

Origins

The idea that physical separation could serve as a solution to the problems of building a new world of nation-states arrived swiftly and dramatically on the global stage after the First World War. Transfer, resettlement, partition, ethnic engineering of various sorts became the solutions of the hour, as an international grab bag of diplomats, bureaucrats, nationalists, and refugees grappled with the astonishing collapse of the old empires and the problems of creating putatively representative systems of governance in the violently forged new nation-states of the Middle East.

Though its rise and broad acceptance seemed to happen rather suddenly, the concept of ethnic separation had some crucial precursors. Three major earlier iterations of protoseparatism arose almost simultaneously in the context of the late nineteenth-century encounters between the expanding British and French empires and the struggling Ottoman state: British and French communalizing policies in their colonies; the Zionist movement and a new discourse of Jewish ethnicity and nationhood; and ethnoreligious violence in the Ottoman-Balkan wars of the early twentieth century. All three of these phenomena, apparently disparate as they were, converged in the Arab Middle East as it was drawn into the spheres of European colonialism and Zionist ambition.

The peace agreements articulated and institutionalized these nascent concepts of ethnic separation. The new League of Nations was charged with overseeing and administering two major new international structures: the minorities treaties defining the rights of “minority” communities in the new nation-states of eastern Europe, and the mandate system giving Britain and France temporary right to rule over the former Ottoman Arab provinces. Both frameworks assumed ethnic nationalism as the basis for citizens’ relations to the state and assigned the League the responsibility of policing the

relationship between ethnicity, religion, and citizenship in the supervised territories of eastern Europe and the Middle East. By the mid-1920s, these earlier precedents had helped shape a new set of international structures that emphasized ethnic belonging as a fundamental aspect of modern statehood.

ETHNICITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN EMPIRES

The rise of race science interacted with the massive expansion of European empire into Africa in the late nineteenth century, bolstering concepts of inherent, unchanging racial identities and feeding into political decisions to tie ethnicity and race to citizenship and nationhood.¹ The pseudoscience investigating the biological basis of race concerned itself not only with colonial subjects but also, centrally, with the question of Jewish otherness. As Jews took an increased role in public life following the process of legal emancipation unfolding in nineteenth-century Britain and France, the question of racial and biological formulations of Jewish identity became a major topic in an emerging science of race, and many Jewish as well as non-Jewish scientists accepted the premise that there was a biological basis for political and social group characteristics.²

By the late nineteenth century, this premise constituted one of the primary assumptions of late European imperial politics in both the colonies and the metropole. Public conversation about Darwin's theories of evolution unfolded alongside increased contact with Asian, African, and Middle Eastern populations understood as "primitives," particularly in the form of popular public exhibitions of racial and ethnic types.³ At the same time, a rising sense of white solidarity emerged from settler colonies from Australia to South Africa, as politicians and the public alike began to internalize the failures of eighteenth-century projects of cultural and political assimilation among colonized peoples.⁴ As the empires expanded, race consciousness became not only a legitimization of imperial rule but also a mode of governance in itself, structuring and limiting indigenous peoples' access to the colonial state.

British and French colonial officials accepted similar assumptions about the centrality and immutability of race, ethnicity, and religion, but created different political and legal systems around these ideas. First in India and then

in Africa, British officials developed what they called a “status quo” policy: essentially, that imperial rule should seek to avoid major changes to cultural practice and particularly religious or ethnic difference, both because “native” forms of cultural practice were innate and unalterable and because such changes might unnecessarily raise resistance to colonial rule. As the noted Orientalist Sir William Jones, founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and an important early figure in academic “Orientalism,” wrote to the governor-general of India in 1788, “Nothing could . . . be wiser than by a legislative Act, to assure the Hindu and Mussulman subjects of Great Britain that the private laws, which they severally hold sacred, and violation of which they would have thought the most grievous oppression, should not be suppressed by a new system, of which they could have no knowledge, and which they must have considered as imposed on them by a spirit of rigour and intolerance.”⁵ Such views combined new modern conceptions of race (Jones was the originator of the “Aryan Theory,” which posited the shared origins of Indo-European languages and gave rise to the concept of the “Aryan race”)⁶ with practical strategies for governing large numbers of resistant colonial subjects.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British imperial law in India approached the problems of governing pluralistic populations by enshrining purportedly traditional communal divides in formal legal terms. Beginning in 1909, a series of laws governing legislative representation established separate electorates for Muslims and Hindus.⁷ In so doing, they created a new political landscape, making rigid new political categories out of previously more flexible social ones and defining Muslims and Hindus as essentially different, politically and culturally.⁸ In Egypt, British officials (and some Coptic nationalists) developed a similar concept of the Copts as the only true descendants of the ancient Egyptians—“uncontaminated by intermarriage with Arabs and negroes,” as one enthusiast put it.⁹ Some imperial propagandists explicitly compared the Copts to India’s Muslims, presenting them as a subjugated group requiring protection from a potentially oppressive majority and promoting the idea of separate Coptic representation. These concepts of colonial “minorities” often made explicit reference to European Jews, demonstrating how metropolitan unease over Jewish political participation could make its way into unrelated colonial contexts. The Copts, Egyptian high commissioner Eldon Gorst told Edward Grey, were unfit for executive administrative positions because they “played towards the [Muslim] peasant, the same part as does the Jew in Russia.”¹⁰

This presentation of the Copts as a separate race akin to the Jews and requiring different imperial treatment soon expanded to include other non-Muslim communities. In particular, British imperial officials began to view Ottoman Armenians and Assyrians as examples of “original” Christians whose protection was incumbent on the European Christian powers. As an increased missionary presence across the Middle East coincided with a number of archaeological excavations of the ancient ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, and especially with the discovery of the Nimrud palace of Ashurnasirpal II in 1848, British enthusiasts drew on these recent discoveries of pre-Islamic Assyrian greatness to promote the idea that Assyrians were direct descendants of this ancient empire just as Copts were descendants of the pharaohs. “The present Assyrian,” one missionary wrote in 1929, “does represent the ancient Assyrian stock, the subject of Sargon and Sennacherib. . . . The writer has known men who claimed to be able to trace their own lineal descent from King Nebuchadnezzar.”¹¹ This racialization of religious difference, drawing partly on metropolitan interpretations of Jewish otherness, was becoming central to the nature of colonial rule across the British empire.

