



**THE CRUCIBLE OF CONFLICT:
SETTING THE TERMS FOR ISRAEL/PALESTINE TO THIS DAY**

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and the conversation with journalist Oren Kessler. Oren Kessler, in addition to being a journalist, is a political analyst based in Tel Aviv. He served as Deputy Director for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, research fellow at the Henry Jackson Society in London, Arab Affairs correspondent for the Jerusalem Post, and an editor and translator at Haaretz English edition. Welcome, Oren Kessler, to the College Commons podcast, and congratulations on your first book, the topic of our conversation, "Palestine 1936."

Oren Kessler: Well, thank you so much and thank you for having me.

JH: It's a pleasure. Let's start by giving our listeners an introduction to the actual crux of your book, which is the 1936 Arab uprising in then Palestine.

OK: Despite the title of the book, which is "Palestine 1936", I like to remind people that it's the revolt of 1936 to '39. This is a three-year uprising. This is an intifada in the parlance of our times. It's the first intifada, really, of the Arab Jewish conflict. I've lost track of how many times when I start telling people about this book and this project that they say, "Oh, you mean the Hebron Massacre?" And the short answer to that is, "No. The Hebron massacre was seven years before the events, the core of this book." And the Hebron riots were, in my view, just that; they were riots, they were terrorism, fairly grim and gruesome series of attacks in which 133 Jews were killed over the matter of a few days. But really, the revolt that I'm writing about here was a nationalist uprising, a sustained concerted uprising, to all intents and purposes, that lasted three full years in this very crucial period just before the start of the Second World War.

JH: You argue that the uprising crystallized the emergent Palestinian Arab National Consciousness. How does this understanding relate in your mind to one of the arguments that

we hear today from relatively right wing Zionist advocates, to the effect that Palestinian Arab Nationalism is not a thing unto itself, but merely a response to Zionism?

OK: Well, I think I would say many nationalisms develop in response to something else, to another nationalism or to a threat. I think the whole history of Zionism would've been much different had there not been the ever-present threat of antisemitism, particularly in Europe. So I do think it's fair to say that Palestinian Nationalism in many ways developed in response to Zionism, that it was sort of the mirror image of Zionism in many ways. I think it's fair to say that had the Jews never immigrated to Palestine, or the land of Israel, in the large numbers that they did in the '20s and '30s, that had the British mandate never begun, most likely this land would've been part of greater Syria. I think that's a fair reading of history. And yet I don't think that necessarily Palestinian Nationalism is all that different in that it emerged in response to a different nationalism.

JH: It's worth pointing out that your book talks about the ways in which Zionism was shaped in relation to the Arab Uprising, and you even point out that it was a wake up call that in some ways the Zionist project and the dream of a Jewish state would be wedded indefinitely to war and to conflict.

OK: Well, I write in the book that although this is, of course, an Arab revolt, that it's as much a Jewish story as an Arab one, the Jewish counter revolt, the Jews political, military, even psychological transformation, that's prompted by this revolt is a crucial and understudied, under investigated chapter in the story of how much of mandate Palestine became the state of Israel. And I write that David Ben-Gurion, who even at this period is the clear leader of the Jews of Mandate Palestine, the Yishuv, as you say in Hebrew, the pre-state Jewish community, Ben-Gurion was an expert at turning adversity into advantage.

OK: And as much as the Jews suffered, and they suffered tremendously through the Arab Revolt, and despite the pain inflicted, the Jews were really able to make gains, as I mentioned, militarily, demographically, politically, strategically, psychologically, and just in terms of sort of national morale that really created the basis and the springboard in 1939 as this revolt winds down. That basis for a Jewish state that we would come to see about 10 years later, that basis is already formed. And that springboard is already there at the end of the revolt and on the eve of the Second World War.

JH: And you spill a lot of ink also talking about something else, which is really the buildup to the Zionist project that threatened the Arabs in the first place. And you highlight the Zionists capacity to organize with the World Zionist Organization and the Local Parallel Jewish Government that became known as the Jewish Agency. And in the story that you tell of the pre-state Jewish Organization's capacity to really build something, you lead us to this incredible appreciation for the personality of Chaim Weizmann. What made Weizmann so compelling, and why is he so important in understanding the Jewish nationalist ability to effectively threaten the Arab nationalist undertaking?

