

# Families in Exile: the Preservation of Palestinian Culture

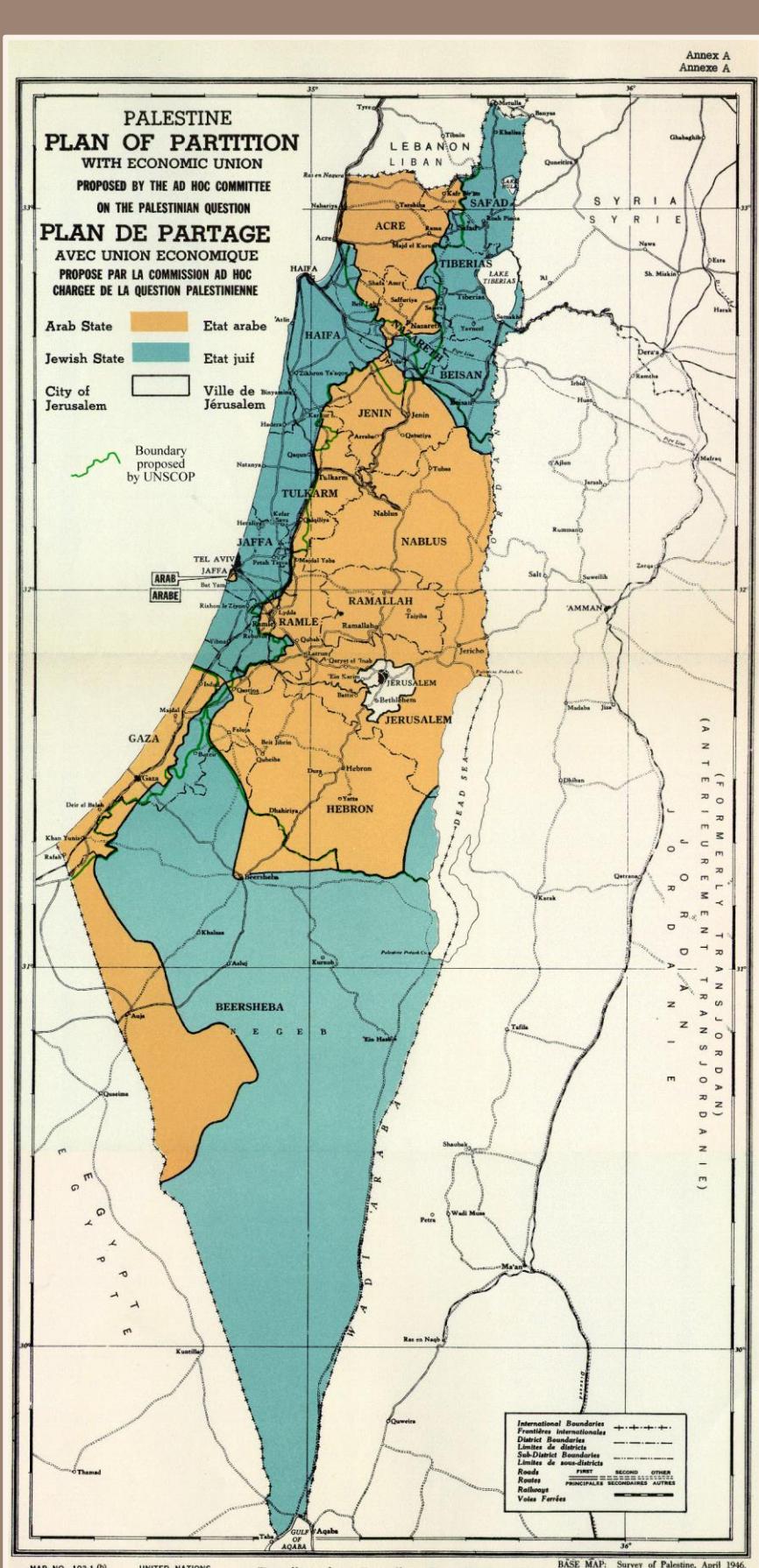
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## World War I

World War I resulted in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and subsequently, the end of their occupation in Palestine. By late 1917, the British controlled significant areas of Ottoman land, including Palestine (Ginat, 2018, p.1). Preceding this, Britain established three crucial arrangements concerning land in the Middle East—the McMahon Correspondence (1915-1916), the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), and the Balfour Declaration (1917) (Ginat, 2018, p. 1). These three agreements set the stage for the 100 years of conflict that have since followed.

## British Mandate Period

British administration was formally recognized in 1920 and the Mandate for Palestine was approved by the League of Nations in 1922. Within the approved mandate, Britain had a “dual obligation” to both Palestinians and the Jewish population that had been promised a “national home” through the Balfour declaration (Ginat, 2018, p. 2). As two distinct cultural and religious groups were forced to function within the same state, diverging societal structures formed that caused Palestinians and Jews to be at constant odds with each other. Increased violence between the two groups in the 1920s and 1930s led to an official commission for the partitioning of Palestine into a bi-national state. The White Paper of 1939 set immigration and land purchasing restrictions to limit the expansion of Jewish movement, but World War II and the Nazi German regime produced an unprecedented number of Jewish refugees who sought protection in the Jewish “homeland.” (Ginat, 2018, p. 3). The British officially pulled out of Palestine in 1948, ending the policy of the White Paper. Israel formally declared their independence on May 14, 1948 (Ginat, 2018, p.3).