In the French empire, indigenous Jewish communities in North Africa became a particular focus of colonial efforts to establish the relationship between communal identity and political rights. Following the invasion and occupation of Algeria in the 1830s, the French government embarked on a systematic program to encourage French settlement on a mass scale. To attract *colons* (settlers), the colonial government appropriated 2,700,000 hectares of territory—nearly a quarter of Algeria’s arable land—from indigenous Algerians and reallocated it to settlers for agricultural development. This ethnically based mass displacement, accompanied by mass murders of civilians that some scholars have viewed as essentially genocidal, foreshadowed the further development of a highly (and violently) ethnically conscious colonial policy.¹²

In 1848, Algeria became the only French colonial space to be incorporated into French territory; settlers were recognized as French citizens and the government of Algeria reenvisioned as part of the metropolitan administration.¹³ Algeria’s integration into the French metropolitan bureaucracy in the second half of the nineteenth century institutionalized settler privilege by imposing French law, ending indigenous legal practices, and formalizing French citizenship rights for the *colons*. In 1865 the metropolitan government declared that French citizenship would be open to indigenous Algerians who were willing to convert to Christianity, declare their adherence to French

cultural values, and publicly reject Arab or Berber ties. In practice, of course, few Algerians took up this option, leaving French citizenship and its attendant political, legal, and economic privileges almost entirely to the European settler population.¹⁴

The newly formed Alliance Israélite Universelle now sought to apply this idea to Algerian Jews. Founded in 1860 by the French Jewish lawyer Adolphe Crémieux, the Alliance was initially intended to promote the cause of universal Jewish emancipation, particularly in the territories of eastern Europe now emerging as semi-independent nation-states.¹⁵ Almost simultaneously, the Alliance began to move in the imperial sphere as well, opening Jewish schools across French North Africa and Turkey and promoting acculturation to French metropolitan secularism.¹⁶ Its members—mainly highly educated French Jews committed to the principle of assimilation—advocated for extending the principle of Jewish emancipation to Sephardic communities under French colonial rule in the Maghrib. In 1870, the Alliance successfully pushed through what became known as the Crémieux Decree, which gave French citizenship to approximately 35,000 “native” Jews in Algeria without altering the second-class “indigenous” status held by Algerian Muslims and Berbers.¹⁷ The Crémieux Decree’s redefinition of North African Jewish identity as carrying specific political rights thus legally differentiated Algerian Jews from their Muslim compatriots.

This development foreshadowed decades of colonial decision making across North Africa and the Middle East that would tie religious community to political rights and representation—often through violent dispossession, reallocation of territory, and forced evacuation practices developed with reference to race, ethnicity, and religion. It also suggested how in both the British and French imperial experience, anxieties surrounding Jewish assimilation and emancipation at home contributed to emerging concepts of race and governance in the colonies. As the nineteenth century wore on, these discourses gradually translated into structural enforcement of racial and religious difference in colonized spaces from Algeria to India, setting the stage for the international acceptance of geographical separation for different races, ethnicities, and religions. Indeed, such practices had important parallels in other settler colonial projects, including American expansion westward in the nineteenth century, German colonial settlement in southwest Africa, Dutch colonial policy in Indonesia, and British colonization in Australia and New Zealand.¹⁸

A NEW SEPARATIST MODEL: THE INFLUENCE OF EARLY ZIONISM

Such ideas were not the purview of British and French colonial officials alone. By the turn of the century, the emerging Zionist movement had not only begun to superimpose a politicized nationalism on European Jewish communal identity but also to propose physical separation as a solution to Europe's "Jewish problem," in ways that reflected and interacted with colonial concepts of ethnic geographies. By the time of the First World War, Zionism had developed a small-scale but concrete ideology and practice of removal and transfer that spanned the European and Ottoman spheres.

The idea of mass European Jewish transfer to Palestine originated in Russia and eastern Europe as a response to the often violent anti-Semitism of the tsarist regime. As Jewish emigration out of Europe—particularly to the United States—became a tide, some Jewish thinkers began to consider the idea of collective relocation to Palestine, with the idea of manifesting some form of Jewish nationhood.¹⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, even before leaders like the Viennese journalist Theodor Herzl had begun to formulate Zionist goals for a Jewish state, French and British Jewish activists had already begun to discuss financing for mass settlement in Palestine for persecuted Russian Jews.²⁰ By 1897, when Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, a small group of Zionist activists had begun to articulate the goals and approaches of the new movement in more specific ways. They sought to solve Europe's "Jewish question" through two primary tactics: a nationalization of Jewish identity and a literal, physical repositioning of that nationhood elsewhere.

Herzl argued that this nationalization represented the natural outcome of Jewish emancipation: "It could not have been the historical intent of emancipation that we should cease to be Jews, for when we tried to mingle with the others we were rebuffed. Rather, the historical intent of emancipation must have been that we were to create a homeland for our liberated nation."²¹ Removal from Europe was as central to his vision as resettlement in Palestine. Writing privately in his diary, Herzl was already considering other options for the transfer of Europe's Jews: "I am thinking of giving the movement a closer territorial goal, preserving Zion as the final goal. The poor masses need immediate help, and Turkey is not yet so desperate as to accede to our wishes. . . . Thus we must organize ourselves for a goal attainable soon, under the Zion flag and maintaining all of our history claims. Perhaps we can

demand Cyprus from England, and even keep an eye on South Africa or America—until Turkey is dissolved.”²²

Following a failed attempt to interest the German government in intervening with the Ottoman state on behalf of Zionist interests, Herzl turned his attention and energies to looking for allies in Britain. Zionism had already attracted some interest and sympathy there, particularly among evangelical Protestants; the *Jewish Chronicle*, based in London, was the first to publish Herzl’s major proposals, and Herzl had good relations with a number of Jewish leaders there.²³ So in 1899, the Jewish Colonial Trust (the Zionist bank founded to fund settlement efforts) established itself in Britain, and the following year the Zionist congress was moved from Basel to London. Diplomatic efforts to interest the British government in the project of Zionism slowly started to bear fruit.

British interest in Zionism rested on three principles: unease with the Jews as an element in British political and economic life, evangelical Protestant interest in claims over the “Holy Land,” and—perhaps most crucially—a sense of the possibilities Zionist settlement opened up for imperial expansion. The turn of the twentieth century saw many Britons expressing a discomfort with Jews as prominent actors in the British political sphere, viewing them as a potential threat to the racialized hierarchies of the liberal imperial order.²⁴ The well-known critic of imperialism J. A. Hobson gave voice to this anti-Semitic feeling in his description of developments in South Africa in 1899, suggesting that the whole of the mining industry there had fallen into the hands of German Jews coming into South Africa via England: “Many of them are the veriest scum of Europe. . . . These men will rig the politics when they have the franchise. Many of them have taken English names and the extent of the Jew power is thus partially concealed. I am not exaggerating one whit.”²⁵ Anxiety over the possibility of impoverished eastern European Jewish refugees flooding into Britain also contributed to this unease, leading in 1902 to a “Royal Commission on Alien Immigration” to investigate Jewish migration and, three years later, the passage of the “Aliens Act” introducing restrictions on immigration to the United Kingdom.²⁶ Anti-Semitism of this nature overlapped with a rising evangelical Protestantism that viewed Jews as potential targets of mission activity and was fascinated with the “Holy Land,” where biblical archaeology and early mass tourism were beginning to intersect to make political claims for Western Christian interests.²⁷

