

The Boundaries of the Holy Land—Past, Present and Future

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The boundaries of the Holy Land – Israel – Palestine, were established in a long process of more than 180 years and the process is still going on. Ottomans, Britains, French, Jews, Arabs, UN, all were and are involved in the not ending process by wars, negotiations, peace agreements and unfinished discussions. Different lines were established but never for a long time, as some political changes brought with them different boundaries for that part of the world, seen by Jews, Christians and Muslims as their Holy Land.

Keywords: Palestine, British Mandate, WW 1, Israel, UN Partition Plan, armistice lines, 1967 War, Egypt

Introduction

Palestine, Eretz-Israel, Israel, Terra Santa, The Holy Land, all those were given to a stretch of land situated on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. This was and still is one of the most important pieces of land, which the world is dealing with during the last two thousand years. One of the main issues is the delimitation of Palestine, a process that began about 160 years ago but it is far from its end.

For a long period, Palestine was more a geohistorical concept rooted in historical consciousness than a defined and measured stretch of land lying within clear geographical boundaries or stable political borders. Except for the Mediterranean Sea, there are no geographical limits based on prominent topographical features that separate Palestine from the larger region in which it is situated. In most periods the borders hinged upon the outcome of a struggle between world powers for control over the entire region; in some cases, political and cultural frontiers divided the country internally, while in other occasions the land in its entirety became a part of a much larger political unit. Only for brief periods was the area under the uniform control of its residents.

The Jewish name Eretz-Israel appears in the Bible (I Samuel 13:19), while the name Palestine, which came from the old name Pleshet (Palasta in Roman usage) gained wide currency. The Roman emperor Hadrian endeavored to quash Jewish nationalism after a revolt which took place in 135 AD. Thereby, the name Palaestina or Provincia Syria Palaestina was used for Eretz-Israel, to eradicate any trace of Judaism in the land (Biger, 1989).

Since the era of the Crusades in the 12th century, Palestine has not been an independent state and every attempt at political definition has merely been an administrative convenience. For four hundred years, prior to World War I, Palestine, or Filistin as it was known to its rulers and the local inhabitants, was not even a separated administrative sub-division of the Ottoman Empire. The area was divided between major provinces with centers as Beirut or Damascus outside Palestine. Only in the second half of the 19th century was the southern part of Palestine organized as a detached district. Bounded by the line from Jaffa to Jericho in the north, the Jordan River in the east and the Dead Sea-Rafa line in the south, this was called the El-Quds (the Holy) (Jerusalem) district and its governor was responsible directly to the supreme authority in Istanbul. The area north of

Jerusalem District was part of the Beirut province; the area east of the Jordan River was part of the Damascus Province, and the area south of Jerusalem District was part of the Hedjaz Province which extended into Sinai Peninsula (Great Britain. Naval Intelligence Division, 1920). None of the areas mentioned above carried the name of Filistin (Figure 1).

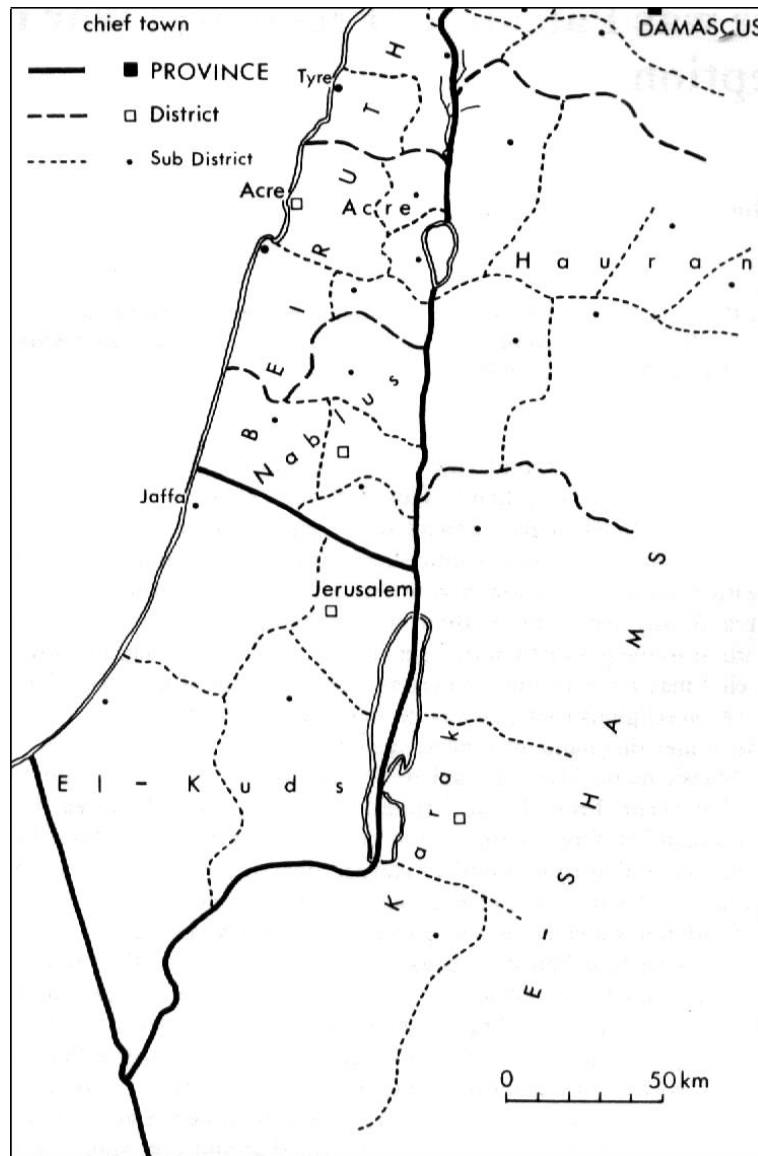


Figure 1. Otoman administrative regions in today Palestine.

Interest in its political definition began after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and ever since, the problems have been political rather than geographical. Previously, Jewish settlers and politicians, European boundary-makers, British, Jewish, French, and Arab politicians, all had different territorial perceptions of Palestine. Based on general encyclopedias published before the First World War a national perception could be made but, the more descriptions that are read, the more confused a reader becomes (Biger, 1981) (Figures 2 and 3).

