

Levi Chaplin-Loebell

Dr. Lauren Banko

The Palestine-Israel Conflict and Peace Process through 1948 to the present

23 February 2025

### **Barbed Wire in the News: Containing Imperialist Anxieties in Mandatory Palestine**

On August 12th, 1946, editions of *The Manchester Guardian* and New York's *Newsweek* both contained coverage of the political tension in Palestine a few weeks after the Zionist paramilitary group Irgun bombed the King David Hotel. The goal of the attack was to destroy evidence held in the government offices of the British Mandatory that would incriminate the Jewish Agency in previous actions against them. Following the attack, Lieutenant General Sir Evelyn Hugh Barker imposed strict curfews in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem while British forces went door-to-door investigating potential threats of further Zionist terrorism. Both articles describe the use of barbed wire as a counter-terrorism measure. As the political situation shifted rapidly over the next few years, so too did the role of barbed wire in shaping the physical and ideological landscape of Israel and Palestine.

*Newsweek* partially attributed the ever-growing tension to an uptick of antisemitism among the British following the bombing, and quoted General Barker's speech to his troops wherein he discouraged fraternization with the Jewish population. "We are determined," Barker stated, "...that [Jewish people] shall suffer punishment and be made aware of the contempt and loathing with which we regard their conduct..." (*Newsweek*, August 12th, 1946). Their correspondent in Tel Aviv reported that during the curfew, Jewish civilians were either confined to "barbed-wire pens" (*Newsweek*) or individually escorted by British soldiers. Meanwhile, *The Manchester Guardian's* correspondent in Jerusalem also made note of the increased use of

barbed wire by the British forces and observed how it felt more reflective of a collective anxiety than a logical security measure, writing:

The military security arrangements express themselves in doubling the amount of barbed wire which is lavished on this city with unrestrained generosity. Even so it creates the impression more of nervousness than of firmness, and it is questionable whether it provides the security which it is intended to achieve (*The Manchester Guardian*, August 12, 1946).

For Jewish refugees, such as those the Guardian correspondent observes coming into Haifa on ships described as “...little less than floating Belsens” (*The Manchester Guardian*)—likely a reference to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp—barbed wire would have been a familiar and unwelcome sight. This echo of the dehumanizing architecture of Nazi concentration camps likely contributed to the growing unease of Jewish civilians, leaders, and militants alike, who already feared deportation from Palestine by the British after the White Paper of 1939 promised to do exactly that. This fear was not unfounded. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates around 50,000-70,000 Holocaust survivors were deported from Palestine and taken to British detention camps in Cyprus.

The British detention camps drew further scrutiny toward British policy and leadership. USHMM notes that “...the sight of Jewish Holocaust survivors being held behind barbed wire also excited widespread criticism of British handling of the problem of Jewish immigration to Palestine” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). For Zionists, the dehumanizing treatment of Jewish refugees that the use of barbed wire represented was further justification for retaliation against the British and for the forceful colonization of Palestinian land. In February of

1947, the British government announced the end of the Mandate for Palestine and the United Nations took over in attempting to determine the fate of the region.

The official end of British rule in Palestine did not mean the end of the barbed wire partitions between British “Security Zones” and surrounding Jewish and Arab populations, and the physical divide made it difficult to attempt intellectual and cultural exchange. On May 29th, 1947, *The Palestine Post* reported on a book sale facilitated by the British Council, which brought Jewish and Arab booksellers who sold books in English to the Security Zone for three days. Though the article describes specific interest from British residents in reading about Palestine’s history and the contemporary politics of the time, the reporter explained that “Since they were penned behind the barbed-wire, British residents [had] not been able to buy books, all the more necessary under the circumstances” (*The Palestine Post*). In this way, the continued presence of barbed wire allowed the British occupation to control the circumstances under which information was exchanged between their soldiers and the Zionist and Arab communities, thus creating a kind of ideological barbed wire between them which would be just as difficult, if not more so, to dismantle than the material object itself.

In November 1948, after the establishment of the State of Israel, the Israeli commander Moshe Dayan and the Transjordanian commander Abdullah El-Tell drew up the borders of the ‘urban line’ through Jerusalem. In *Between the Border of Despair and the "Circle of Tears": Musrara on the Margins of Jewish-Arab Existence in Jerusalem* by Moshe Naor and Abigail Jacobson, the urban line is described as “...a seven-kilometer-long demilitarized zone...In some areas it was 200 meters wide, while in other places...it was only ten meters wide. Barbed wire and, at some points, concrete walls, marked the border, while signs in Hebrew, Arabic, and Yiddish warned residents of mines planted along the no-man's-land”. Though the urban line was

originally meant to be a temporary division of land, it was agreed upon in April of 1949 that it would become permanent, and “...served as a physical (and mental) border until 1967” (Naor & Jacobson). At this time, Zionists primarily viewed the military presence, mines, and barbed wire as measures to prevent Palestinian Arabs from returning to their homes. Although they had once been considered by the British to be ‘terrorists’ and ‘illegal’ immigrants who must be suppressed via detention camps and barbed wire, now that the Zionists had gained power and sovereignty, their methods of statebuilding retained the afterimage of the British empire in the maintenance of literal and metaphorical barbed-wire fences.

## Works Cited

- "Books and Barbed Wire." *The Palestine Post (1933-1950)*, May 29, 1947, pp. 3. *ProQuest*,  
<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/books-barbed-wire/docview/929735121/se-2>.
- Correspondent, A. "Tension in Palestine: Barbed Wire and Politics." *The Manchester Guardian* (1901-1959), Aug 12, 1946, pp. 4. *ProQuest*,  
<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/tension-palestine/docview/478686265/se-2>.
- Naor, Moshe, and Abigail Jacobson. "Between the Border of Despair and the "Circle of Tears": Musrara on the Margins of Jewish-Arab Existence in Jerusalem." *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2023, pp. 75-98. *ProQuest*,  
<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/between-border-despair-circle-tears-musrara-on/docview/2830959649/se-2>, doi:<https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.28.2.03>.
- "PALESTINE: Hate Plus Hate." *Newsweek*, vol. 28, no. 7, Aug 12, 1946, pp. 44-44, 47. *ProQuest*,  
<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/palestine-hate-plus/docview/1832559487/se-2>.
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Cyprus Detention Camps", *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/cyprus-detention-camps>