But there were other and potentially more important incentives for British support for Zionism as well. These became particularly apparent in the first

years of the twentieth century as Herzl entered into negotiations with the British government for Jewish settlement somewhere, even if not Palestine. In discussions with Foreign Secretary Joseph Chamberlain in 1902, Herzl and his associate Leopold Greenberg (later the editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*) proposed a plan for Jewish settlement in El Arish in Egypt's Sinai peninsula. Facing opposition from Egyptian politicians and Lord Cromer, Britain's consul general in Egypt, the plan was eventually declared impossible due to practical concerns around irrigation. But the following year Chamberlain, recently returned from an expedition to East Africa, suggested to Herzl that this territory—which he described as bearing “considerable resemblance to the Sussex Downs”²⁸—might represent a suitable arena for Jewish colonization. Though initially reluctant, Herzl eventually agreed to consider the possibilities for what came to be called the “Uganda plan”: a mass resettlement of eastern European Jewish communities in East Africa under the auspices of British imperial protection.²⁹ Zionist advocacy and British support for these ideas demonstrated a shared hope that mass transfer of Europe's Jewish “minority” could simultaneously solve the problem of Jewish integration, create a new modern nation, and develop as-yet-unclaimed space for empire.³⁰

This “territorialism” quickly became a mainstream aspect of Zionist thought in these early years, when the parameters of Zionism were still under negotiation. Later Zionist historiography would treat territorialism as a disastrous thought experiment that sought merely to provide a temporary haven (*Nachtasyl*, or “night shelter,” as the Hungarian Zionist Max Nordau described it) for persecuted Jews and succeeded only in diminishing European Jewish claims to Palestine in the process.³¹ But at this moment, Herzl took the proposal seriously and saw considerable support for the idea within Zionist ranks. It had precedents in Leon Pinsker's work, which explicitly declared that the creation of Jewish nationhood was much more important than the location of the state.³² Chaim Weizmann viewed the turn toward Uganda as “the logical consequence of [Herzl's] conception of Zionism and of the role which the movement had to play in the life of the Jews.”³³ Following the worsening violence against Jews in Russia beginning with the Kishinev pogroms of 1903, territorialism gained considerable support not only among British-oriented secular Jewish figures like Greenberg but also among local Jewish communities in eastern Europe.³⁴ Like Herzl, many of these communities considered physical removal from the horrors of European anti-Semitism a key aspect of the Zionist platform and, as historian Gur Alroey writes, “did not see any contradiction between their mem-

bership in the Zionist movement and their aspiration to establish a state for the Jews outside the Land of Israel.”³⁵

At the same time that Herzl and Greenberg were in negotiations with the British government over Jewish colonization in Egypt or Africa, small groups of Zionists were already setting up tiny communal settlements in Ottoman Palestine. Although the Ottoman government allowed Jewish immigration from Europe on an individual basis, it feared the creation of monolithic enclaves that could present a challenge to its multiethnic state and forbade large-scale settlement of ethnic or national groups in any single location, especially Palestine.³⁶ Though Ottoman officials did not generally regard Ottoman Jews as a threat, they were cautious about Zionism, which they viewed as a European ideology backed by the same states that had posed economic and military threats to the Ottoman Empire for generations. As the Ottoman parliamentarian Ahmed Riza Bey declared in 1909, “If the Jews are moderate, the government will not oppose bringing them into the empire. But we should not forget that if the Jews make out of Zionism a political question . . . then a Jewish question will be created in Turkey and its outcome will be very bitter.”³⁷ So though they allowed individual settlement in Syria and Mesopotamia, Ottoman officials refused permission for mass migration of Russian and eastern European Jews to Palestine multiple times in the late nineteenth century, citing decades of commitment to their principles of ethnic pluralism and stating that Palestine no longer contained significant unoccupied land.³⁸

Nevertheless, European Jews (mostly Russian and Romanian) did begin to move to Palestine in small but significant numbers, with many entering Palestine illegally. The Jewish population in Palestine doubled between 1868 and 1882 to about 25,000 people (including both European immigrants and local Jewish communities), roughly 6 percent of the population. By the turn of the century, some figures put the Jewish population at as much as 50,000—nearly 10 percent of the population.³⁹ The Ottoman state watched this development with some anxiety, noting the insular nature of the settler communities at places like Jaffa and aware of foreign support for the endeavor from British, French, and Russian representatives both inside and outside Palestine.

By the early twentieth century, then, Zionism had begun to provide a small-scale but concrete example of an ideology and practice of ethnonational separation in both the European and the Ottoman spheres. The British government’s acceptance, in principle, of mass Jewish transfer out of Europe rested on the premise that some form of Jewish settler colonialism could operate for the benefit of the British empire. But it also served as a legitimization

of the principles of ethnic removal and resettlement, a point that was not lost on the Ottoman state as its officials began to think about their own non-Turkish, non-Muslim communities in this new era of the nation-state. In 1890, the Ottoman sultan ‘Abdul-Hamid demonstrated his grasp of the situation: “Why should we accept Jews whom the civilized European nations do not want in their countries and whom they have expelled? . . . It is not expedient to do so, especially at a time when there is Armenian subversion.”⁴⁰ And this link between Zionism and Armenian nationalism as parallel separatist narratives was not purely an Ottoman official discourse. Zionists in Palestine participated in it too, as when the Jewish journalist Avraham Elmaliach, writing in Jerusalem’s Sephardic press in 1909, declared that Zionists wanted “to establish in Palestine a gathering of citizens as loyal to Turkey [*sic*] as the Armenians and the Greeks”—perhaps not, at this moment, the best mode of reassuring the Ottomans of Zionist loyalty to the crumbling empire.⁴¹

Generally, though, Zionism did not look like a rising movement in the years leading up to the First World War. It had failed to convince large numbers of Jews anywhere in Europe, and was riven by internal disagreements over the East Africa scheme. In 1905, when the Seventh Zionist Congress finally voted the plan down, a group of “territorialists” led by the English Zionist Israel Zangwill split off to form the Jewish Territorial Organization to advocate for Jewish settlement somewhere other than Palestine. The split clarified a distinction between those hoping for immediate Jewish removal to anywhere as a means of saving as many victimized Jews in eastern Europe as possible, and those (mainly Russian and led by Menachem Ussishkin) determined to advocate for nationhood in Palestine regardless of how long it might take or how unlikely it seemed. Herzl’s premature death in 1904 at the age of forty-four contributed to the movement’s shift toward the Russian perspective, as the backing from a major European power for which Herzl had worked so diligently appeared increasingly unlikely. As the war approached, national divides also became more salient; the small Zionist movement suffered from a split between pro-German and pro-Entente adherents, which the German leadership’s move to Copenhagen did nothing to heal.⁴² From Copenhagen the Zionist office primarily concerned itself with organizing relief for Jewish refugees pouring out of eastern Europe, while the pro-Allied Zionist leadership based in London continued to lobby a British imperial government that still seemed potentially sympathetic to its cause.