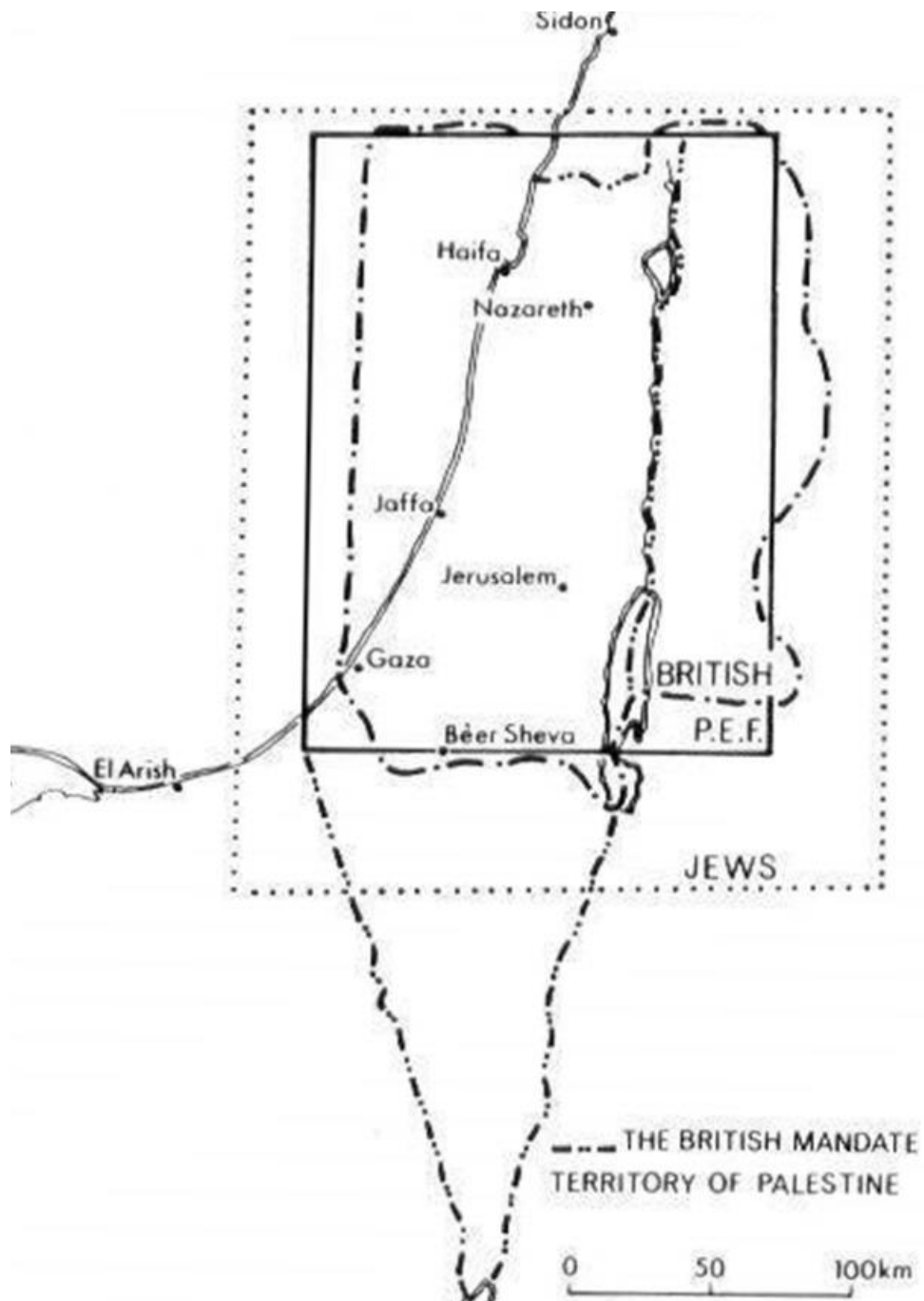
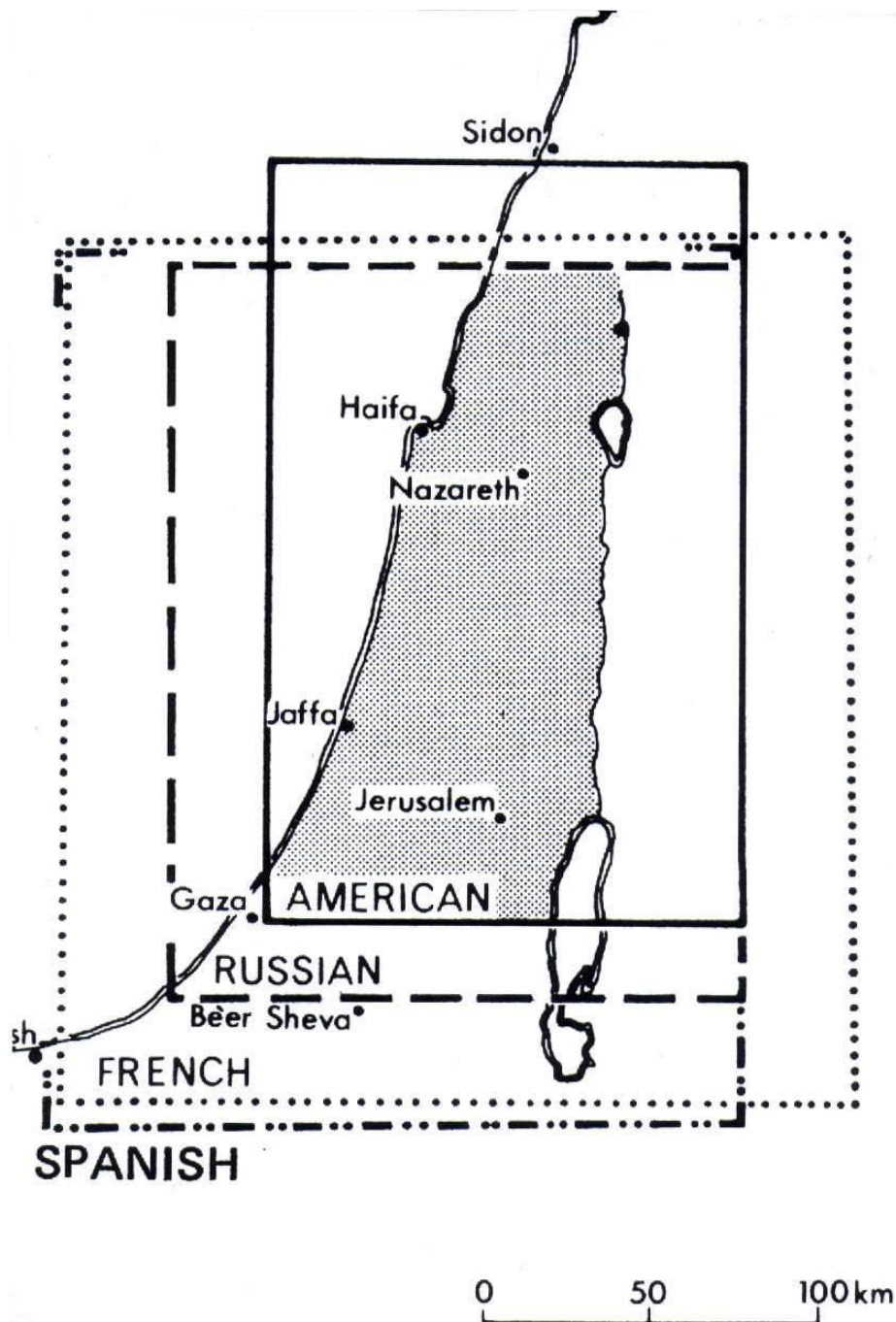


Figure 2.



Figures 2-3. Different altitudes defining Palestine. The shaded area—agreed by all.