OK: I think Chaim Weizmann has been unfairly sidelined in the Israeli and the Zionist narrative, in Israeli historical memory. He's remembered here mostly as the first president of the state of Israel. But that was really an epilogue to an extremely distinguished career that lasted about 30 years, in which he was the face and the muscle of Zionism in the world. Let's not forget that David Ben-Gurion was barely known outside of the Holy Land until 1947, '48. It was Weizmann who carried the torch of Theodor Herzl. It was Weizmann who was there from the Balfour Declaration through the trials and tribulations of establishing the British mandate, in the '20s, including outbursts of violence in the '20s.

OK: We've mentioned Hebron and some others. He was also the man who met famously with Harry Truman in 1947 and got US support for the partition of the Holy Land. And Weizmann was just an incredibly charming man. He was a man who managed to, by the sheer force of his character and his persuasion and his charm, was able to win over probably thousands of Brits and other non-Jews and non-Zionist to a much more sympathetic understanding of the Zionist enterprise, simply by the force of his personality. And so the Zionists were incredibly well organized, and the Arabs of this land simply had nothing to match them in terms of organization, in terms of international backing, in terms of just sort of understanding how the diplomatic game is played in terms of economic connections, you name it. And really what I came across, again and again in my research, is the feeling among the British, among the administrators of this country, that the Arabs needed to be protected from the Jews, that without protection the Arabs had no chance against these dynamic, very dedicated, very motivated Jews, both within the country and abroad.

JH: Is it fair to say that in addition to the British appreciation of the Jews commitments and organization, that Chaim Weizmann in particular was able to cut through the negative stereotypes that the Brits had of the Jews by virtue of his charm and effectively his ability to be palatable to British Western sensibilities?

OK: He's a truly fascinating character, Chaim Weizmann, and I really enjoyed looking over his correspondence in the course of this research. Weizmann was born in a shtetl, in Russia, but since his 20s had lived in England, particularly in Manchester, and then in London. He was a very accomplished chemist, and famously made tremendous contributions to the Allied War effort in World War I. But his real passion was Zionism. And he was extraordinarily well connected among the British elite. His address book was full of British aristocrats and lords and ladies, and it's simply remarkable just to see what his daily meetings looked like. He would have breakfast with the Archbishop of Canterbury, and then go meet with David Lloyd George, the former Prime Minister, and then meet various lords and earls. It was really remarkable. As far as I can tell, he's the only Jew in Britain who had... Well, maybe, okay, maybe not the only Jew, but certainly the only Zionist Jew [chuckle] in Britain who had that kind of access. And the Arabs had nothing to match that kind of access.

JH: One of the themes of your book is that a lot of the through lines of history that we still talk about today have their roots or their most compelling expressions in the events surrounding and at the heart of the 1936 Arab Revolt, or as you say, 1936 to '39 Arab Revolt, following some of those through lines. To this day, we still speak about the early 20th century land sales by Arabs

to Jews as one of the controversial hearts of the legitimacy of Zionist settlement in the land of Israel. Zionists and Jews today still argue that those land sales were legal and Palestinians and Palestinian nationalist partisans today still argue that those sellers were absentee landlords who were really indifferent to the people's interests, meaning the Palestinian people's interests. What does the 1936 Arab Revolt and the lead up to it impart us today about this controversy?

OK: Yeah. So I think for example, the dispute over Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem, I believe those lands were bought by Jews and/or some of them in, I think in the '20s and '30s, if I'm not mistaken. And that's sort of the basis or the claims today, that Jewish families still own those lands east of the Green Line. But really when we think about the revolt and how it relates to today, just the very notion of a two-state solution in this land has its origin in this period, in the famous Peel Commission partition plan of 1937, that was the ideological template for the UN's partition plan exactly 10 years later and really for everyone since then.