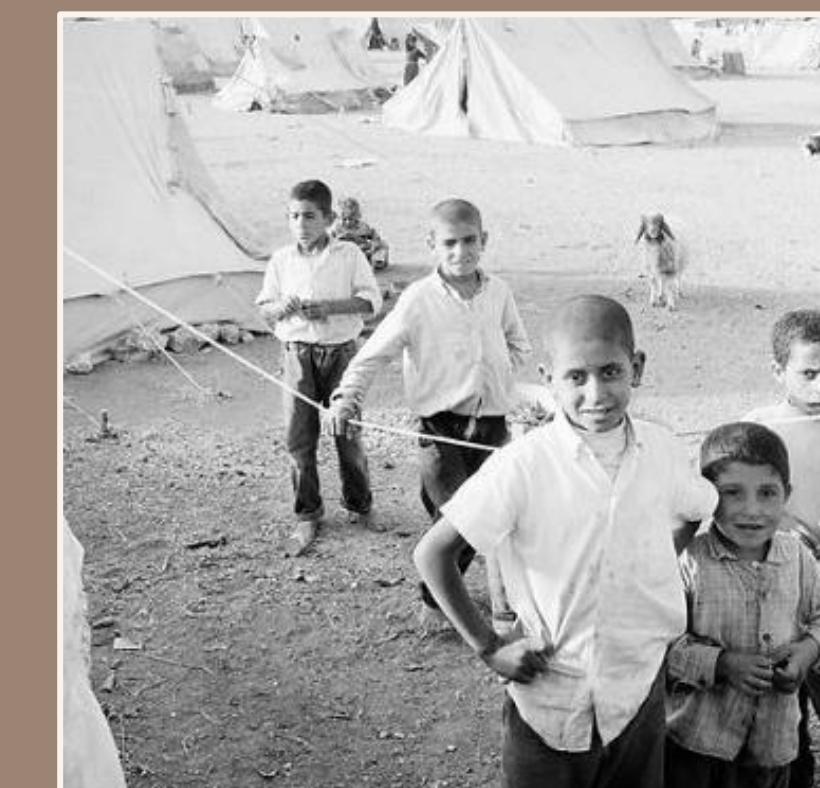
1947 UN partition plans.

## 1948 Nakba

The Nakba, which is Arabic for “catastrophe”, refers to the mass exodus of Palestinians from their land following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war (Fischback, 2010). As tensions rose to an all-time high after the partitioning of Palestine, a violent struggle for territory broke out. The war ended in Arab-Palestinian devastation as the Israelis captured 77.2% of the land from the original Palestinian state (Fischback, 2010). More than half the Palestinian population was expelled from their homes, 2/3 moved to the area still controlled by Palestine, while the remainder fled to the surrounding Arab countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.



Mother and child look at their home after Israeli takeover. (1948). Image provided by E. Vibert.



Boys in Baqa'a Camp. (1968). Image provided by E. Vibert.

## Six-Day War

The Six-Day War (1967) was a direct consequence of the cultural, political, and economic tensions that arose from the Nakba, as well as a major tipping point in the 19 years of Arab-Israeli conflict that had occurred since. An Israeli surprise attack on June 5, 1967, triggered an Arab military response and an ensuing six days of violent armed conflict (Bowen, 2017). By June 11, Israel had occupied the entirety of Palestine, as well as the Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem from neighbouring Arab countries, causing a second Palestinian mass exodus (Bowen, 2017).

## Aysha's Story

Aysha Yousif Matar Azzam, the founder and operator of a community grain mill in Baqa'a Palestinian refugee camp, illustrates the struggle of exile and keeping Palestinian culture alive. Her parents, originally exiled from the Palestinian (now Israeli) village of Beit Mahsir, fled east of the Jordan River to a small settlement in the Jordan valley. Aysha was born in 1957 and remembers her childhood fondly. Her favourite memories were of her father taking her across the border to pray in Palestine on Fridays. 1967 marked an abrupt shift in Aysha's life. The new territorial control Israel had gained during the Six-Day War meant that their borders were no longer open to Palestinians and resultantly, Aysha could not participate in the life she had become accustomed to—something that still affects her to this day.

Aysha Yousif Matar Azzam



Wilson, A. (2022). Aysha in her Baqa'a home [Photograph]

## Life in Baqa'a

Aysha now lives in the Baqa'a refugee camp, set up by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in 1968 for Palestinians displaced by the Six-Day War (Sneineh, 2018). Everyone her family knows now resides within the borders of the camp. Despite the camp's location in Jordan, the peoples' tie to their Palestinian roots is unbreakable. Aysha continues to maintain Palestinian traditions for her children and other members of the community, she considers it “feeding their [Palestinian] identity and history”—a way to keep Palestine alive.



Wolfram, M. (2018). Al-Baqa'a refugee camp near Amman [Photograph]. <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-dead-sea-revival-red-canal.html>

## Current Refugee Situation

Today, there are more than 5 million Palestinian refugees, most of whom live in countries that neighbor their homeland (Sheindlin, 2020). Their right to return to that same Palestinian homeland has become one of the most politically charged and polarizing questions in modern history (Sheindlin, 2020). Although Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives contradict each other, Israel's refusal to honour the Palestinian right to return home is seen as a “violation of international law” by Amnesty International (2019). While the path forward may not be simple, it is clear something must change. The Palestinian diaspora includes millions exiled from their home, with no promise of return. Until an agreement can be reached that recognizes the Palestinian right to autonomous existence on their ancestral land, this century-old conflict will find little resolution.

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