But even though the descriptions differ, the area of agreement is still considerable. It covered an area of about 26,000 sq. km. and was bounded in the north by the lower Litany (Qassamiye) River and in the north-east and the southern foot of the Mount Hermon; the eastern line was either the Jordan River or the line some km to the eastward; the southern line passed from the Arnon River (Wadi Al Mujib), through the southern point of the Dead Sea and Beer Shiva, westward to the mouth of Wadi Gaza. This is very differing from the modern political definition of Palestine, which had evolved during the last 160 years, but mainly after World War I.

The Delimitation Process

The process of the delimitation the boundaries of modern Palestine-Israel can be divided into three main stages. There are:

- Outside political delimitation.
- The forced delimitation.
- The internal diplomatic delimitation.

Outside Political Delimitation

This stage, which took place between 1841 and 1947, marked the stage when outside nations and international institute delimited the boundaries of the discussed area. Many political actors, The Ottoman Empire, Mohammed Ali the founder of modern Egypt, The British Empire, The French Government, and the United Nations, all were involved in the delimitation process, each donated its influence. The will of the local population has never been discussed at this stage, which is marked by diplomatic negotiation.

The first act, which marked a boundary line in the vicinity of Palestine, happened in the first half of the nineteenth century. Toward the end of 1831, an Egyptian army unit, commanded by Ibrahim Pasha (step son of Mohammed Ali, the then Ottoman delegate to Egypt) invaded Palestine and Syria. For eight years, Egypt's northern boundary passed near the Taurus Mountains until the intervention of European powers in the dispute between Mohammed Ali and the Sultan. The outcome of this military move was the evacuation of the Egyptians army from both Syria and Palestine and the signing of an agreement in 1840 between the Sultan and Mohammed Ali, known as the London Agreement. Under its terms, Mohammed Ali renounced his rule over Syria and Palestine. In return he received from the Sultan a Firman (an Imperial Order) conferring upon him the right to govern Egypt, a right granted to him and his offspring "in all Egyptian territories included in the boundaries designated on the figure sent by the great Vasir" (Figure 4).

The figure depicted for the first time the designation of Egypt' political boundaries, by this making a line between Egypt and Palestine for the first time. The figure shows quite clearly the delimitation line, which passed at Sinai Peninsula. It starts at the city of Suez and runs northeastward toward Palestine. It stops some distance from the Mediterranean shore, in a point between Rafh and Khan Yunis of today. From there a line runs toward the sea, northward while another line runs eastward, toward the Dead Sea. Thus, it marks a shore south-north boundary line between Palestine and Egypt and a long east-west line between Palestine and the province of Hedjaz. Thus, the year 1840 marked the first time Palestine ever appeared on a political figure, a figure which is a part of official agreement concerning boundaries. This agreement was done between an Egyptian ruler and the Ottoman Sultan without any involvement of the local inhabitants (Biger 1981).

The second time a boundary line was delimited in that area came about in 1906. This came after Britain established itself in Egypt in 1882. The British consul to Egypt, Evelyn Bering (later the Lord Cromer) found the 1840 line is reaching the south entrance of the Suez Canal (opened in 1869) thus giving the Ottoman Empire the ability to control and attack the ships running there. Cromer tried to convince the British Government that the situation is threaten the British Empire, which should ask for removing the line eastward. Only in 1906 Cromer succeed in his aim and the British Government asked the Ottoman to place the boundary line on the Rafa-Aqaba line. The Ottoman refused but under threat of war with Britain they agreed to remove the boundary eastward, toward the Rafa-Taba (not Aqaba) line (Figure 5).

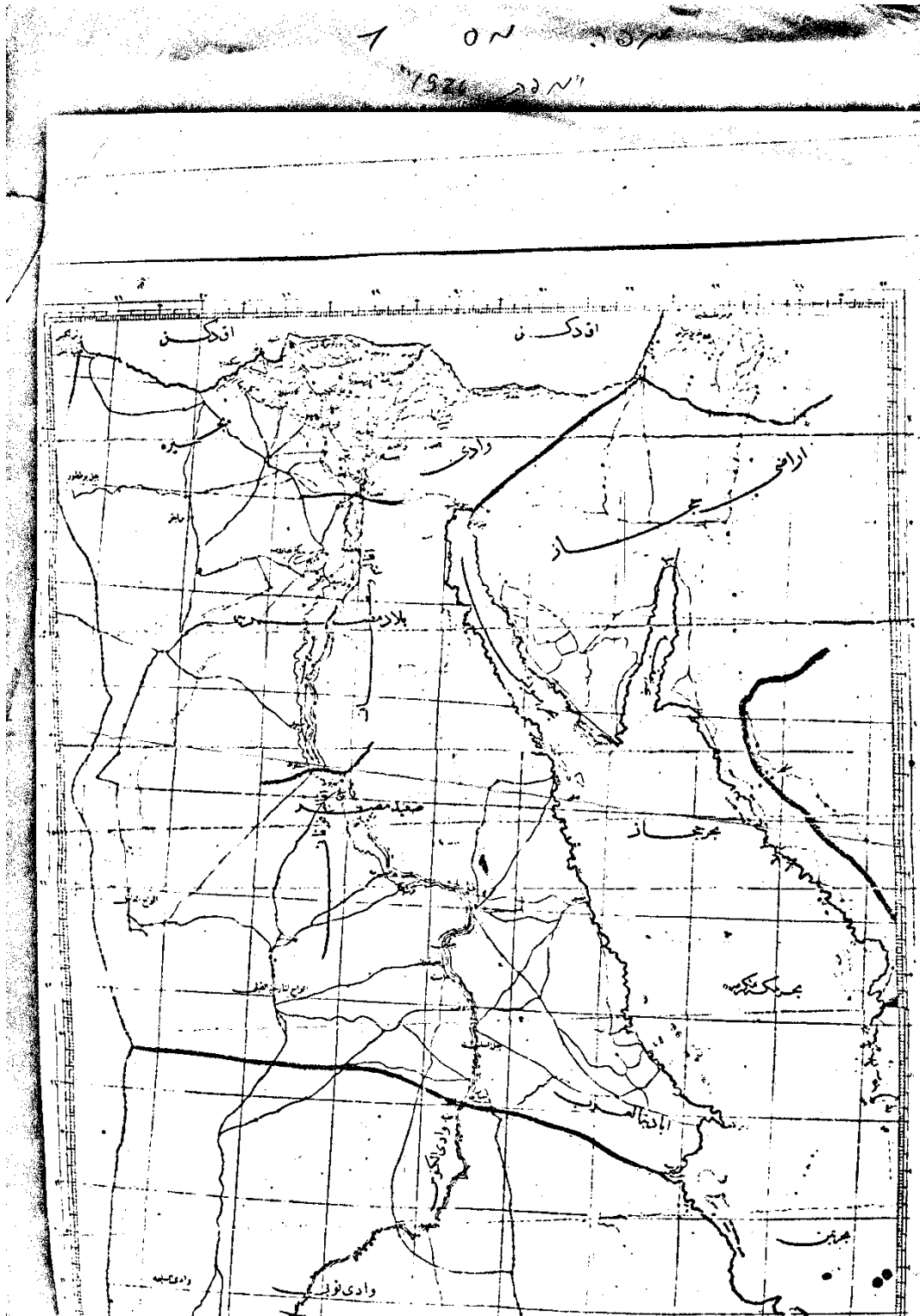


Figure 4. The 1841 figure of Egypt.