OK: When we think about what it means for Jews to be a military force, as I mentioned, this is when the Haganah, the main Jewish armed group, becomes a force to be reckoned with and goes from a glorified network of night watchmen to the seed of a Jewish army. And all through British training, I might add, this is often forgotten, but the British found themselves unable to quell this revolt. And what they did was agree to a longstanding Jewish demand to arm and train Jews in large numbers, which is what they did. And some 15,000 or 20,000 Jews became members of the Palestine Police. And this was really the seed of the IDF.

OK: When we think about Islamic terrorism or Arab terrorism here in this land, we can't really understand that without looking at people like Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, who was a Jihadi preacher in this period, who even today lends his name to the armed wing of Hamas, and to the rockets that Hamas fires at Israel. Or indeed, when we think of Islamic extremism, we can't really understand that in a Palestinian context without thinking about people like Hajj Amin al-Husayni, who was the undisputed leader of the Palestinian Arabs at this time. And I would also add this is really when Jewish terrorism also appears on the scene. The Haganah, the mainstream Jewish armed group, clung to a policy called Havlagah in Hebrew during this Arab revolt. Havlagah means self restraint. And they wanted to show the British that they were responsible, that they could be trusted with weapons in the hope that the British would include them in their security apparatus, which as I mentioned, is exactly what happened.

OK: But there was a dissident movement by the name of Irgun, was sometimes known as the Etzel in Hebrew, the National Military Organization, which was a more right wing revisionist movement loyal to Vladimir Jabotinsky, which had a much more eye for an eye mentality. And they believed that, "If the Arabs target Jewish civilians, then we'll target their civilians. And if we can show them the costs, and that we can show them that Jewish blood won't be shed in vain, that that might have a deterrent effect." And so this is really when you see Jews in the land of Israel targeting Arab civilians again and again throughout this period. And there had really never been anything like that here before this period.

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JH: In the context of understanding the through lines of history and the seeds that the Arab revolt planted in realities that you've described that still resonate today, let's go in the opposite direction. Give us some examples of some things that we really need to know in order to understand the Arab revolt of 1936 to '39, but that really don't apply anymore. Things that have fundamentally changed, presumably as a consequence of the enfranchisement and the reality of the Jewish state.

OK: Well, I think the Jews are much... Certainly much stronger than they were in the 1930s. The Arab revolt begins with something that the press at the time called the "Bloody Day in Jaffa" in which 16 Jews are killed, on the streets of Jaffa in South Tel Aviv, in separate attacks, mostly over a day or two. As much as terrorism continues to be a problem in this country, you don't see a series of wanton attacks against Jews in the streets go unanswered. There is just a completely different power dynamic now, of course, demographically it's an entirely different situation. In this period that I'm writing about, the Jews are threatening to become 30% of the population. And the rise of Hitler in 1933 and other antisemitic movements in Europe really makes Jewish immigration to Palestine skyrocket. And the Jewish population of this land doubled in the first half of the 1930s. And the Arabs can't help but notice this. In 1935, 60,000 Jews came to this land, that's double the number of the year before. And the Arabs were smart enough and perceptive enough to realize that if things continue that way, the Jews will be a majority before long.

OK: Now, this is a country that's about 75 or 80% Jewish. Back then it was, let's say, 30% Jewish. And yet one thing hasn't changed in my view, which is that demography is destiny. However, haltingly, the Western world was moving from imperialism toward greater self-determination. And it was clear to both Jews and Arabs that whoever had the majority, whoever had that 51% would be calling the shots. I've heard certain historical analyses that try to pin all the blame for the conflict on the British, and I think that's a little bit too easy. I think without the British mandate, we wouldn't have the state of Israel, if we're being honest. And I think it was clear to both sides from quite early on that whoever had the majority would be the sovereign. And in the early '20s, the Jews weren't anywhere near a majority, so they didn't represent that much of a demographic threat. By the mid '30s, they very much did. And I think that really changed the calculus.