This lobbying paid off in spectacular fashion when, in November 1917, the British government officially accepted the principle of Zionism in a letter

from Arthur Balfour, now serving as foreign secretary, to Lord Rothschild, declaring Britain's support for the project of a "Jewish national home" in Palestine.⁴³ The Balfour Declaration bridged the gap between proremoval and pronational Zionists; now, under the auspices of British imperial protection, they could have both. On the eve of the British invasion and occupation of Palestine, the British government had come to view Zionist settlement in the "Holy Land" as bringing the same potential benefits to the British empire that they had previously envisioned in Egypt or East Africa, along with the romantic fulfillment of the "restorationist" vision beloved of many British evangelical Protestants.⁴⁴

The formal acceptance by a major European imperial power of the principle of mass transfer as a political solution shocked many Jews in western Europe who viewed it as a betrayal of assimilationist ideals.⁴⁵ In a famous statement, secretary of state for India Edwin Montagu—the only Jew serving in the British cabinet—expressed his dissatisfaction with the Balfour Declaration's interpretation of religion as a determinant of political and national status:

If a Jewish Englishman sets his eyes on the Mount of Olives and longs for the day when he will shake British soil from his shoes and go back to agricultural pursuits in Palestine, he has always seemed to me to have acknowledged aims inconsistent with British citizenship and to have admitted that he is unfit for a share in public life in Great Britain, or to be treated as an Englishman. I have always understood that those who indulged in this creed were largely animated by the restrictions upon and refusal of liberty to Jews in Russia. But at the very time when these Jews have been acknowledged as Jewish Russians and given all liberties, it seems to be inconceivable that Zionism should be officially recognised by the British Government, and that Mr. Balfour should be authorized to say that Palestine was to be reconstituted as the "national home of the Jewish people." I do not know what this involves, but I assume that it means that Mahomedans and Christians are to make way for the Jews and that the Jews should be put in all positions of preference and should be peculiarly associated with Palestine in the same way that England is with the English or France with the French, that Turks and other Mahomedans in Palestine will be regarded as foreigners, just in the same way as Jews will hereafter be treated as foreigners in every country but Palestine. Perhaps also citizenship must be granted only as a result of a religious test.⁴⁶

It was indeed a crucial moment, for the reasons that Montagu had identified and more. The idea of tying ethnicity or religion to citizenship had already been enshrined in the colonies in legal and political terms; the Balfour

Declaration now institutionalized the idea in an international context. Further, while population expulsion, removal, and transfer had all been enforced in colonial contexts before, this represented something new: the acceptance of mass transfer as an internationally sanctioned strategy for creating a new global order characterized by ethnonational homogeneity.

OTTOMAN MODELS OF ETHNIC SEPARATION

Since its massive expansion from Anatolia into Arab territory to the east and European territory to the west in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Ottoman state had been marked by an enormously pluralistic subject population in linguistic, religious, ethnic, and national terms. Its rulers were thus faced from an early date with the questions and problems of ruling over a highly disparate population spread over a vast expanse. Until the loss of most of its European territories in the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire included many regions in the Balkans and the Caucasus where Christians constituted a numerical majority, as well as other areas, particularly in the Arab provinces, where Jews and Christians represented demographically significant communities. Though Ottoman authorities ruled their empire as an Islamic state, with their claims to legitimacy resting in part on specifically Muslim conceptions of religiously sanctioned power, they found it politically and militarily expedient as well as theologically justified to create spaces within the empire for these large non-Muslim communities to operate on a semiautonomous basis.

To do this, Christian and Jewish communities in the empire were categorized as *dhimmis* (protected peoples) and organized into millets, a word indicating a non-Muslim community allowed to maintain a degree of communal autonomy (in particular, separate courts for questions of personal law like marriage, divorce, and inheritance) in return for certain institutionalized disadvantages like special taxes.⁴⁷ There was no broad impetus on the part of the Porte to convert these *dhimmis* to Islam.⁴⁸ The specifics of the system varied dramatically through the empire in earlier periods, but underwent a degree of institutionalization and centralization in the nineteenth century as the Ottoman government sought to reshape the empire through a series of political, economic, and military reforms.⁴⁹ The move toward institutionalizing the millet system meant that the Ottoman state now identified and differentiated certain religious communities in increasingly formal

(though still locally variable) terms. It did not, however, correlate such communal distinctions with specific rights to collective political representation within a national framework, as was beginning to happen in certain European colonial spaces in North Africa and South Asia.⁵⁰

This formalization of the millet system took place alongside new and, for the Ottomans, ominous political developments. From the eighteenth century onward, the British, French, and Russian governments all imposed increasingly draconian “capitulations” treaties on the Ottoman state in the aftermath of military victories. As well as exempting foreigners on Ottoman soil from adherence to Ottoman law and bestowing preferential tax status on foreign investment projects, the capitulations enshrined the principle that these European powers could enforce “protectorates” over the Ottoman Empire’s Christian and Jewish communities: the Russians over the Greek Orthodox, the French over the Latin Catholics, and the British over the tiny Protestant convert communities and, more importantly, the empire’s Jews.⁵¹ The European powers now began to increase their political and financial investment in these “protected” communities, creating new forms of economic and political separation between Ottoman Muslims and Christians. Further, in the late nineteenth century, American and British Protestant missions began to establish relations with local Armenian, Greek Orthodox, and Latin communities in the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Arab provinces. Though their rates of conversion to Protestantism were infinitesimal, the educational institutions these missions established targeted and benefited Christians in substantial numbers. Mission schools increased the social, economic, and political distance between Christian communities and their Muslim neighbors, as well as reducing Christian subjects’ reliance on Ottoman state institutions for economic opportunity and social advancement.⁵² This infusion of European interest, money, and ideas into Christian and Jewish communities in the Ottoman sphere also contributed to the rise of a new consciousness of European concepts of representation, citizenship, and nationhood among a growing and disproportionately non-Muslim middle class.⁵³ In this context, another possible definition of millet—as meaning “nation”—became increasingly relevant, especially for Armenian and Greek communities exposed to the political tumult of the nineteenth-century Balkans. By the early twentieth century, the Ottoman government was allowing the term “millet” as a legal description for some sociolinguistic communities as well as longer-defined religious denominations.⁵⁴

These developments coincided and interacted with a series of multilateral uprisings that resulted in territorial losses for the Ottomans and the emergence of new, unstable, and often irredentist nation-states across the Balkans. Beginning with Serbia and Greece in the early nineteenth century, the British, French, Austrians, and Russians provided assistance to what were essentially local insurgencies, allowing small and often divided local movements to challenge Ottoman power and occasionally each other. Greek and Serbian elites sometimes described these revolts as nationalist, but most of the peasant participants were driven by more parochial motives; few of them would have articulated national sentiments as an explanation for their participation in the insurrections, instead citing religious, familial, or regional loyalties—or simply economic opportunity. Much of the actual fighting was carried out by local brigands, a military class present throughout the Balkans who in the early nineteenth century served as mercenary bandits in a wide variety of small-scale conflicts.⁵⁵

Strategic support from the so-called Great Powers, alongside Ottoman military disarray, allowed Serbia to claim internal autonomy in 1829 and a small sovereign state of Greece to emerge in 1830.⁵⁶ In neither case did this result in a polity that could independently mount a challenge to the economic, cultural, and political power of the still-vibrant Ottoman Empire—not least because, as one scholar has put it, “the inhabitants of the new states were as viciously divided among themselves in peace as they had been in war.”⁵⁷ Indeed, as the number of new states expanded to include Romania and Bulgaria, the major beneficiaries to this new regional order appeared to be not the new nation-states themselves but their imperial patrons, particularly tsarist Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Habsburg empire.⁵⁸