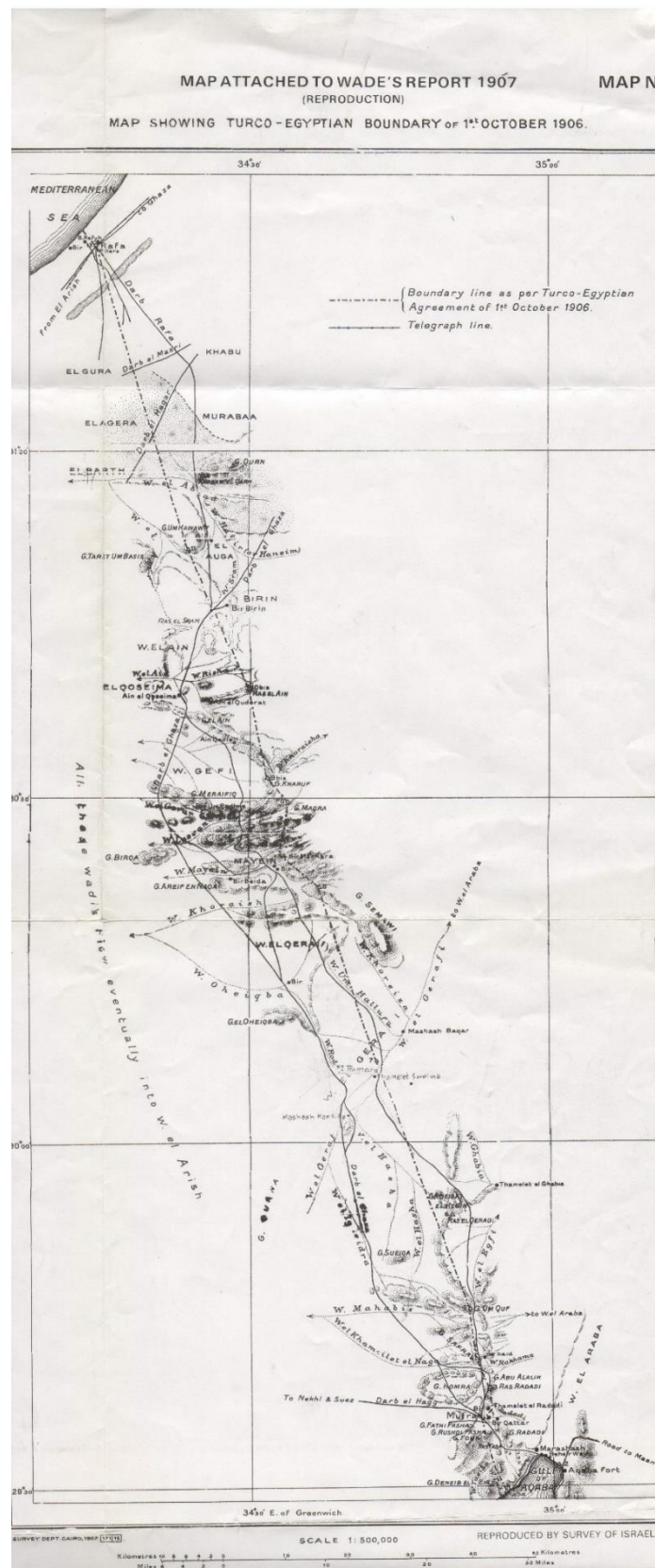


Figure 5. The administrative line of 1906.

It was agreed that the line is not a boundary line between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire but “An administrative separating line” between the province of Hedjaz and the district of El Quds (Jerusalem) on one side and Sinai on the other side (Hurwitz, 1984). Although there was no mention of Palestine in that agreement, the line established in 1906 is the oldest boundary line of Israel of today. It was adopted in 1919 as the southwestern boundary line between British Palestine and Egypt, and as an outcome of the Israel-Egypt peace talk, at late 1979; it was adopted as the boundary line between Israel and Egypt.

Those two southwestern lines of Palestine were established not as a part of a process to delimit the boundary of Palestine as a whole, a process that went on only after World War I.

The events of this war brought Britain into Palestine, as the Allied forces, let by General Allenby conquer Palestine in 1917-1918. In 1915, during the war, the British promised the Arabs, who helped them, an independent state stretching along all the Arab land held by Turkey, except the area “West of the districts of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus” which, according to the British, did not included Palestine. The Arab version of that promised talks about the area “west of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus” which meant that Palestine was included in the area that was promised to the Arabs (Kedourie, 1969). A year later, in 1916, Britain and France signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, in which the area which is now Palestine was divided into several parts (Figure 6).

The area north of a line running in northwestern direction from the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee toward a point on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, north of Acre (The Blue Area) was allocated to France. The area east of the Jordan River, north of the Yarmuk River (Area A) was allocated for an independence Arab State influenced by France. The cities of Haifa and Acre and the surrounding area (the Red area) were allocated to Britain. The area east of the Jordan River, south of the Yarmuk River (Area B, which also included the area south of Dead Sea-Rafh line) was allocated to an independence Arab state influenced by Britain. Central Palestine (the Brown area) was to be ruled by a multinational regime, including in its France, Britain, Russia, Italy, and the Arabs (Nevakivi, 1969). A year later, in 1917, Britain present the “Balfiur Declaration”, promised the Zionist Organization that it “view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people” (Friedman, 1973).

When the war ended, all those promises were brought before the victorious nations. The newly established League of Nations, decided, on April 24, 1920, to give Britain a Mandate over Palestine (and Mesopotamia-Iraq) while giving France a Mandate over Syria and Lebanon. Britain and France had to decide where to place their mutual boundary in the Middle East while Britain had to delimit the boundary between Palestine and Mesopotamia, France had to delimit between Syria and Lebanon.

Britain decided to adopt the 1906 line as the boundary line between Egypt and Palestine (Kliot, 1989). A line running from a point three miles west of Aqaba, on the shore of Aqaba gulf, along the center of Wadi Araba, the Dead Sea, The Jordan River to its confluence with the Yarmuk River, and in the Yarmuk River up to the Syrian Boundary, was established as the eastern boundary line of Palestine. It separated Palestine (and the Jewish National Home) from the newly created Trans Jordan ruled by the Emir Abdullah. This line never served as a boundary for any independent regime which ever ruled Palestine.

