

Crushing the Palestinian uprising: A prequel

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As fighting once again rages between Israelis and Palestinians, it is worth taking a look back in history to the time when the British held authority over the region. In this article, [Carly Beckerman-Boys](#) looks at how the British authorities handled the Arab resistance in the 1930s, finding it to be remarkably similar to the actions and policies of Israel vis-a-vis the Palestinians today.



Disproportionate attacks, civilian deaths and international condemnation – these were the hallmarks of a campaign to punish and deter violent Palestinian resistance many decades before Israel's 2014 operation in Gaza. Just as the Israeli Defence Force continues to this day, British authorities in the 1930s fought their counter-insurgency against Palestine's Arab militants using variations on collective punishment. Both powers have forcefully tried to persuade the ordinary Palestinian that supporting militants is counterproductive, but how effective is this strong-arm strategy? British tactics created a culture that fought and fostered rebellion, allowed the dehumanisation and mistreatment of Palestinians, damaged the Empire's international reputation, and, still, could not escape the need to make political concessions.

Britain's Palestine revolt began with a general strike and the odd skirmish in 1936 and tension erupted to new heights of violence after the Royal, or Peel Commission in 1937. This British investigation suggested partitioning Palestine between a new Jewish state and neighbouring Transjordan, and the effect was explosive. Through ambushes, assassinations, sniper attacks, improvised explosive devices and conventional fighting, Palestinian Arab militants (and some foreign fighters) killed Jewish settlers and (many more) uncooperative Arabs while scoring several victories against their imperial foes – even taking control of East Jerusalem for a short time. Such chaos prompted the War Office to pour an additional 25,000 troops into Palestine, many from the notoriously aggressive Black and Tans.

As there was great popular support for the rebels, General Haining – the first commanding officer empowered to combat Palestine's rebellion – refused to accept the very existence of innocent civilians. Many were intimidated or coerced into hiding militants and storing their weapons, but this distinction was ignored, providing Britain with the apparent moral and legal justification for collective punishment. During weapons searches, and according to the troops' own diaries, soldiers and police ruined years' worth of food and fuel stores, ransacked houses and destroyed furniture until nothing was left. They looted, stole life savings, and used the searches as a concession prize when true militants escaped custody. Constable Burr wrote home to his parents in 1937 about how fun this was, losing "a band of bad boys" but instead getting "to beat up a village where they had stayed the night".

There were also well known incidents of villagers forced into cages during these searches and held without shelter or water until they gave up the location of their rifles, or, if such weapons did not exist, succumbed to the heat. Several very public deaths from this practice warranted compensation and the incidents were quietly hushed up.

Arab women's groups wrote to the High Commissioner of Palestine, imploring him to stop the violent searches because they only created an atmosphere of defiance and vengeance. As police rarely found the weapons stores they believed were tucked away in every village throughout the countryside, this impoverishing treatment was counter-productive. The same was true of punitive home demolitions – a tactic Israel continues in Gaza. When a British soldier was killed, it was standard procedure to destroy the nearest village. Royal Engineers often used sea mines to flatten entire areas and deliberately caused collateral damage, gleefully describing the process in letters to friends and family. Between 1936 and 1940, authorities destroyed approximately 2,000 houses, and some villagers were forced to demolish their own homes one brick at a time.

Added to this, some 9,000 Palestinians were arrested for possessing weapons, even old and damaged Ottoman rifles, and many were sentenced to death for offences like discharging a weapon (regardless of the bullet's final

destination). More than 100 prisoners were actually hanged, and there is documentation to suggest Palestine police shot some prisoners rather than take them to trial because officers considered even the military courts too lenient.

The War Office advertised these tactics as effective counter-terrorism. In response to complaints against British troops, they insisted that collective punishment was “the only method of impressing the peaceful but terrorised majority that failure to assist law and order may, in the long run, be more unpleasant than submitting to intimidation.” This attitude effectively declared open season on Palestinian civilians as though British violence and intimidation was somehow for their own good. As Arab fighters were able to pick off more soldiers and police, a certain number of the British troops stationed in Palestine combined this twisted paternalism with good old-fashioned anger and frustration, exceeding their already extensive remit to impose punishment.

According to the writings of British witnesses and those involved, Palestinian prisoners were used as human shields against road and rail mines. They were strapped to vehicles at the head of convoys, or to the front of trains carrying military cargo. Private Bellow referred to this as “rather a dirty trick, but we enjoyed it”. If a prisoner fell and was crushed in the convoy, “nobody bothered to go and pick the bits up”. A soldier named Arthur Lane also recalled how prisoners were struck with “rifle butts, bayonets, fists, boots, whatever” and confirmed that officers witnessed such brutality; it was “definitely done with their approval”, often simply as catharsis.

Local Arab sources also accused British soldiers and police of greater atrocities, including massacres at the villages of Kafr Yasif, al-Bassa and Miksa, rape, scorching with hot iron rods, forcing prisoners to stand under cold showers for hours, water (stomach-filling) torture, removing fingernails, and even an early form of water-boarding using a silver coffee pot. The rumours were troubling enough for unconnected British officials at the consulate in Damascus to protest privately. Mr Ogden, for example, stressed to the Foreign Office that he “heard from several independent sources that such methods are by no means unknown to police in Palestine” and that torture “ought to stop, and quickly” before the Germans could harness it as propaganda. Hitler was already criticizing British brutality in Palestine, both German and Italian radio programs were broadcasting details across the Middle East and news stories about British cruelty appeared as far away as South America.

The War Office, naturally, denied all accusations. Incidentally, their draft report shows one crucial line was struck out: “His majesty’s Government are satisfied, after most careful enquiry, that [the complaints] are entirely unfounded.”

By 1939, the Arab Revolt was, for all intents and purposes, suppressed through military force, but only the continued presence of troops in Palestine could guarantee this quiet would last. Regardless of whether a world war was approaching or not, no British government was likely to have tolerated such indefinite expense. In 1939, they issued the MacDonald White Paper. In a formula that met with regional Arab leaders’ requirements (but not Palestinian demands for a shorter interim period), a new British policy promised Palestinian statehood in ten years. It was named for the Colonial Secretary, Malcolm MacDonald, despite his position as a staunch Zionist and personal friend to Chaim Weizmann. The document was both painful to issue and ultimately nullified, but it helps to illustrate how even an ignominious, brutal and decisive military victory may not secure an end to the battle.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [Scott Soerries](#) CC BY 2.0

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