Both in the new states and in the Ottoman imperial center, the violent fracturing of the Balkan political order created new, confused, and contradictory perceptions of the relationship between ethnicity, religion, and national identity. This became especially clear in the conflict over the last bastion of Ottoman power in Europe, Macedonia, which featured an enormously diverse population even by Balkan standards.⁵⁹ Its disposition had been a topic of intensive international negotiation since 1878, when the Treaty of San Stefano ended the Russo-Ottoman War and assigned most of the territory to a newly autonomous Bulgaria—a decision reversed a few months later in Berlin, where Macedonia was restored to Ottoman control. By the late nineteenth century Macedonia had become the target of both Greek and Bulgarian expansionism, with Serbian and Romanian nationalists

also making claims over Macedonian territory. A schism within the Orthodox church between Greek and Bulgarian elements and the emergence of two revolutionary organizations advocating for some form of Macedonian autonomy complicated the situation further. In 1903, these revolutionary organizations organized a general revolt against the Ottoman military. Though it was put down within a month, the insurrection created chaos and opened the door for further military activity from a variety of points on the political spectrum. By the next year, Greek and Bulgarian militias were operating across Macedonia and seriously disrupting peasant life.

Bandits from both sides used the church schism as shorthand for national affiliation, threatening locals to force declarations of loyalty to either the Bulgarian “Exarchate” or the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople—a meaningless question in terms of religious practice, but an important indication of how denominational affiliation could stand in as a mark of ethnonational difference in the absence of discernable national feeling among the Macedonian peasantry.⁶⁰ The Ottoman government took this moment to conduct a Macedonian census and issue identity cards stating religious denomination. The census committee’s question about affiliation with either the Exarchate or the Patriarchate had provoked little comment when asked during the previous census twenty years before, but now elicited passionate opposition from villagers who protested the classification options, complained of the harsh tactics of pro-Greek Ottoman census officials, and refused to participate in the identity card system.⁶¹ Such local resistance clearly demonstrated how religious categories were now taking on new and politically charged meanings.

These violent encounters and territorial challenges had another consequence that would further redefine ethnicity, religion, and nationality in the Ottoman sphere: mass dislocation. As the Balkan wars disrupted peasant communities from Greece to Bulgaria, violence along the Ottoman-Russian border also uprooted huge numbers of people. Following the Crimean War of 1854–56, earlier flows of people out of Russian and border territory became a flood, with as many as 900,000 people fleeing the Caucasus and Crimea regions for Ottoman territory.⁶² The next decade, Russian efforts to subdue recalcitrant Chechen and Dagestani Muslim populations in the North Caucasus caused further exodus. By 1914, as many as two and a half million refugees from the North Caucasus would be living within the confines of the Ottoman Empire.⁶³ This huge and sudden refugee influx from both the Caucasus and the Balkans forced the Ottoman state to establish a formal

refugee regime of sorts, dealing not only with strategies for resettlement but also with the construction and enforcement of a statewide policy on ethnicity, religion, immigration, and citizenship.⁶⁴

Initially, the influx of refugees caused chaos; thousands died in overcrowded and disease-ridden transit camps. But with the establishment in 1859 of a “General Administrative Commission for Migrants,” Ottoman officials were already beginning to think about how refugee resettlement could serve their interests as they planned centralization, pacification, and sedentarization campaigns in the hinterlands. The commission, assigning government personnel (including translators) to assist with the practicalities, mapped out regions of settlement in Anatolia where refugees would be collected and placed.⁶⁵ The commission’s workload and authority increased following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 and the mass displacement of mostly Muslim expellees from the lost territories of Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, and Greece.

Balkan and Caucasian refugees thus became participants in Ottoman efforts to establish greater control over some of the most difficult political territory in the empire. North Caucasians, in particular, were recruited into military units (which were allowed to retain Caucasian leadership and sometimes distinguished by Caucasian dress) loyal to the Ottoman state and deployed in largely Christian regions in which Ottoman control was perceived as insecure; such forces played a major role in a number of massacres of Armenian communities in the 1890s.⁶⁶ Refugees were also deployed to encourage sedentarization in largely nomadic areas. Historian Resat Kasaba points out that early resettlement efforts placed refugees in *muhajir* (immigrant) villages in central Anatolia, carefully positioned in “ribbonlike patterns around the lower reaches of the mountain, so that the migration routes of the local tribes would be blocked and the tribes would have to alter their nomadic lives.”⁶⁷ In 1901, the commission resettled refugees from Bosnia in and around Ankara, providing them with such amenities as newly built villages, hospitals and other medical infrastructure, starter farm animals and seed, and food provisions.⁶⁸ And the Ottoman state also used the influx to think more systematically about issues of citizenship, nationality, and immigration. The 1869 Law on Nationality, enacted in part as a response to the refugee crisis, granted Muslim refugees immediate citizenship rights and established detailed ethnolnational parameters for immigration into Ottoman territory.⁶⁹ By the end of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state was in the main refusing to accept non-Muslim refugees and had formally forbidden Muslim emigration out of the empire.⁷⁰

By the time of the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, this sort of informal violence had reclassified populations into nascent nations successfully enough to produce organized state armies intent on ethnically based nation-building and -expanding projects. In the spring of 1912 Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro, with Russian assistance, agreed on a collective effort to detach the Balkans from Ottoman control. A relatively quick victory against an Ottoman military already challenged in other directions, particularly by its simultaneous entanglement with Italy in Libya, resulted in the loss of nearly all the Ottoman Empire's European holdings. The Balkan allies, unable to agree on the subsequent disposition of the territory they had won, engaged in a second war among themselves, allowing the Ottomans to regain control over western Thrace.

The Second Balkan War, in 1913, represented the first large-scale military encounter among Balkan Christians in which conscripted armies carried out most of the fighting.⁷¹ This more state-oriented approach to nation building meant the enforcement of national identity through army-enforced ethnic cleansing, not only of Muslims but also of other Christian "nations." Deportation and massacre of Muslim villagers, coupled with the starvation and disease that accompanied the siege of cities like Edirne, reduced the Muslim population to almost nothing in many areas. The sources also record cases of forced conversion to Christianity, particularly in the context of the Bulgarian conquest of Pomak villages in the Rhodope Mountains.⁷² But this enforced Christianization of the battle territories was not the only form of homogenization taking place in the context of the wars. In the name of these newly constructed national identities, Bulgarian troops massacred Greeks at a number of locations in Macedonia, matching Greek attacks on Bulgarian civilians in Bulgarian territory. The earlier violence had drawn new ethnoreligious boundaries; the Second Balkan War gave newly formed national armies a venue to reify and enforce them.