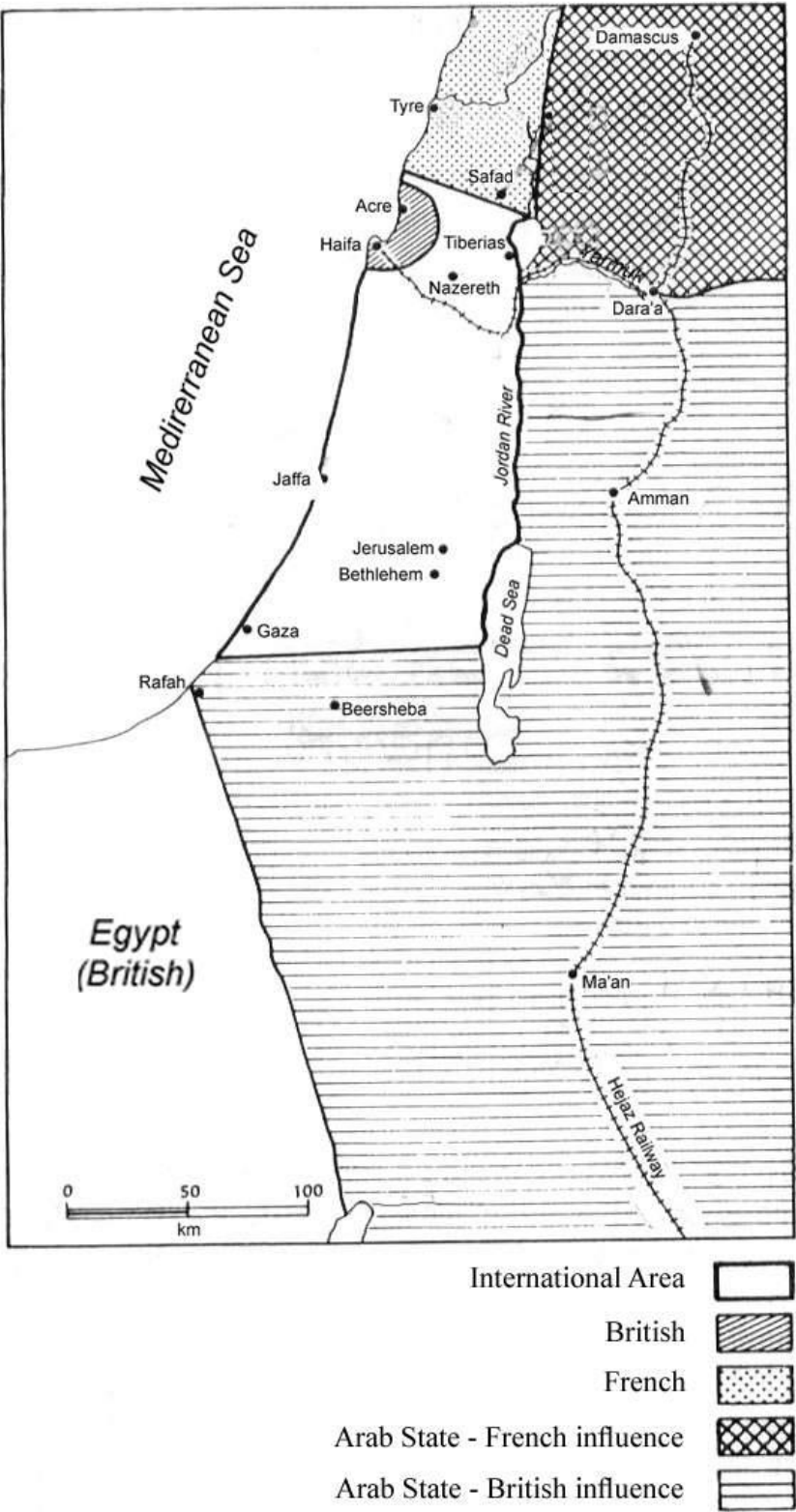


Figure 6. Palestine in the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement.

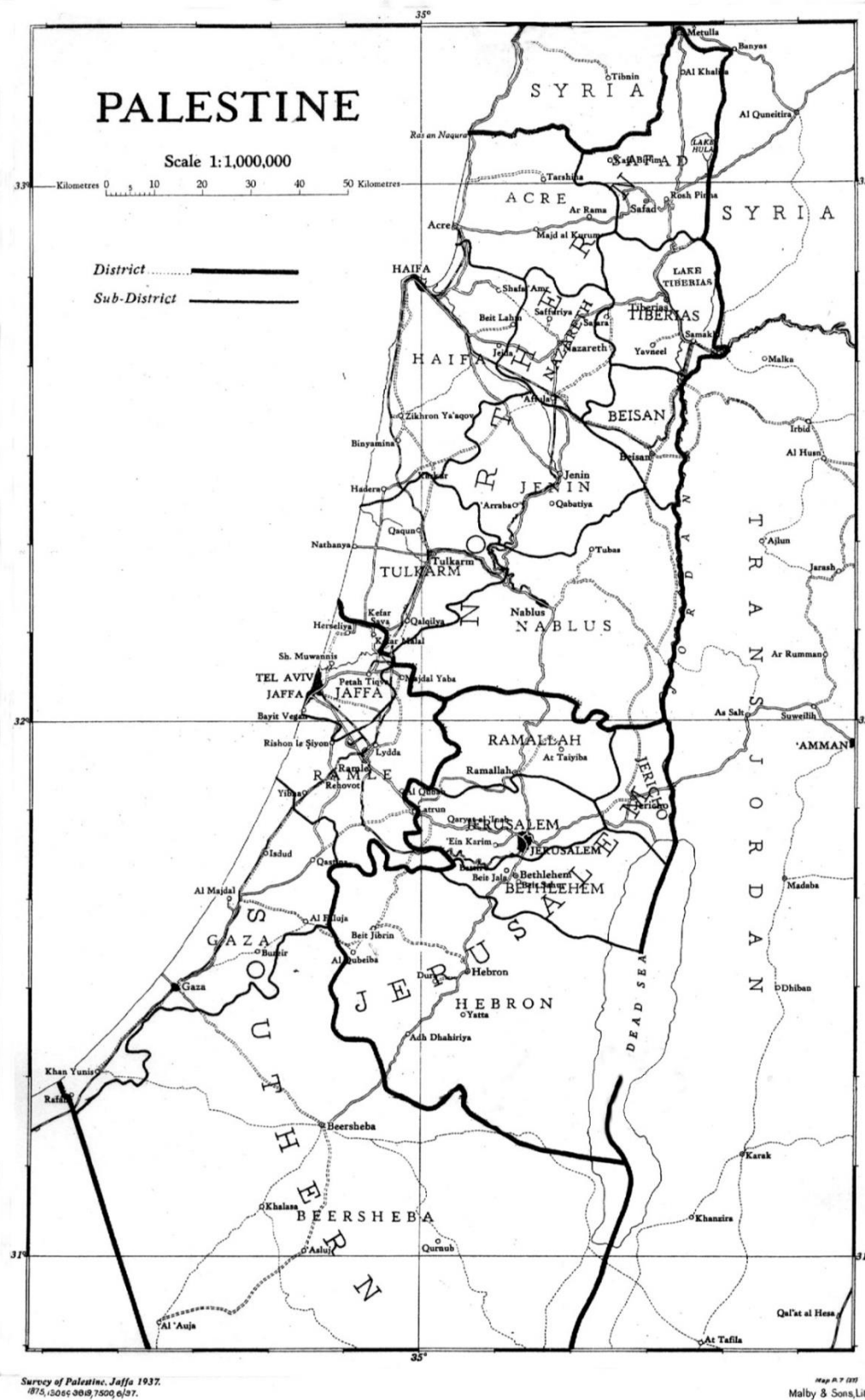


Figure 7. British Palestine 1937.

