To the casual observer, any attempt to understand the Middle East situation and its various manifestations must be akin to being suddenly confronted with a forest, and, overwhelmed by the oppressiveness of the whole, being unable to delineate any one particular object within the whole. The value of studying historical trends lies not in the research producing some magic solution, but rather in the provision of knowledge which, in unravelling the background to an issue and in demonstrating reasons for the actions of nations and men, thereby helps to defeat mindless emotion and acquired prejudice.

I hope in this article to place an emotionally-charged problem of our times, namely the Arab-Israeli conflict, into sharper focus and thus encourage rational debate over what should be our collective attitude to this problem.

History is a seamless web, the decision to choose a starting-point always being arbitrary. The Arab-Israeli conflict could feasibly be traced back to the first contact between Jews and Mohammed’s legions in the seventh century. However, the present, seemingly intractable problem that exists in the relationship between Israel and the Arabs originated in more recent times in the struggle for Palestine. While some friction manifested itself from the last years of the nineteenth century (1), the conflict, as it is recognisable now, can be said to have arisen out of a confusion of pledges made by Great Britain during the course of the 1914-18 war. Because of this very confusion both the Israelis and the Arabs can and do lay

* Michael Gurdon is a History Honours graduate from the University of Queensland and visited Israel during 1968.
claim to have right and justice on their own side. The Arabs quote the McMahon correspondence; the Jews, or more correctly the Israelis, point to the Balfour Declaration. A brief perusal, then, of the background to the conflict is called for before an examination of the significance of the present situation can be taken into account and before solutions to that conflict can be proposed.

The Arabs’ claim to what is now the State of Israel dates from the promises contained in the correspondence of Sir Henry McMahon with the ruler of the western part of the Arabian peninsula, Sharif Husain, in the period July 1915 to March 1916. Britain thereby pledged the establishment of an independent Arab nation in return for Husain’s promise to recruit soldiers to fight against the Turks and in his promise of economic preference for Great Britain. On the strength of this agreement the Arabs declared war on June 5, 1916 and in so doing played a significant part in the defeat of the Ottoman Empire.

However, nations are often like individuals - when they find themselves in a difficult situation as Britain did during the war, they sometimes make promises that they may be unable to effect or, indeed, have no intention of keeping. This was also the case with the British promise to the Zionists in the following year.

ZIONISM

The Zionist movement had developed in response to the deteriorating social conditions of Jewish people in Eastern Europe and Russia during the last years of the 19th century and was to be given added impetus in the search for a haven for Jews with the publication of Theodor Herzl’s Der Judenstaat. (2) In order to facilitate emigration to Palestine, the Jewish Colonisation Association was formed and it began to make large land purchases from the local Palestinian inhabitants. Internationally, however, the period up to the First World War was one of frustration for the Zionists. They appealed to virtually every government in Europe and offered Jewish loyalty and finance in return for aiding the Zionist colonisation of Palestine. All such requests failed, but the war altered the picture. The first announcement of an alliance between Great Britain and the Zionists came in the form of a letter sent by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour, to Lord Rothschild on November 2, 1917. It was this that came to be known as the ‘Balfour Declaration’.

These contradictory agreements -- the McMahon Letters and the Balfour Declaration -- were thus made through a desire at each stage to strengthen the security of the British Empire. In one case, the Arabs would aid Britain in the fight against the Turks; in the other, with France now so close to the Suez Canal, (3) the Zionist argument that a grateful Zionist government in Palestine would always remain an ally of the Empire acquired added force.

