

## **SAME BASIC GEOGRAPHICAL FACTS CONCERNING THE ISRAEL - PALESTINE DISPUTE**

### **Gideon BIGER**

Department of Geography and Human Environment,  
Tel Aviv University, Israel.  
E-mail: bigergideon@gmail.com

**Summary:** The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is one of the major disputes in which, it seems, everybody "know" the basic facts and anyone who deals with it has a solution. Although we are dealing with a very recent dispute, which seems to take its first steps only about a hundred years ago, its roots go back for thousands of years, going back to the first and second century A.D.

**Keywords:** Israel, Palestine, geography, political geography, state, international boundaries, historical-geography research

\* \* \*

### **Introduction**

The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is one of the major disputes in which, it seems, everybody "know" the basic facts and anyone who deals with it has a solution. Although we are dealing with a very recent dispute, which seems to take its first steps only about a hundred years ago, its roots go back for thousands of years, going back to the first and second century A.D.

As the central issue which is under consideration for solving the dispute is the formula "The two States solution", the aim of this article is not to look at the basic historical, political or cultural fact but to limit itself to the basic geographical "needed" knowledge which can enrich the understanding of the dispute and even can show a way to find a solution for this long dispute.

As the main dispute concerning the right to establish an independent state in a particular area, the first question we will deal with is the very simple question – Where and what is Palestine and where and what is Israel.

### **The Essence of Eretz-Israel – Palestine - Philistine**

Eretz –Israel (the Hebrew name of the discussed area) - Palestine (The worldwide known name of that area) – Philistine (The Moslem – Arab name of that Area) is more a geohistorical concept rooted in historical consciousness than a defined and measured stretch of land lying within clear geographical boundaries or stable political border. With the exception of the Mediterranean Sea, there are no geographical limits based on prominent topographical features which separate Palestine from the larger region in which it is situated, and for this reason, it has always served as a passageway.

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 on other occasions the land entirely became a part of a much larger unit. Only for brief periods was the area under the uniform control of its residents. However, despite the perpetual instability and vicissitudes with regard to its ethnic, cultural and political status, "Eretz-Israel – Palestine" did exist as a concrete geohistorical unit with unique qualities of its own. This singularity derived mainly from the historical consciousness of the Jewish people, as well as the influence of this consciousness over other nations and faiths.

Because of the political and cultural changes that Palestine underwent, its boundaries and its status in the area constantly fluctuated, and its name was often altered. The first reference to the Hebrew name "Eretz-Israel" appears in Biblical time, during the reign of King Saul (I Samuel 13:19) and the name gained currency at the time of the first *aliya* (wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine) in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and during the British Mandate period (1922-1948), when the country was officially titled "Palestine" with the addition of the Hebrew acronym for Eretz-Israel.

The name Palestine was given to the country in the wake of a Jewish revolt against the Romans and its suppression in the second century A.D. The emperor Hadrian endeavored to quash Jewish nationalism and thereby extirpate the roots of the revolt, decide to abolish the old name of Judea and replaced it with the roman name Palasta (taken from Pleshet – the area inhabited by the Philistines (an island's Mediterranean nation) in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). Thus he established the Roman province of Palaestina which was part of Syria. The Roman name entered the European world through it and when the Moslem Arabs conquered the area in 638 A.D. they used the name as Filistin (Philistin). Before and after this, Eretz-Israel had been called many different names and sobriquets that reflected the way the Jewish people and other nations regarded the status and qualities of the land – both the reality and the ideal; Judea, the Land of the Hebrews, Zion, the Holy Land, the Sacred land, Palestine, the Promised Land, and the Land of the Deer.

### **Physiographic Demarcation**

Palestine comprises a part of an expansive geographical region that stretches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. In its entirety, this region is called the Fertile Crescent. It consists mainly of plains and lowlands, and is bounded on the north and east by the Taurus (in Turkey) and Zagros (in Iran) mountain chains. On the south it is open to the Arabian Desert, part of which, the Syrian Desert, and penetrate deep into the center. The Fertile Crescent average around 600 km. in length and 90 km. in width (from the sea to the desert). Its southwestern section is separated from the rest of the area by the deep Syrian-African rift that in Palestine forms the Jordan rift Valley, the Arava plain and the Gulf of Eilat (Gulf of Aqaba). This rift on one side, and the Mediterranean Sea on the other, have constituted the country's boundaries in the twenties century and the stretch of land between them comprises Palestine (Eretz-Israel) in the limited sense of the term.

Since all the land's boundaries have changed so frequently, it would be arduous and arbitrary to fix exact border based on geographical lines. The perception of Palestine' physical boundaries – or natural boundaries, as they

are sometimes called – changes with the viewer's vantage point. Forces outside the region regarded Palestine as an intermediate land between the sea and the desert, and a single unit with Syria. By contrast, the perspective of the kingdoms that arisen within Palestine and Syria has been greatly influenced by the geographical lines of the land' as well as settlement configuration and prevailing political and military circumstances. While outside observer view Palestine as an important passageway on the edge of the desert, the inhabitants of the land regarded it as the heart and soul of the entire geographical region.