This war gave rise to an even more dramatic refugee influx and a significant expansion of the Ottoman state's interest in using refugees to engage in demographic engineering. Initially, Muslims fleeing the violence in the Balkans gathered in three main points: Albania and the urban centers of Edirne and Salonica. Those who found themselves in Albania, about sixty thousand strong, fared worst; stranded in an already impoverished country, with no access to relief efforts coming from either the Ottoman sphere or western Europe, many of them starved.⁷³ From Salonica and Edirne, by contrast, many refugees found their way into Anatolia with the assistance of

private relief organizations like the Salonica Islamic Committee or the Greek government, which shipped refugees out to Ottoman territory following the wars. The Ottoman Refugee Commission estimated that a total of 414,000 refugees were settled in the empire following the Balkan conflicts.⁷⁴ The crisis not only intensified refugees' own sense of ethnicity but also strengthened emerging concepts of Turkish national identity. As the Turkish nationalist intellectual Halide Edip noted, "The vast number of Balkan Turks, refugees who poured into Constantinople and Anatolia with their lurid and sinister tales of martyrdom and suffering at the hands of the Balkan Christians, the indifference and even the apparent joy of the so-called civilized outside world at their sorry state, aroused a curious sympathy for everything that was Turkish in those days."⁷⁵

The enormous numbers of refugees and their need for immediate resettlement sparked a series of demographic engineering projects—targeting Greek communities in Istanbul, along the Aegean coast, and in Thrace for replacement—that were unprecedented in scope and ambition. Boycotts, intimidation, and occasional violence combined to force 150,000 Greek Ottomans out of the empire and into Greece. As Balkan and Caucasian Muslim refugees flooded into Anatolia, the concept of removing particular communities to ensure a more desirable ethnic profile took on another justification: the property of the deported could be redistributed to incoming destitute Muslim refugee communities, one of the initial rationales behind the first deportations of the Armenians beginning in 1915 and a development that would become a theme in removals and resettlements across the Middle East (and elsewhere) through the twentieth century.⁷⁶ The Ottoman-European encounters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had turned the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Anatolia into an enormous arena of experimental demographic engineering.

RACE, NATION, MINORITY, MAJORITY: THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL ORDER

By the time of the First World War, then, the inhabitants of the Arab provinces of the old Ottoman Empire had already witnessed three disparate precursors of ethnic separatism: communalizing colonial policy in Egypt and Algeria, European Zionist settler colonies in Palestine, and waves of Christian and Muslim refugees fleeing ethnic and communal violence in the

Ottoman Balkan sphere. Following the war, they would also see the creation of a formal international legal and political system that assumed and enforced ethnonational identifications as the fundamental building blocks of a new state order—an idea applied with especial enthusiasm in parts of the world now coming under new forms of “international” authority. The postwar treaties of Versailles, Sèvres, and Lausanne collectively created two related frames for ongoing Allied control over unreliable territory: a system of “minority protection” (and its corollary, population exchange) in the new and fragile states of eastern Europe, and a neocolonial regime of externally monitored “mandate” nations in the Levant, both under the jurisdiction of the newly constructed League of Nations based in Geneva.⁷⁷

On paper, the League of Nations was envisioned as the world’s first inter-governmental organization dedicated to the maintenance of global peace and security. In practice, it most often sought to protect the interests of its most important constituents, the British and French empires, cloaking an agenda driven by nineteenth-century liberal imperialism in some new Wilsonian language about self-determination and nation building.⁷⁸ Given its lack of military backing and its members’ deep reluctance to make use of economic sanctions, the League had very limited powers of enforcement. Nevertheless, it developed extensive although perpetually ill-funded bureaucratic institutions dedicated to upholding international agreements and monitoring the rights of threatened groups. As the dust of the negotiations settled, overseeing “minority” protection in eastern Europe and monitoring the mandate system in the Middle East came to represent central rationales for the League’s continued existence.

The use of the words “minority” and “majority” to describe ethnonational communities within states represented a relative neologism at the peace talks, not only in terms of the former Ottoman territories but also with regard to central and eastern Europe. The concept of national “minorities” requiring special forms of collective protection from majoritarian states had come to the fore in Europe only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It initially emerged in three contexts: Marxists proposing the formulation of some kind of Habsburg federalist system, internationalist Jewish organizations advocating for specific collective Jewish rights and representation in eastern Europe, and new international organizations promoting pacifist and reformist agendas. None of these had succeeded in making the idea central to European diplomatic thought.⁷⁹ Its emergence as a primary feature of the postwar order at Paris was somewhat unexpected, and was largely the consequence of the

unanticipated and total collapse of the Habsburg state and the rising Bolshevik movement in the Russian sphere alongside the emergence of Woodrow Wilson's peculiarly American vision of "self-determination."⁸⁰

The emergence of a violent Polish-Ukrainian struggle in 1918 and the multiple anti-Jewish pogroms in Polish cities in the closing days of the war caused Poland to emerge as a test case of the dangers of nationalism in a postimperial world. At Versailles, European leaders who had failed to predict the dramatic and total collapse of the central European empires worried that Poland would be, as Arthur Balfour had it, "a perpetual occasion of European strife" for decades to come.⁸¹ The subsequent debate over Poland's future became a debate over the League's role in policing the protection of the "minorities" created by the collapse of the central European empires.

Jewish internationalist groups were well positioned to influence this discussion, both because of the prominence and immediacy of questions about the fate of Jewish communities in Poland and because many had been articulating "minority" claims to guaranteed communal rights and representation for some decades. But at the peace talks, bitter divisions emerged among Jewish representatives over the nature of their political claims. The Paris talks saw a major dispute between assimilationists, represented by the Alliance Israélite Universelle and Lucien Wolf's Joint Foreign Committee, and the Zionist faction, represented primarily by Menachem Ussishkin, Nahum Solokow, and Chaim Weizmann and supported by most of the American Jewish representatives at the Paris peace conference.⁸² The Zionist-American coalition, describing Jews as one of the multiple "national, religious, racial and linguistic minorities" in Europe, requested recognition as "distinct and autonomous organisms" in their host states, including the right to run their own schools and cultural institutions and the right to proportional representation in any state-level legislative bodies. They also demanded some form of enforcement, with the League of Nations acting as arbiter.⁸³ Wolf and the assimilationists had some of the same desiderata: forbidding economic boycotts against Jews, allowing for Jewish religious and cultural institutions, using British legal models to deal with the question of Sunday trade, and structuring electoral law to give Jews something close to proportional representation.⁸⁴ But in bitter opposition to the Zionist position, Wolf declared that he would not support any minority treaty clause that referred to the Jews as a "nationality."⁸⁵

The question of minority rights was further complicated by broad uncertainty among the Allied powers about which of the nationalities in the

former Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman empires should be awarded their own states. Among the Allies, a general accord eventually emerged supporting recognition for Poland and Czechoslovakia, leaving the question of how to deal with the non-Polish and non-Czech populations within the new states' borders. (The fate of the enormous ethnic German populations—now reenvisioned as “minorities”—found across the Baltic states, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union represented a major issue, with ominous signs as early as the 1920s that the nascent Nazi party was ready to make use of the concept of minority rights to support irredentist territorial claims.)⁸⁶ Eventually, these negotiations resulted in the Allied acceptance of the idea that these newly identified minorities possessed collective rights that could be guaranteed only by an authority outside the state. The introduction of this particular vision of minority rights tied to external minority “protection” was, as historian Eric Weitz points out, “a fateful move with profound policy implications, because it presumed the domination of one population in the state, and others who would be wards of the international system and therefore subject to all the hesitations and contradictions of Great Power politics.”⁸⁷