The Balfour Declaration and its ratification by the League of Nations (in the form of the Palestine mandate given to Britain) initiated a bitter contest between two nationalisms, both claiming the same territory. The Zionists demanded Palestine because it had been promised by their God, Yahweh, and confirmed more recently by Balfour and the League. It was a ‘return’ full of mystical significance. It was perhaps not unnatural that the Zionists -- notwithstanding the stipulations for securing the rights of the non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine -- should have interpreted ‘the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people’ as ‘recognising Palestine as the National Home of the Jewish People’, which was what they had asked for in 1917 but which had not, in fact, been granted. The Palestinian Arabs wanted Palestine simply because they lived there, and they pinned great hopes on the new principle of self-determination. The British mandate to Palestine was, indeed, of the ‘A’ class, applying to ‘certain communities belonging to the Turkish Empire’ which had ‘reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations’ could ‘be provisionally recognised’; and, considering that Palestinian Arabs constituted the overwhelming majority of the population of that country at the time, they not unnaturally regarded the mandate as a recognition of their right to become -- as other ex-Ottoman Arabs did eventually in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan -- a fully self-governing Arab people, notwithstanding the provision, likewise contained in the mandate, for the establishment, in Palestine, of a national home for the Jews.

ARMED STRUGGLES

The following three decades set the scene for an accelerated immigration program which was reflected in heightened tensions with the local Arab community and punctuated by anti-Zionist uprisings in 1921
and 1936. Finally, while a special session of the UN General Assembly was considering a proposal that the United Nations should take over the Trusteeship of Palestine in view of the difficulties in implementing a suggested partition plan, Ben-Gurion and the members of the National Council of the Jewish State in Palestine proclaimed the creation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. This proclamation directly involved, for the first time, established Arab States in the Palestinian issue. Israel claims that the intention of the Arab League States was to destroy the very existence of the new Jewish state. Arab apologists claim that the Arab armies entered only the Arab State area in order to prevent the Zionist seizure of all Palestine. Israel, nevertheless, was to assert that this ‘Arab aggression’ rendered all previous UN resolutions concerning Palestine -- and their inherent obligations for Israel, particularly to the local Arab population -- null and void. It is interesting now to note that the King-Crane Commission of 1919 which was enquiring into the problems of the Palestine mandate should have declared that ‘no British person consulted believed that the Zionist program could be carried out except by force of arms’. It was a shatteringly accurate prediction.

MIDDLE EAST AND WORLD POLITICS

In recent years the growing independence of the Arab States and the increased importance of the Middle East to the world’s energy requirements, have made the Arab-Israeli conflict significant in terms of the global balance of power. One leftist viewpoint in this context has been that Israel has become a pawn of American foreign policy in the region. While this is a demonstrably oversimplified analysis, it is true that the US between 1956 and 1973 identified its interests with those of Israel and against those of the Arab States. Indeed, the introduction of Great Power politics into the Middle East equation has further complicated the issue and must always be taken into consideration in any assessment of the problem.

Both the US and the Soviet Union have utilised Arab and Israeli rulers in order to safeguard their own national interests. However, Great Power alliances in the area have been a surprisingly unstable factor. The Soviet Union, for instance, originally strongly supported the establishment of Israel partly in the hope that British influence in the area would be reduced. Its present tacit support for a negotiated settlement is not entirely unrelated to its interest in getting the Suez Canal re-opened. To elaborate further on the point, the US supported Nasser’s claims to the Negev in the period 1952-55 and requested withdrawal of Israeli troops from Sinai and Gaza at the end of 1956. The objective of the US was to prevent an alliance of the emerging Arab nations with the Soviet Union and to protect its position in the region. The current flurry of Kissing er diplomacy can also be seen in this light. Nor is it true to say that either the Soviet Union or the United States is in a position to ‘deliver’ their clients, in forcing on either Israel or the Arab States a settlement unfavourable to them. In our own times the Israeli Government has been unresponsive to American pressures for those territorial concessions that would serve to meet US needs (e.g. oil) in their relations with the rest of the Middle East. Moreover, the Arab States, notably Egypt, have successfully managed to turn on and off friendship with the Soviet Union whenever domestic or foreign policy requirements demanded it. In fact, while the Arab bloc as a whole has more and more asserted itself politically and economically, and is a force in encouraging national liberation movements elsewhere, particularly Africa, it is becoming increasingly difficult to place the various Arab countries into any easily identifiable ideological framework. There are still pan-Arab Nasserists and reactionary sheikdoms, but there is also a militant Libya which is fervently anti-communist and a formerly pro-Western Saudi Arabia which has imposed a political oil embargo (as opposed to the cutback in oil production, which is an economic issue) to satisfy the religious desires of King Faisal. It cannot be reiterated enough, therefore, that the solution to the Middle East crisis can only result from changes occurring within the Israeli and Arab nations, and will not be imposed from outside and against their perceived national interests.