In these two lines (the southwestern and the eastern lines) Britain was free to delimit the boundary according to its needs and decisions, as it ruled both sides of the border area. This was not the case in the northern area, where Britain confronts France in establishing a boundary line. The northern line of Palestine was a segment of the line that marked the French and the British Mandate areas in the Middle East. The negotiation concerning the location of that boundary line lasted for about five years and was concluded by a treaty signed in March 1923 (The National Library of Israel, 1923). The line runs, taking into consideration the local village boundaries (Biger, 2002), eastward from the Ras el Naqura ridge on the Mediterranean shore and then runs northward to include in Palestine the Jewish settlement of Metula and the source of the Jordan River. Then it runs southward, parallel but east of the Jordan River, till it reaches the Sea of Galilee. The line runs on its Eastern Shore, about 10 m east from the shore. From the middle of the Eastern Shore, it runs east and south, thus leaving in Palestine an area, stretching up to El-Hama, on the Yarmuk River (Figure 8).

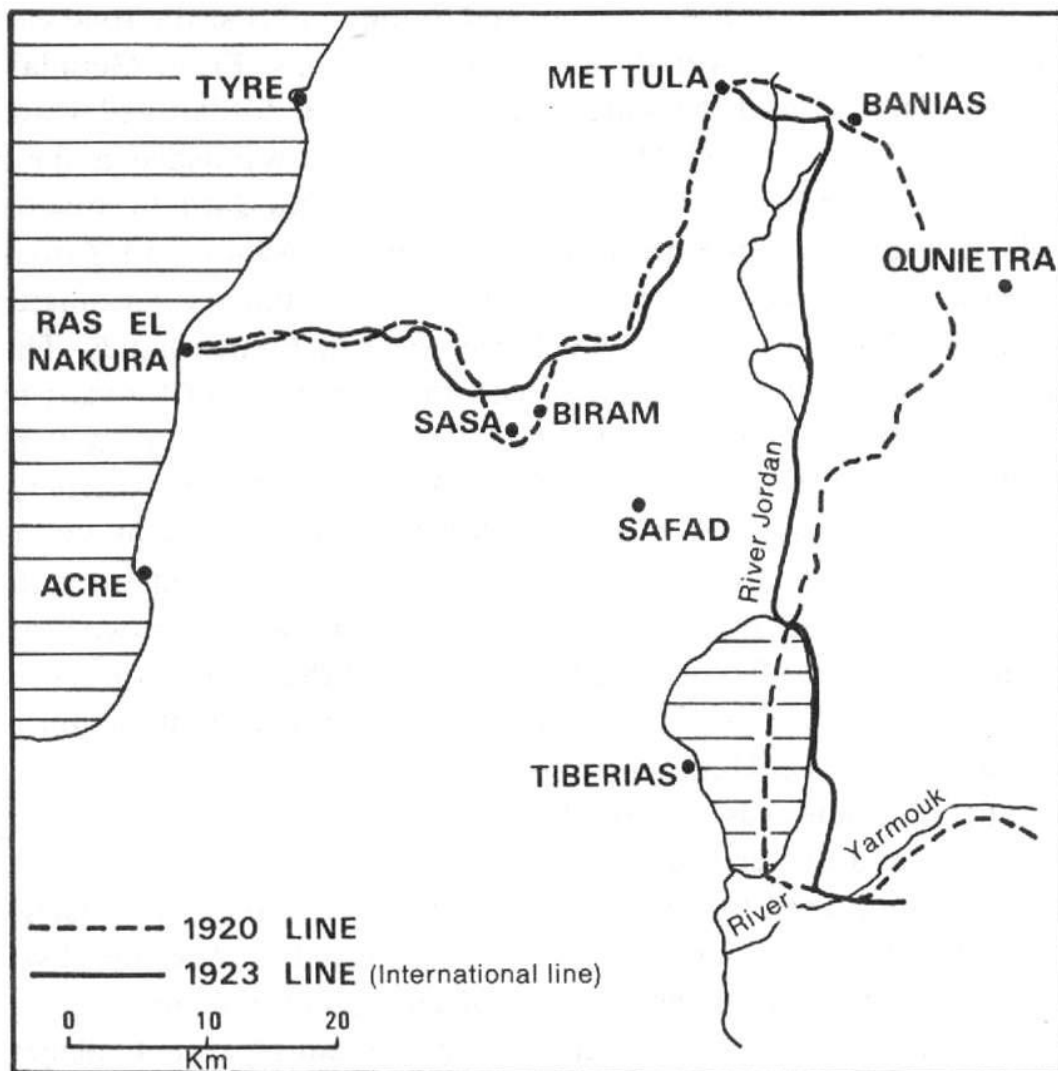


Figure 8. The northern boundary of British Palestine.

The year 1923 marked the period, in which, for the first time in modern history, Palestine was defined as a political-territorial unit, separated from the surrounding area. British Palestine, with an area of about 27,000 sq. km. was, and still is, what the whole world accepted as Palestine. All past boundaries (except from the Jewish Rabbinate law boundaries) are seen now as a historical item, without anything to do with the actual issue of the delimitation of that area.

The Partition of Palestine

Britain held the idea of establishing a Jewish state in its Palestine, but the local Arab population never accepted that idea. A series of confrontations with the British regime brought the British Government to suggest, in 1937, to divide Palestine between a Jewish and an Arab state, holding to itself the holy cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem and a corridor the Mediterranean Sea (Katz, 1998). This idea (Figure 9) was accepted by the Jews (which suggested other partition line) but was rejected by the Arabs. Even though, the idea never died, and one may look at the history of Palestine and the Jewish-Arab struggle in Palestine-Israel as a struggle for a better location of the line.

The 1937-1938 partition lines and few other suggestions marked the 10 years between 1937 and 1947, in Palestine. Nothing had come from all those suggestions and in February 1947, Britain passed the Palestine problem to the United Nation. In 29, November 1947, the general assembly of the United Nations adopted Resolution 181, which called for establishing in Palestine of two states, a Jewish one and an Arab one, leaving the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem as a “corpus separatum” under a UN regime (Figure 10).

This resolution ended the first period of boundary making in modern Palestine, a period in which outside powers marked its boundaries.

Again, the Jewish world accepted this resolution; the Arab refused to accept it and a war broke between the Jews and the Arab in Palestine. The war was later continued as a war in which Syria, Lebanon, Trans-Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt attacked the newly created State of Israel in spring 1948. This war of 1948 (the independence war of Israel) opens the second stage of boundary making in that area, the period of the Gun.

The 1948 war was ended with an Israeli victory. The Arab armies were defeated, and the newly established state not only survived the attack but succeeded in enlarging its area. British Palestine was divided according the 1949 Armistice agreements between Israel and its surrounding countries, into three areas. The State of Israel added some areas to the area allocated to her by the UN, which were allocated to the Arab State, which never was established. Thus, the Area of Israel was about 20,770 sq. km. Trans Jordan occupied the West Bank, an area allocated to the Arab State, which, according to this act, changed its name into Jordan. The Egyptian army occupied the Gaza Strip, which was also allocated to the Arab State (Figure 11).