JH: You quote the colonial secretary, Malcolm MacDonald, who had inherited the conflict when he took office in 1938, and he said, "They can deny it as much as they like, but materially the Arabs and Palestine have gained very greatly from the Balfour Declaration." That is to say from the declaration that sort of gave a green light to the notion of a Jewish state. But continuing the quote he added, "They fear that it is going to be their fate in the land of their birth to be dominated by this energetic new coming people; dominated economically, politically, completely.

If I were an Arab, I would be alarmed." You referred to Vladimir Jabotinsky, earlier in our conversation, and he knew this to be true 15 years earlier when he wrote, "Every native population regards its lands as its national home. It will refuse to admit not only new masters, but even new partners or collaborators." So this theme is a big deal, and you argue in your own words, "MacDonald's principle point that material gains were no replacement for self-determination appears so self-evident to modern sensibilities as to verge on platitude. At the same time, however, it was a sharp turn in the official discourse of Palestine."

JH: And what I want to ask you is the following, is it really a self-evident platitude that "material gains are no replacement for self-determination?" Don't you find that many advocates for Israel today in fact cite those very same material gains as justifications for either Israeli policies or indeed the Zionist project, I guess, as if those material gains might sway or even be relevant to those who advocate for Palestinian nationalism?

OK: Yeah. It's a remarkable speech made there by MacDonald. It's a speech he made to parliament in, I believe it was early 1939, maybe late 1938, in which he's basically laying the groundwork for the famous or infamous White Paper of 1939. And that's really perhaps one of the greatest negative legacies of this revolt from a Jewish perspective, is that MacDonald goes on to issue this White Paper in spring/summer, 1939 that basically shatters Jewish immigration to Palestine to just 75,000 total over five years. And as I mentioned earlier, in the year 1935, 60,000 Jews had had come. So just on the eve of the outbreak of war, he severely reduces Jewish immigration to this country. So even while he's in the process of sort of winding down the Zionist enterprise, he says, basically, "While the Arabs can deny it as much as they like, but they've benefited tremendously."

OK: And what I meant when I wrote that, "It seems self-evident to us now..." I think the very concept of Arab nationalism, let alone Palestinian Arab nationalism, was almost an unknown quantity in the period that I'm writing about. One of the Arab characters who I follow closely is a man named George Antonios, who wrote a book in English, a seminal book called "The Arab Awakening", which really introduced the west to this concept of Arab nationalism. But I do think that this was a period in which empires still existed and thrived in the world. This was still the British empire. And I think for many people, the very idea that material progress had come and that lifespans had been extended was enough of an argument for them. I think many people were surprised to hear that despite all of that, many Arabs continued to insist on self-determination. I don't think everyone agrees or understands that today, but I think it's just a much more common sentiment. I think if it were as simple as economics, then perhaps all of the land between the river and the sea today would be the state of Israel, because clearly the Israeli economy is in much better shape than the Palestinian economy.

JH: I'd like to round out the interview by asking you what surprised you in this research? What blindsided you?

OK: I have to say, I encountered a certain amount of anti-Semitism among British official then, but not as much as I had expected. I admit to being a bit of an Anglophile, so perhaps I'm partial on this count, but I really found that again and again, most of the British working in this land or

on this land didn't really like the task that they were assigned. They thought that Britain had gotten itself into a real mess here. But the concept of fair play was very much present, and not just in public declarations, but really in the correspondence between the British officials. There's this idea that, "Okay. We made these promises to the Jews, we made these other promises to the Arab, we had these agreements with the French, and let's try to, in some kind of way, maintain our own integrity and dignity here and to deal fairly with all of these partners that we've made these various promises to." So I know everyone likes to gang up on imperialism these days, and it's the easiest target despite the rather cruel steps that the British made such as the White Paper, at least from a Jewish perspective, I was somewhat pleasantly surprised at sort of British professionalism and trying to make the best of what had to have been a very difficult situation for them.

JH: Well, Oren Kessler, thank you for taking the time. It's a remarkable book filled with stories and information and great photos that transport you to these seminal moments in our history. Thank you for the book and sharing your ideas.

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OK: Thank you so much.

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