THE PROBLEM TODAY

Since the Palestinian war twenty-six years have passed and three further armed conflicts have become history. This is because the basic problems created by the attitudes which led to the events of 1948 still exist, and the expenditure of time, passion, and the involvement of imperial-
ist and great power interests, have only served to aggravate them. Let us examine then these component problems of a seemingly insoluble conflict. Firstly, the question of the very existence of Israel and what this existence means to the opposing parties; secondly, the tragic situation of the Palestinian refugees. Only if these component parts are resolved satisfactorily can there be any real hope for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and for the defusing of its allied threat to world peace.

The British historian Lewis Namier, himself a Jew, profoundly believed that only the formation of a Jewish national state would solve the Jewish problem. It was at the opening of the 1940s that he wrote: "There are many millions of Jews who will never abandon the age-long goal of the Return, and the half-million in Palestine will never accept minority status in the National Home." (4) In other words, the Zionists were not prepared to accept a federated Palestine or, indeed, any solution based upon the principle of national self-determination. Their aim was nothing less than partition, with a state under Jewish control. Namier claimed, furthermore, that the mandate of the League had acknowledged the unbroken national and religious tradition of the Jewish people's special relationship with the land of Palestine. Yet was this claim to sovereignty through 'an ancient historical right' wishful thinking? H.V. Cooke in his book, *Israel - A Blessing and a Curse*, thinks that it was. It is pure nonsense, he says, to view 1948 as a restoration of the Jewish State that had been made ineffective in 70 A.D. for hardly a nation would be secure in its territorial sovereignty if this principle was universally valid. (5) However, Israel's rights of sovereignty are now complete and she is an accepted member of the Community of Nations -- except nominally on the part of the Arab States which continue to espouse the attitude that the Jewish claim is invalid. This feeling of antagonism and of being unjustly treated goes back far beyond 1948, to the growing Zionist threat.

The Zionists saw anti-semitism as something that was inherent in all non-Jewish peoples and that the only solution to the Jews' problems would be an ingathering of all Jewish people to Israel. However, their concept of Israel as the 'home of the Jews' actually militated against the solution of Jewish problems in other countries and their striving for justice. All indications are that Israel's existence -- in its present form -- has exacerbated those problems. It may very well be that Zionism, in the longer perspective of history, will come to be evaluated as a transient political program which met certain needs and aspirations while they lasted. It should not be forgotten that prior to the Nazi persecution which rallied world Jewry behind the concept of a Jewish national home in Palestine, many leading Jews in Europe and the US had believed that Zionism was endangering their nationality status in the countries of their birth and also causing even more anti-semitism. A return to this attitude in the near future is more likely than not. From a tactical point of view, the separation of the 'Zionist manipulators' from the great mass of Jews has been a constant theme in the attitude of those who struggled against the Jewish colonies in Palestine and who are struggling against Israel, and this extract from a 1946 speech by Abd al-Rahman Azzam, the then Secretary-General of the Arab League, places the Zionist threat into what he, for one, considered to be its proper perspective:

"The calamity of Zionism has overtaken them (the Jews), Zionism which the British at first supported with their money, so that Zionism may build a foreign, imperialistic state in an Arab land. The Zionists are a curse on the Jews themselves and, indeed, on us Arabs." (6)

