WORLD

Great white father: Winston Churchill created the Emirate of Transjordan by inserting the Hashemite Abdullah (center) as leader. The Zionist leadership reluctantly agreed to this lopping off of 80 percent of Palestine. A year later, when it became clear that Arabs would not resettle on the East Bank, Vladimir Jabotinsky (right), the fiery Zionist, reasserted the Jewish claim to the whole of Palestine.



THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE



BLACK STAR



"... Jordan was intended for resettlement of the Palestinian Arabs. It was never meant to be an independent state ..."

fusal to cede the territory occupied after that war—from East Jerusalem to the Jordan River, plus the Gaza Strip—is therefore considered the bar to national rights or "self-determination" of the Palestinian Arabs.

Because the Palestinian question lies at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel's flat objection to self-determination is considered a major stumbling block to peace, on a par with the determination of important elements of the Palestine Liberation Organization to destroy the Jewish state.

So goes the conventional wisdom of much of the world, and, because it is so widely believed, it is naturally thought to be fair and objective. No matter that it is based on an incredible distortion of history, politics, geography, and demography. Yet, unless this distortion is corrected, there is little hope for anything close to an enduring Middle East peace. A brief look at relatively recent events puts the problem in perspective.

Before World War I, the word "Palestine" had no clear-cut geographical denotation and represented no political identity. In 1920, however, the Allied powers conferred on Great Britain a "mandate" over the territory formerly occupied by Turkey. It was called the Palestine Mandate and included the land on both sides of the Jordan River. This mandate was confirmed by the League of Nations in 1922 and remained

unchanged during the League's lifetime.

The mandate incorporated the Balfour Declaration, the famous 1917 proclamation by which Great Britain committed itself to provide a homeland in Palestine for the Jewish people; it did not provide a homeland for the Arabs living there, but it did protect their "civil and religious," although not their political, rights.

However, two months after the League of Nations approved the mandate, Winston Churchill, then Britain's colonial secretary, changed the rules of the game. "One afternoon in Cairo," as Churchill later boasted, he simply took all the land east of the Jordan River and inserted the Hashemite Abdullah—the grandfather of King Hussein—as its emir. But he did not free it from the mandate, and the people living on the East Bank were in all respects Palestinians. The people living there traveled under Palestinian passports, as did the Jews and Arabs living on the West Bank. But the whole country was effectively ruled by Britain.

Why did Churchill do it? Because Abdullah was bitterly disappointed that he hadn't been chosen by the British as king-designate of Iraq—a post that went to his brother. Churchill wanted to stroke Abdullah's ego and at the same time serve the empire.

But, according to Britain's East Bank representative, Sir Alec Kirkbride, this land, constituting 80 percent of the mandate, was "intended to serve as a reserve of land for use in the resettlement of Arabs once the National Home for the Jews in Palestine, which they were pledged to support, became an accomplished fact. There was no intention at that stage of forming the ter-

ritory east of the river Jordan into an independent Arab state."

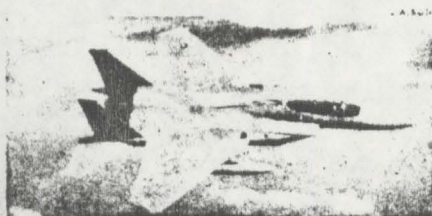
Indeed, Churchill persuaded the Zionists to go along with suspension of Jewish immigration to the East Bank on the grounds that this would mollify the indigenous Arab population on the West Bank—then 200,000 strong—and thus make possible a Jewish homeland west of the Jordan.

Of course, it did no such thing; instead, it whetted Arab appetites for the whole of Palestine, an objective which was nearly achieved several times: the Palestinian Arab uprising against the Jews in 1936; the British White Paper of 1939, which cut off Jewish immigration to the Holy Land, locking European Jews in with Hitler; and the united Arab war against the newly proclaimed state of Israel in 1948.

Until 1946, however, Transjordan remained under the British Palestine Mandate. The English declared Transjordan an independent entity without a soupçon of international authority.

As a result, what began in 1920 as a mandate to turn Palestine into a Jewish homeland turned into a reverse Balfour Declaration, creating an Arab nation in four fifths of Palestine and leaving the Jews to fight for statehood against the Arabs on the West Bank.

The upshot: Jordan is now considered an immutable entity, as distinct from Palestine as are Egypt, Saudi Ara-



Bungling toward peace: Jimmy Carter, the "honest broker," talks peace with Begin and Sadat while brokering a jet sale to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The proposed deal, which would send 60 F-15s to the Saudis while cutting the Israeli commitment almost in half, has seriously complicated the peace talks by stiffening the Israeli hard-liners' resolve against territorial concessions. The latest fallout: the resumption of "bulldozer diplomacy" by Israel on the Sinai and the West Bank.



bia, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

But a country whose population is virtually all Palestinian can hardly be considered as something less than a Palestinian nation.

Still, the notion that Jordan has nothing to do with Palestine is so deeply embedded that it came as no real surprise when, the other day, the *New York Times* treated it as a world apart. In a three-part series on the Palestinians, the *Times* drew historical maps cutting Transjordan out of the British mandate—and repeated the fiction that Israel occupies the whole of Palestine.

While the *Times* was breast-beating over the "stateless" Palestinians, I. F. Stone was complaining in a story in *The New York Review of Books* that Jewish dissidents, like himself, could not get a word in edgewise in behalf of Palestinian nationhood.

Stone knows all about the two banks of the Jordan, as his piece indicated. It seems, however, that it didn't register with him; he suggested neither that the Palestinians already have a state nor that the one thing the American press never reports is the fact that Jordan is Palestine.

On the other hand, the Israeli government doesn't say it either, and a story goes with that fact.