The Armistices lines were marked on figures by a green pencil and thus got the name of “the Green Line” (Newman, 1995). That line basically marked, with some modification, the line where the armies stood at the day in which a cease-fire was accepted. Thus, the guns and army officers were the tools and the people who drew the line. The local needs, geographical considerations, and other reasons which are usually used in delimitation of an international boundaries were never discussed as both sides saw the line as a temporary line, to be replaced shortly afterward by a permanent boundary line. This was not the case at that time and the guns were used again in the process of boundary delimitation. In June 1967, another round of war between Israel and the surrounding Arab world took place. Israel took the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, The Golan Height from Syria, and the West Bank from Jordan (Figure 12).

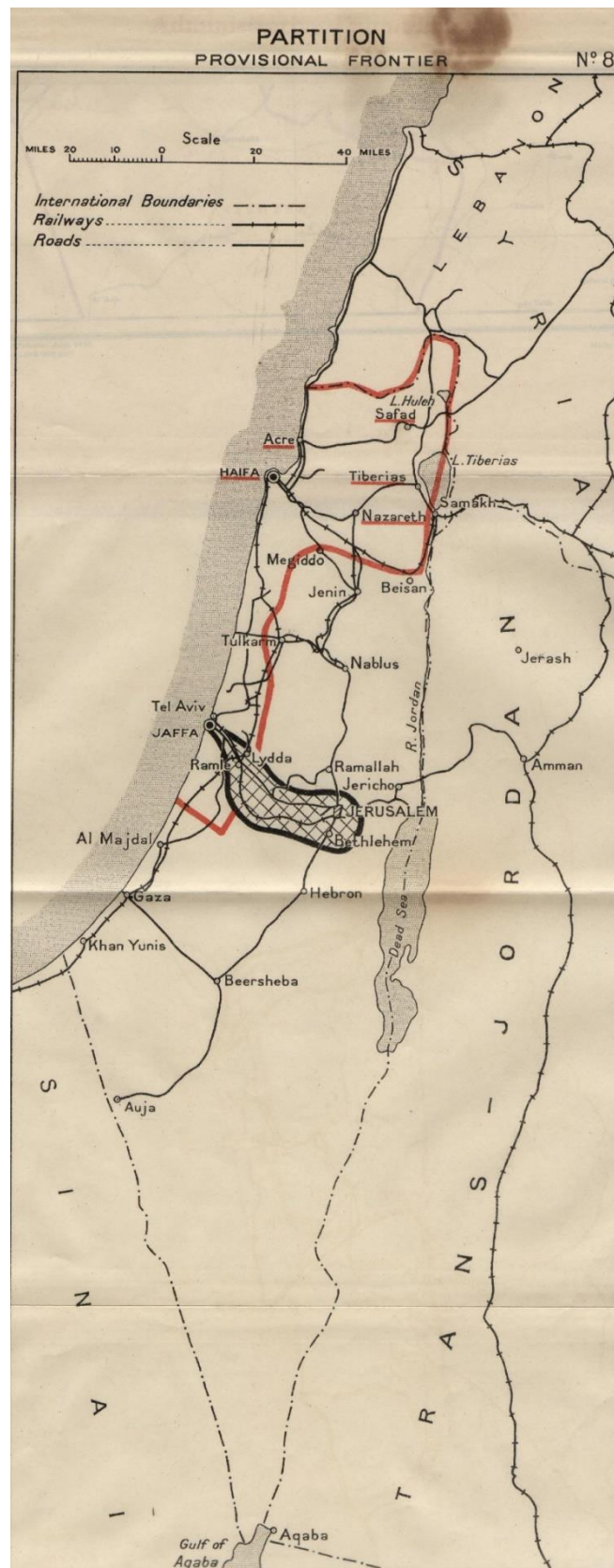


Figure 9. The suggested division of Palestine 1937.

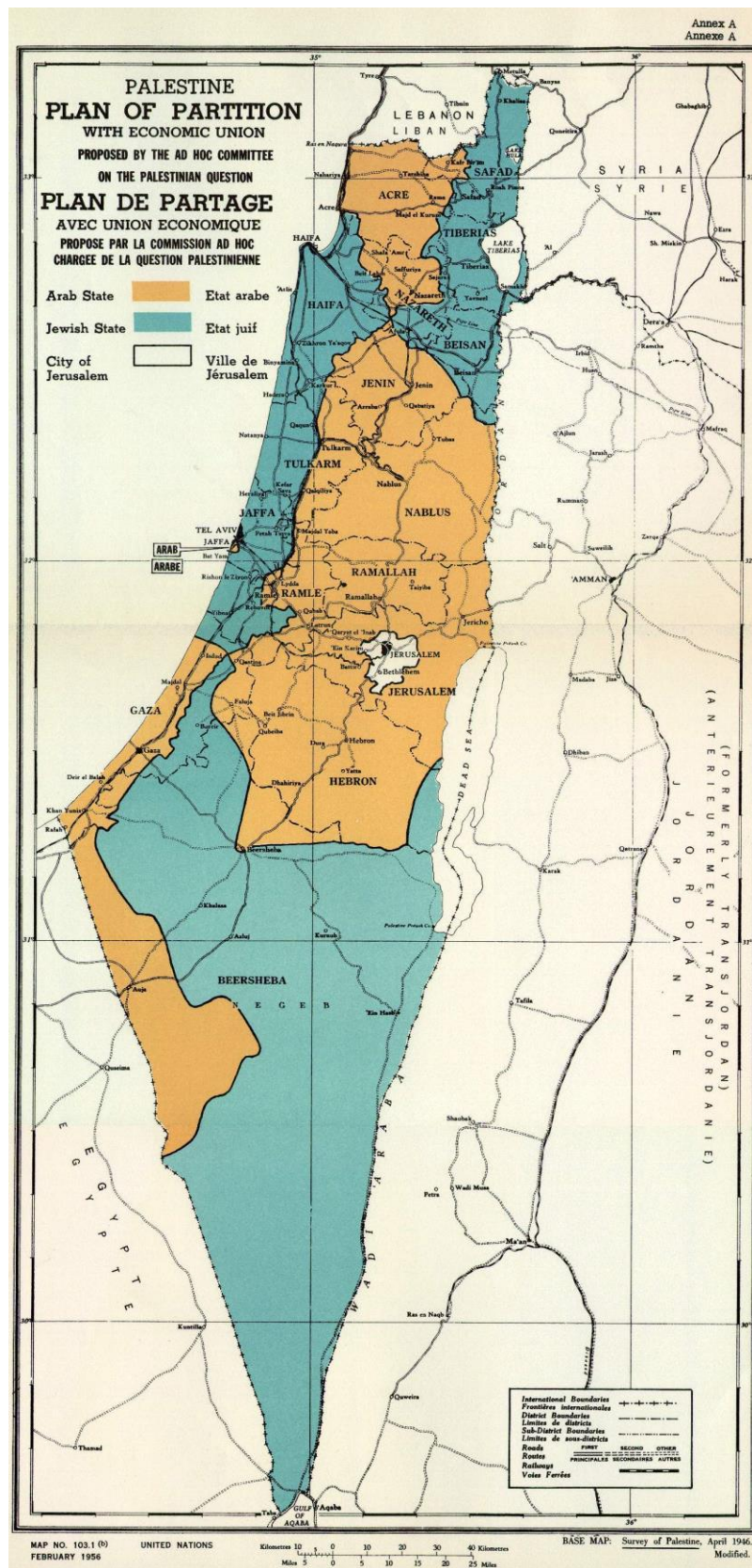


Figure 10. The UN partition plan 1947.