A curse on the Palestinian Arabs certainly. But it is becoming apparent that unless the Zionist program is fundamentally modified, it could develop into just as much a curse for the Israeli masses. For while the initial effect of the October war has been to harden the Zionist stance and to reinforce the support for retaining some of the occupied territories as a buffer against further attacks, it is obvious that in the long term major concessions will need to be made. And when the mass of the Israeli people come to realise that their very survival is being threatened by the continued militarist policies of Zionism, a peaceful revolution in values may conceivably eventuate which will reject Zionism as having outlived any past usefulness. Nevertheless, this realisation will never have much chance of developing into a powerful political force until threats of 'driving Israel into the sea' are renounced by Arab governments. Whatever may be the rights and wrongs of the situation, the existence of Israel has returned a dignity and pride to the Jew. Any armed attempt to destroy that nation will continue to be met by a determination that has acquired a force of two thousand years of suffering and alienation behind it. We must not underestimate the significance attached by the Israelis to the fate of the Biafrans with whom they identified to the extent of be-
lieving that 'there, but for the grace of the Israeli defence forces, go we'.

ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST

So it must be stated forcibly here that Israel, whatever its eventual territorial size or its composition, must be guaranteed its right to exist in return for fundamental concessions, concessions that cannot be made by the present leadership. What is really ironic is that Israel in 1974 is in a more precarious position than it was in 1956, despite (or because of) the military successes of the Zionist leadership. If the Arab armies had not been defeated time and again on the field of battle, the much more effective weapon of oil -- whatever one thinks of the morality of wringing diplomatic changes from dependent nations in such a way -- would not have been utilised. As a result the initiative and balance of power has shifted perceptibly and inexorably to the Arab camp. Thus, the Zionist program, in being carried through to its logical conclusion, has brought a permanent military alert to Israel and the whole region, with a consequent neglect of pressing socio-economic needs on the domestic front.

THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES

I shall turn now to the question of the conciliatory initiatives that need to be forthcoming from Israel, concessions that are realistic within the prevailing historical and political framework and which progressive forces around the world might feasibly rally behind. Essentially, the solution revolves around -- as it has always done -- the question of the Palestinian refugees. No final peace settlement can be brought about -- no Arab government could afford to recognise the existence of Israel given the power and influence of the Palestinian guerrillas -- until the settlement of the refugee problem. And this settlement, furthermore, is inextricably linked with a withdrawal from occupied territories and a re-appraisal of the kind of state Israel is to become.

When one referred to refugees prior to 1948 one meant, of course, the Jews and not the Arabs; those coming to form Israel, not those being excluded from it. The tragic story of the Arab refugee began with the announcement by the British of the termination of their mandate (in itself a victory for the terrorist policy of the Stern and Irgun organisations) and the subsequent civil war that raged through Palestine. The day following the proclamation of the State of Israel, the armies of six Arab countries launched their offensive. The Mufti of Jerusalem and other Arab leaders exhorted the Arab population of Israel to leave their homes and seek protection behind Arab lines. This most of them did do, but as Israel was not defeated, they were left stranded following the ceasefire. Some 750,000 were scattered in the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. They were not allowed to return to their homes, and their places were taken by the many thousands of Jews who poured in from Europe and elsewhere -- 300,000 in the first eighteen months; 820,000 in the first five years. Given that the two sides are starting from conflicting first principles, there has never been much of a hope for the settlement of this problem. Before agreeing to a partial return of refugees or the consideration of some other plan of settlement Israel has always insisted on the signing of a peace treaty. The Arab governments, for their part, constrained by the attitudes of the Palestinians and by the unknown reaction of their own populations, have refused to consider a final peace settlement until the prior settlement of the Arab refugee problem. They have, in fact, resisted every attempt to resettle all of the refugees in their own countries, arguing that such resettlement would in effect concede Israel's right to the territory it occupies (now including the territory of Arab States themselves since 1967), and to the former property of the refugees. This is not to say that they have not accepted the resettlement of large numbers of Palestinian Arabs, but it does mean that they will not agree to any UN developmental program that denies to the refugees the right of repatriation. (7) And despite the re-entry into Israel by 1961 of 35,000 Arabs under the Family Reunion Plan, as long as the absence of those who wish to return is due only to a prohibition upon their return, their residential claims must still be adjudged valid.