When the Zionists agreed in 1922 to suspend immigration to the East Bank, in accordance with Churchill's request, Vladimir Jabotinsky signed on.

But Jabotinsky, the elegant, fiery Zionist leader who later became the father of the terrorist Irgun Zvai Leumi and the "eagle" of its commander, Menachem Begin, changed his mind about the deal a year later after it became clear that the Jews had traded away most of the mandate for nothing.

The Establishment Zionists, however, stuck with the British ever after. "There are no Palestinians, there are only Jordanians," said Golda Meir again and again.

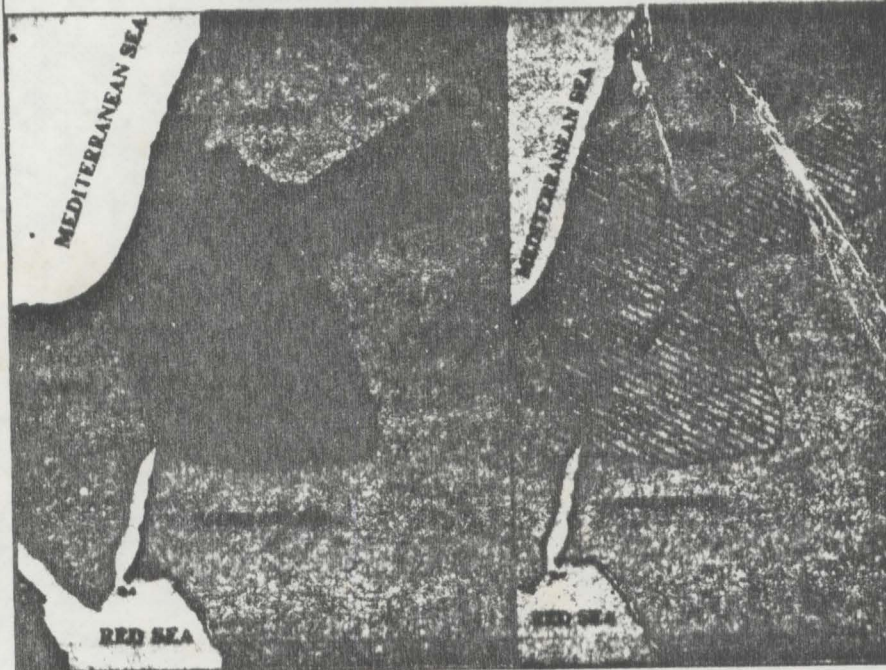
Of course, she was wrong. In fact, there are no Jordanians, only Palestinians. One reason why Golda insisted on the opposite—as everyone with a passing knowledge of Zionist politics understands—was that her political enemy Jabotinsky was on the other side.

Meir and her Mapai party, which ruled Israel until Begin took over last year, hated Jabotinsky and his followers, considering them all "fascists."

The Jabotinsky vision held that both sides of the Jordan belonged to Israel; he wrote a song about it: "The West Bank is ours, and the East Bank is ours."

Menachem Begin marched to this tune most of his life. For domestic political reasons he dropped it some years ago, but now that he is prime minister, it's surprising, to say the least,

The Real Palestine



On the left, Palestine under the British mandate. It included the land on both sides of the Jordan River and was confirmed by the League of Nations in 1922. The entire area remained under the mandate until 1946, when at the last meeting of the League of Nations Britain simply announced that it had established the Kingdom of Transjordan. In May, 1946, Abdullah was named king and in 1952 his grandson, Hussein, succeeded to the throne.

On the right, Palestine as the *New York Times* saw it last month, illustrating a series on the Palestinians. The map depicts Palestine, 1922-48, as lying solely on the West Bank of the Jordan. Transjordan, on the other hand, is depicted as a separate nation in the same manner as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, etc. Thus, the distortion of history and geography continues.

that he does not even allude to it.

This is not to suggest that Begin make a play to conquer the East Bank. But, by reciting the history of Palestine, he could clear up the confusion and make a contribution toward peace.

Thus, if the world were to understand that Israel now occupies only 20 percent of Palestine rather than 100 percent, would it not make a difference?

If it becomes clear that the Arab refugees and their children who crossed over to Jordan in 1948 did not enter a "host country" but rather the Arab part of their own country, would it not make a difference?

Would it not make a difference to the prestige and future of King Hussein, perceived by the PLO as an interloper only a cut above the Israelis, to point out that he succeeded in maintaining Arab hegemony over four fifths of Palestine?

Of course it would make a difference.

Israel is being robbed of its political, historic, and geographic legitimacy while seeming to rob the Palestinians of a nation it already has.

"If there is a Palestine, there can also be an Israel," says Peter Bergson, who led the Hebrew Liberation Movement

in the 1940s. "But if we paint Jordan as if it's just another Arab nation, as if it's Saudi Arabia, then the fight is on for the extinction of Israel in stages.

"Because," Bergson adds, "if we insist that the whole of Palestine is the West Bank, anything we return is simply the fruit of a crime. But if we tell the truth, if we point out that 80 percent of the land is already in the hands of the Palestinian Arabs, everyone—here and around the world—will see this dispute for what it is.

"And what is it but an argument over boundaries? We are two nations sharing one country, and we're talking about a strip of land that amounts to 4 or 5 percent of the whole. Every boundary disagreement in history has been settled by drawing new lines. But you can't settle it if someone thinks his nationhood has been ripped off."

If all this sounds theoretical, impractical, unpragmatic, it's the opposite.

No neighboring Arab nation wants a separate state on the West Bank—not Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon. Some of them say they want it, but whosoever accepts rhetoric in the Middle East belongs in the U.S. State Department. Or *The New York Review of Books*.