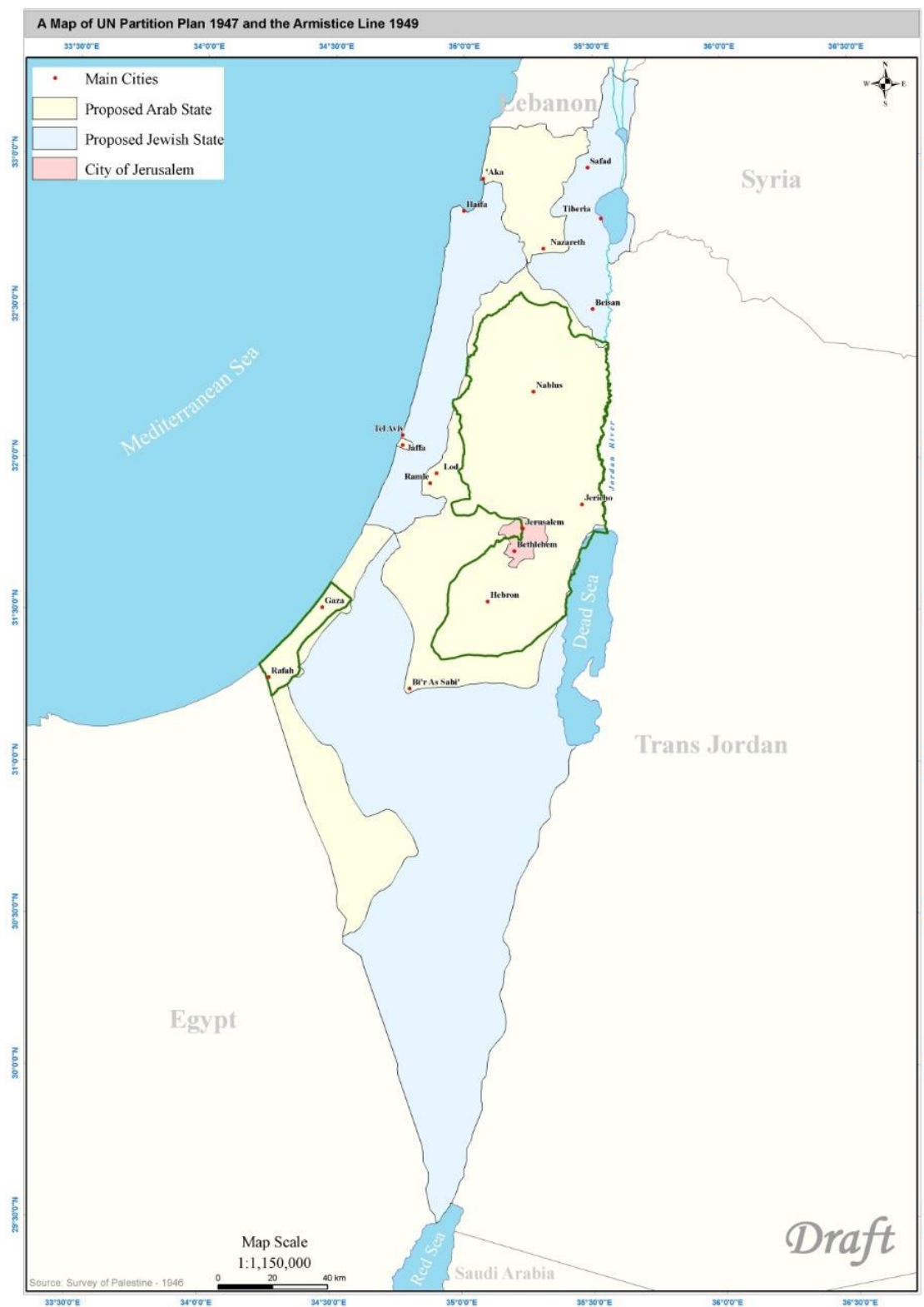




Figure 12. Israel and the occupied areas 1967.

Thus, new lines, Cease-fire lines were established in this area (Biger, 1995).

In October 1973 Syria and Egypt tried to attack Israel to have their territory back but, after some successes, Israel enlarged again its area, occupying area west of the Suez Canal and in the vicinity of Damascus. This war marked the end of the second stage, in which the boundary lines were dictated by force rather than by diplomatic negotiations.

The Third Stage—Bilateral Diplomatic Boundary Negotiation

1977 marked a new era in the history of the Middle East. President Sadat of Egypt visited Israel and a diplomatic negotiation for achieving a peace treaty was begun. In the Camp David Agreement Israel agreed to give Sinai Peninsula Back to Egypt, establishing the mandatory boundary line between Egypt and Palestine as the international boundary between Israel and Egypt. This was the first time Israel got a recognized international boundary, which was an outcome of peaceful diplomatic negotiation. This led to the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, in which the mandatory boundary line between Palestine and Trans Jordan was established, with some modification, as the international boundary between Israel and Jordan (State of Israel, 1994). An attempt was done in January 2000 to achieve a peace agreement between Israel and Syria, but it failed as both sides could not agree on the location of the international boundary between them.

Even though the Guns never stopped, in 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon, occupying the area north up to Beirut. It took Israel about 18 years to withdraw from Lebanon, but no peace agreement was established. The line, which separated Israel and Lebanon, is officially the line of the withdrawal of Israeli forces, agreed upon between Israel and the United Nation, without the involvement of the Government of Lebanon (Figure 13).



Figure 13. The “blue line” between Israel and Lebanon.

The Internal Problem Between Israel and the Palestinians

The Palestinian Arabs, who refused to accept the 1947 UN resolution, organized themselves in the Palestinian Liberation Organization and from 1967 (even earlier) demanded their independence in former Palestine. On the other side, Israel settled itself in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. More than 500,000 Israeli Jews built new settlements in the larger Jerusalem area, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In 2006 Israel evacuated the settlements built in Gaza Strip. Three rounds of talk between Israel and the Palestinian Authorities, held in the 1990's (Government of Israel, 1994) in 2000, and in 2008 (ANAPOLISE) never achieved any final resolution. Basically, there are three major opinions to solve the problem. Some Israelis are asking for establishing a Jewish State all over former British Palestine. Some Palestinians asked the same for an Arab State. Most agreed for the establishing of two states in Former British Palestine, a Jewish one and an Arab one. The main problem is the delimitation problem. The whole issue can be summarized by one question—Where the separating line should run? Solving this problem can bring an end to this troubled area.

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