The ostensible reason given by the Israelis for their turning-down of the almost annual UN requests for repatriation, and for their demand for a peace treaty before such a consideration, is that they consider these refugees as a potential internal threat to Israel's security and very existence. This is not the whole reason however. There is a distinct emotional disinclination to take back large numbers of refugees, thereby diluting the Jewish character of Israel's population. Apart from a not unexpected tendency towards aggressive nationalism after centuries of persecution and subjection, there is a strong feeling that there is something of a Messianic fulfilment...
in the ‘return of Israel to the land of Israel’. A visit to Israel reveals to the traveller just how much it is a ‘Jewish State’, and its religious significance may be ascertained from this speech of Ben-Gurion’s in 1957:

“If we had not inherited from the prophets the Messianic vision of redemption, the suffering of the Jewish people in the Diaspora would have led to their extinction. The ingathering of the exiles ..... is the beginning of the realisation of the Messianic vision.” (8)

WHAT KIND OF STATE?

It is this view of the kind of state that Israel is, or should be, which has made the solution of the refugee problem more and more difficult, and which has increased the Palestinian leaders’ distrust of the Israelis along with their conviction that a settlement can only be brought about by force and through the destruction of Israel. It is the reason why I am convinced that with a peaceful and total settlement of the refugee problem, a major tenet of Zionism (the Messianic vision of a strictly ‘Jewish’ state) will have been undermined.

In the final analysis, it will require great vision and selflessness on at least one of the sides to break out of the captivity of over fifty years of fixed national thinking. For while it may be true that the leaders of nations initially govern public opinion, it is equally true that public opinion eventually comes to govern those leaders. That is why a permanent peace settlement can never be applied by the Great Powers. This can only occur when there is a change in the nature of the conflicting national interests. This writer, moreover, is of the opinion that only one party can provide the key to that change of heart. The anti-Israel coalition is too disunited, too composed of varying aims to initiate such a change. A final peace agreement will require concessions in territory and a serious reappraisal of the kind of State that Israel intends to be -- in terms of it becoming a less overtly ‘Jewish’ State and in terms of its relationship with the West -- and these can and must come of their own free will from the Israelis. There are signs that such a change is beginning to develop: There has long been a group in Israel which believes that Arabs and Jews can live side by side in peace. Led by Mapam, Israel’s Marxist Labour Party, this group is attracting attention with its idea that the conflict with the Arabs is being intensified by Israel’s identification with the West, and that Israel should adopt a neutralist line, more in tune with the rest of the Middle East. It was also of some significance, moreover, that Ben-Gurion, in the period prior to his death, stated repeatedly that he was for giving back all of the captured territories for the sake of peace.

If the above attitudes were to gain ground and become the basis for future Israeli foreign policy, would this set into motion the beginning of the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict? Yes, I believe it would. There should then be enough areas of common agreement to make possible direct negotiations with the more responsible fedayeen groups which have been talking of the creation of a multi-racial, multi-religious state in which Jew and Arab will be equal. (9) The final solution could well be a more realistic compromise based on a partition settlement, perhaps producing a federated nation but certainly with the establishment of a Palestinian State comprised of the West Bank plus some other areas which are now a part of Israel. The resettlement of the Palestinians would have a corollary in further reducing tension by downgrading the Zionist requirement for more large-scale Jewish immigration (and by implication, Israel’s ties with the West). Economic cooperation between the two peoples -- combining the technological expertise of the Israelis with the new-found nation-building dignity of the Palestinians -- would serve to raise the living standards of the whole region and begin the effective and necessary integration of Israel into the Middle East. Other by-products of the relaxation of tension in the region would be that (i) reactionary Arab leaders could no longer use their ‘common enemy’ as a convenient pretext for distracting their people’s attention away from urgent domestic considerations; (ii) it would allow Jews living outside Israel to devote their full energies to vital socio-economic struggles within their own countries.