In the end the first “minority treaty”—signed with Poland in June 1919 and serving as the basis for a number of others—made fairly modest demands. In early drafts, the Polish government had been required to “accord to all racial or national minorities within their several jurisdictions exactly the same treatment and security, both in law and in fact, that is accorded to the racial or national majority of their people.”⁸⁸ But the final version required more simply that the signatories would “not prohibit or interfere with the free exercise of any creed, religion or belief. . . and that no person within their respective jurisdictions shall be molested in life, liberty or pursuit of happiness by reason of his adherence to any creed, religion or belief.”⁸⁹ Minority communities had no way to complain directly to the League of any violations of their rights; they had to induce a third state or the League itself to lodge a protest. The final documents called for equal rights for all citizens, the free exercise of religion and cultural practice including language, and some mechanisms for protecting cultural distinctiveness, but stopped short of guaranteeing any form of political autonomy for minorities. As French prime minister Georges Clemenceau wrote to the Polish nationalist agitator Ignacy Paderewski, “They do not constitute any recognition of the Jews as a separate political community within the Polish State”⁹⁰—though their recognition of “minority” communities as permanent collective entities with externally

guaranteed civil rights inevitably carried political implications, not least in its suggestion of the impossibility of full assimilation.

In many ways this new minorities regime represented not innovation but continuity, applying long-standing British and French approaches to controlling territory and peoples within and outside their empires to the postwar nation-state system. (The same could be said of the League itself; as historian Mark Mazower has noted, “Although organizationally the League was a radical departure from the past, in other ways it fitted squarely into an earlier Victorian tradition of Great Power paternalism . . . that coexisted comfortably with both liberal Christianity and racism.”)⁹¹ The minorities treaties were limited to the new states of eastern Europe; their protections did not apply in other European states, much less colonized spaces where British and French colonial officials routinely moved against particular ethnic and religious groups with impunity. The architects of the Polish treaty rejected the idea of universal protections for minorities on the grounds that they would impinge on national sovereignty in places like Britain and France. As one negotiator noted, such a plan would have given the League “the right to protect the Chinese in Liverpool, the Roman Catholics in France, the French in Canada, quite apart from the more serious problems, such as the Irish . . . such a right could only be recognized in the case of a new or immature state of Eastern Europe or Western Asia.”⁹² Minorities, then, were to serve as a site for western European intervention and a reminder of the limitations of sovereignty in territories labeled less civilized—just as they had in the nineteenth-century “capitulations” regime.

Further, as the Information Section of the League noted, the treaties were not intended to establish “a general jurisprudence applicable wherever racial, linguistic or religious minorities existed. . . . [but to offer assistance where] owing to special circumstances, these problems might present particular difficulties.”⁹³ In other words, the appellation of minority was not intended to describe every ethnic, national, or religious group outside the majority; it applied only to groups with an already established history of national or protonational consciousness developed in the European diplomatic exchanges of the late nineteenth century.⁹⁴ In the Middle East, only a few specific communities would be explicitly recognized as minorities in this sense: non-Muslims with nineteenth-century histories of ties to western European “protector” states.⁹⁵

The application of these requirements to only a few states caused immense irritation among targeted nations, who viewed the treaties as extensions of

the old capitulations agreements that had long used minority rights as a fig leaf for external political and economic intervention. As the Romanian representative to the League quite correctly protested, the treaties “implied the establishment of two categories of countries—countries of the first class, which, in spite of having small groups of minorities, were placed under no obligations; and countries of the second class, which had been obliged to assume extremely onerous obligations.”⁹⁶ The minorities treaties, then, enshrined two already well-established imperial principles: that ethnicity and religion were potentially relevant to citizenship and should be institutionally defined with a view to state stability, and that minority communities represented a legitimate site of external intervention into the affairs of theoretically sovereign but less “civilized” nations.⁹⁷ The minorities treaties thus fit into a much longer pattern of international law, begun as far back as Westphalia, which negotiated relations among the “three elements of the international legal order” identified by legal scholar Nathaniel Berman: “(1) a substantively grounded international community (Christendom of the 17th century, Europe of the early 19th, Civilization of the late 19th, all the way to today’s Liberal Democracies); (2) sovereigns, whose ‘potency’ and ‘serenity’ are periodically reimagined; (3) those viewed as not full participants in the community of sovereigns, those ‘Vassals, Subjects, People,’ whose rights and subordinate role are variably conceived and reconceived.”⁹⁸ An early assessment of the success of the minorities treaties demonstrates how clearly this point was understood at the time, noting that “in the Versailles peace system, the minorities provisions constituted a corollary and corrective to the principle of national self-determination.”⁹⁹

That said, it was equally evident that the League’s powers of enforcement of the minorities treaties would be limited. The postwar agreements set up a petition system whereby complaints about violations would be accepted and filtered through “committees of three,” ad hoc groups including the acting chair of the council and two other members from countries unmentioned in the petition. If the committee of three deemed a petition valid, it sent the complaint on to the relevant state’s government and requested a response. In the event of a disagreement about an appropriate corrective measure, another committee of three would review the case further. Beyond that, it was not clear what the League might be able to do to prevent violations. The committee appointed to deal with minority protection was clearly aware of this difficulty, declaring that it would ordinarily limit itself to “benevolent and informal communications” with affected governments and emphasizing the

responsibility of protected minorities to “co-operate as loyal fellow citizens with the nations to which they now belong.”¹⁰⁰ If the main consequence of the minorities system was the clear delineation of the affected states’ limited sovereignty in the new international order, it also inadvertently pointed out the almost total inability of the “Great Powers” to enforce their own rules.¹⁰¹

Partly because of this evident weakness, by the time the Lausanne treaties were negotiated a few years later, mass deportation and population “exchange” had emerged as central modes of dealing with minority problems. Whereas the negotiators at Paris had broadly decided on a system of minority protection that might also accommodate a degree of voluntary population exchange as an ancillary tool, the delegates at the 1923 Lausanne conference decided that transfer should be an initial and primary mode of engagement. “First,” as the legal scholar Catriona Drew has noted, “they would reach agreement on the scope of the population exchange; then, they would legislate minority protection for those not to be ‘turned out.’”¹⁰² Minority protection and minority expulsion had become “two sides of the same coin”—an approach that made use of a Wilsonian concept of self-determination, privileging the rights of theoretical nations over the rights of individuals, to legitimize forms of external intervention that carried a much older imperial pedigree.¹⁰³

ETHNONATIONALISM AND THE MANDATE SYSTEM

If the minorities treaties were applied to the new states of eastern Europe with the specific purpose of marking their subordinate status within a nineteenth-century-style global hierarchy, the mandate system did the same thing in more overt fashion for the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. And just as the existence of “minorities” had constituted a major part of the Allies’ argument for continued supervision of the Balkans and eastern Europe, the League of Nations now began to develop a narrative of ethnic, religious, and national difference in the Middle Eastern mandate territories that sought both to legitimize mandate rule over Arab populations and to define the League’s supervisory capacity over the British and French mandatorial authorities.