Our own role in this issue should be primarily one of providing active moral support for those Israeli forces which are currently striving to overcome the negative, restrictive and intransigent elements inherent in Zionism. (10)

The socialist movement in Australia must express its opposition to Zionism as a political program and strengthen its ties with those groupings in Israel which are looking beyond the short-sightedness of the present Israeli power structure. Obviously, in this context, nothing should be done which would weaken the stance of such people in the minds of Israelis and world Jewish opin-
ion. Anti-Jewish activities in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, for instance, is counter-prod-
uctive to the cause of justice and peace and does not strengthen the hand of progressive Israelis and Jews. Saner cou n sel must pre-
vail, and wherever we can bring our collect­
ive influence to bear we must do so. Not only this, but our attitudes should be made
known to progressive elements within the
Palestine liberation movement and the
Moslem world in general. There can be no
doubt that Arab statements concerning
the liquidation of Israel and the deportation
of Jews has helped to maintain the support
of Israelis for their politico-military leader­
ship and its Zionist ideals.

Still, let there be no mistake. The road to
a peaceful and ultimate settlement will be a
thorny one, fraught with almost insurmount­
able difficulties. Nothing can be imposed from
outside and be successful. What we can do in
all goodwill is to take the initiative and make
our viewpoint known to all parties in the con­
flict. But if a lasting settlement is arrived at,
it will be comforting to know that it is with­
in the realms of possibility for men, by app­
llying their willpower, to solve the most ser­
ious of international conflicts, and the estab­
lishment of Israel may yet turn out to be a
blessing, not a curse, for the whole of the
Middle East.

FOOTNOTES

1. With the change both in the nature and
volume of Jewish immigration to Palestine
in the 1880s and 1890s, anti-Zionist societies
were formed in Jerusalem, Haifa and Jaffa.

2. Herzl was not immediately concerned with
the locality of his Jewish State, only that it
should exist. However, orthodox Jews held
sway at the first Zionist Congress at Basle in
1897, the delegates finally deciding that
Palestine had an emotional appeal to the
devoutly religious Jew and Christian alike,
which another locality would not have.

3. This resulted from the Sykes-Picot Agree­
ment of 1916 which divided the crescent
area into spheres of British and French
fluence. But within just a few months the
British appear to have regretted entering
into the Agreement, and sought for a way
to overturn it.

4. Namier, L.B. - 'Numbers and Exodus'
in Conflicts (Macmillan, London, 1942),
p. 161.

5. Cooke, H.V. -- Israel - A Blessing and
a Curse (Stevens & Son, London, 1960),
p. 173.

6. Address on "The Arab League and World
Unity' 4.1.46, quoted in S. Haim (ed.) Arab
Nationalism (U. of California Press, 1962)
p. 165.

Similar impressions developed elsewhere, too.
Many British leftists, for instance, had sup­
ported the establishment of a Jewish homeland
as a continuation of the pre-war and wartime
anti-fascist struggle. So it came as a shock
with the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt
that Israel had seemed to live up to the Arab
sneer of being a 'beachhead of imperialism'.

7. It must be admitted that Palestinian lead­
ers have well understood the political impor­
tance of their compatriots remaining in the
refugee camps as their most effective symbol
of the wrong done to Palestine and of their
implacable hatred for Israel.

8. Epstein, I. Judaism, (Penguin, Harmonds­

9. And actually in accord with the reports
of the 1919 King-Crane Commission, the
British Conferences of 1939 and the Anglo-
American Commission of 1946.

10. For example, there is the current diff­
culty in post-election Israel in the formation
of a government. This process is being threat­
ened by the insistence of the National Relig­
ious Party that it will not become a coalition
partner unless legislation is initiated which
will allow only those converts to Judaism
whose conversion is recognised by the Is­
raeli Rabbinate to be recognised and reg­
istered as a Jew.