Britain, France, and Russia had agreed on the basic outlines of a European division of Ottoman Arab territory some years before the actual fall of the empire. With Russia’s withdrawal from the proceedings in 1917, Britain and France were left free to implement a modified version of the 1916 Sykes-Picot

agreement, assigning what would become Syria and Lebanon to French control and Mesopotamia and Palestine to the British. The atmosphere of anti-colonialism that Woodrow Wilson and others brought to the peace negotiations, though, rendered outright annexation of this territory impossible. As Mark Sykes (the British diplomat who had helped construct the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement) put it, "Imperialism, annexation, military triumph, prestige, White man's burdens, have been expunged from the popular political vocabulary, consequently Protectorates, spheres of interest or influence, annexations, bases etc., have to be consigned to the Diplomatic lumber-room."¹⁰⁴ As a reluctant compromise, the Allies agreed on a new system: a set of "mandate" territories, in which European control would be (theoretically) temporally limited and overseen by the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations. The postwar treaties thus created a number of new states across the Levant, declaring Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Iraq, and Palestine mandates under British or French authority. Technically, these new mandate states were supposed to be moving toward eventual sovereignty under European supervision and guidance; in practice, they were largely governed as additions to the British and French colonial empires.¹⁰⁵ The League's formulation for the Middle Eastern mandates borrowed concepts of ethnicity, religion, and nationality's relevance to citizenship from three main sources: nineteenth-century European diplomatic agreements on empire, Zionist visions of Jewish nationhood, and the just-concluded minorities treaties.

The late nineteenth-century diplomatic agreements that had divided up Africa for European colonial consumption directly and clearly informed the documents that outlined the mandate system, with their valorization of European civilization, emphasis on technocratic forms of development, and legitimization of violence as a response to native resistance.¹⁰⁶ The Berlin Act of 1885, with its declaration of intent "to regulate the conditions most favourable to the development of trade and civilization," was now given new expression in Article 22 of the League's Covenant, which famously declared that in areas "inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization."¹⁰⁷ The division of these peoples into "A," "B," and "C" mandates—according to the League's assessment of their level of readiness for independence—likewise drew on nineteenth-century concepts of global racial hierarchies and made the case in advance that the violent imposition of

a neocolonial authority could be justified by reference to an international civilizing mission.¹⁰⁸

But there were other influences at work as well. The official League of Nations mandate for Palestine incorporated the full text of the Balfour Declaration, declaring that “recognition has thereby been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country” and enshrining the earlier British commitment to European Jewish immigration into Palestine in international law. Further, it made provisions for the international Zionist movement to operate as the “public body” representing the interests of the Jewish population in Palestine and established the mandate government’s right to create a nationality law, “framed so as to facilitate the acquisition of Palestinian citizenship by Jews who take up their permanent residence in Palestine.”¹⁰⁹

The legal documents underpinning the Middle Eastern mandate system also made use of language taken from the recently concluded minorities treaties, guaranteeing freedom of religious worship and “the right of each community to maintain its own schools for the education of its own members in its own language” (qualified somewhat by the government’s right to maintain “such supervision over religious or eleemosynary bodies of all faiths in Palestine as may be required for the maintenance of public order and good government”).¹¹⁰ The mandate assigning Syria and Lebanon to French rule made similar assumptions about ethnicity, nationhood, and citizenship, guaranteeing “respect for the personal status of the various peoples and for their religious interests,” promising “the right of each community to maintain its own schools for the instruction and education of its own members in its own language” and guaranteeing that mandate authorities would “refrain from all interference . . . in the management of religious communities and sacred shrines belonging to the various religions, the immunity of which has been expressly guaranteed.”¹¹¹ Nearly identical wording appeared in the mandate for Mesopotamia: “The right of each community to maintain its own schools for the education of its own members in its own language (while conforming to such educational requirements of a general nature as the Administration may impose) shall not be denied or impaired.”¹¹² All this was overlaid on the principle of “preserving existing rights” for religious communities, particularly with regard to Palestine’s “Holy Places” and Mesopotamia’s “sacred shrines”—the British imperial principle of the status quo previously developed in India and Egypt.¹¹³ The mandates for Palestine,

Syria, Lebanon, and Mesopotamia thus drew simultaneously on Zionist ethnonationalist political claims, new visions of minority rights, and longstanding liberal imperial concepts of empire and civilization to legitimize European mandatory rule over the Eastern Mediterranean. They also made plain the League's broad acceptance of ethnic nationalism and (particularly in the case of Palestine) large-scale population movement as viable state-building strategies.¹¹⁴

Like the minorities treaties, the mandate agreements had a bureaucratic machinery within the League of Nations that served as the main venue for the many internal disagreements about the nature of the mandate system and the League's role. The Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC), made up of nine appointed members from various member states deemed to be "experts" in colonial administration, was charged with the task of reviewing and discussing the reports to come out of the mandates and advising the League Council on any follow-up actions.¹¹⁵ There was also a section of the League Secretariat devoted to supporting and documenting the PMC's work. The League Council had final responsibility for any actions related to the mandates, though its powers to change the course of governance in any particular mandate territory was mainly limited to exerting public pressure.¹¹⁶ Despite their evident limitations, the mechanisms for engaging with both the mandatory authorities and the PMC—formal petitions, correspondence, and annual reporting—were far from meaningless to local populations who consistently studied, analyzed, and made use of them to engage in vigorous advocacy for their own interests and political desiderata within the mandate system.¹¹⁷ Despite most League officials' essentially colonial interests and deep-seated resistance to acknowledging the views of Middle Eastern colonized populations, this system of petitions and reports meant eventually that the League's archives came almost inadvertently to record a discourse of great vibrancy and scope from a wide range of local actors across the mandate territories.¹¹⁸

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The theory and practice of ethnonational separatism arose out of a particular confluence of geographically disparate but philosophically linked political developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Three key precedents—British and French colonial policy, Zionist political ideology, and the multilateral practices of ethnic cleansing that characterized late

Ottoman-Balkan-Caucasian encounters—came together following the war into a shared geographical and political space, namely, the mandate territories of the Arab Middle East, once part of the Ottoman sphere and now temporarily claimed by the British and French empires under the auspices of the new League of Nations. In the postwar era, the treaties coming out of Paris, Sèvres, and Lausanne collectively created a formal legal regime that supported the theory and practice of ethnonational separatism via League enforcement of minority protection in eastern Europe and supervision of neocolonial mandate governments across the Middle East.

And the League had a final role that would further set the stage for the promotion of ideologies of ethnic separation: guardian of the huge numbers of refugees whom the war had left homeless and stateless. The refugee regime that emerged in Syria and Iraq for displaced Armenians and Assyrians after the First World War quickly became a major *raison d'être* of the League and the British and French mandate authorities alike. Over the next decade, refugee spaces would offer novel venues for the League and its partners to forge particular visions of ethnicity and nationhood as well as new iterations of international authority across the newly colonized Middle East.