### **Modern definition of Palestine**

The modern definition of Palestine goes back only to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Ottoman conquest of the southern Middle East in 1516-17 led to redivision of Palestine into several districts – Gaza, Jerusalem, Nablus, Safed and more. From then onward, during the 400 years of the ottoman rule, those districts underwent constant changes, dictated by the varying relations of the ottoman state between the central regime and the district governors, and between the former and the other European power. Through all of the internal vicissitudes, the name "Filistin" was conspicuously absent; it had vanished since the Crusader conquest of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The name Urdun (Jordan) was applied to the river only. Throughout this entire period the Jewish world employed the name "Eretz-Israel", while "Filistin" was initially used by Moslems to refer to a sub district only and eventually disappeared. On the other hand, the name "Palestine" was preserved by the Christian world, although, in the Middle Ages and even later, the Christians usually called the land the "Holy Land" or "Judea".

The Renaissance and the renewed interest in the classical world imparted new significance to the Roman name "Palaestina" which was incorporated and commonly used in most European languages. This European usage was carried to the Orient by Christian Arabs who were subject to a Western Christian influence. The second Arabic newspaper to appear in Palestine, edited by a member of the Greek Orthodox Church and printed in 1911 was called *Filistin*.

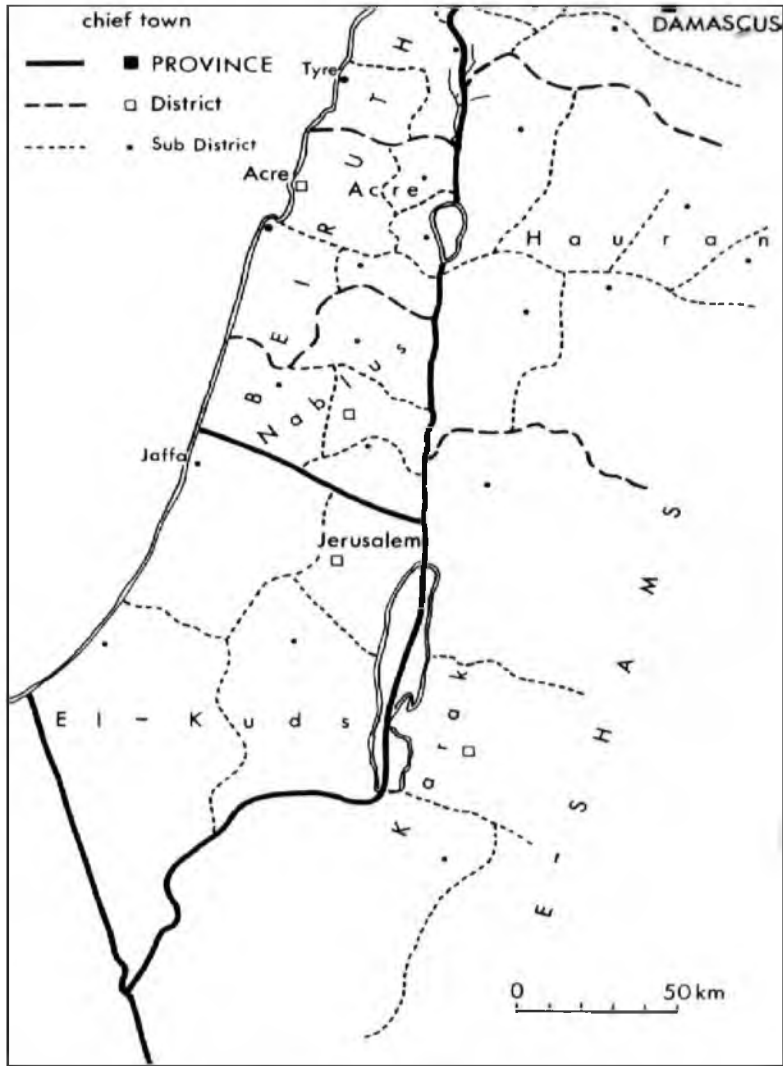


Fig. 1. Region at XIX century

It was only toward the end of the Ottoman period – first in 1856 and again in 1873 – that the southern portion of Palestine was detached from the spacious districts above it, from the Yarkon River – Wadi Auja line in the north to the Dead Sea – Rafa line in the south. Following its severance, this territory was converted into an independence district, under the direct control of the capital of the empire, Istanbul. It was

demarcated by administrative boundaries appearing on map, but not existing on the land itself, and was called "Mutassarif El-Kuds" referring the Jerusalem.

Now, too, the name "Filistin" was not mentioned officially. North of this unit, the area was part of the province (*iyalet*) of Beirut, divided into the districts (sanjacts) of Acre, Nablus and Beirut (including the sub-districts of Sidon, Tyre and Marj Ayun). The Territory east of the Jordan River was part of the province of Syria. The area south of the Dead Sea belonged to the province of Hejaz, which, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century extended to include most of Sinai Peninsula and the area east of the Arava Valley.

In 1906 the first modern line, which will dictate the boundaries of Modern Palestine was drawn between Sinai Peninsula, which was to remain under British control from Egypt, and the entire Ottoman empire along the Rafa- Taba line. In 1908 the territory between this line and the Arava (the later "Negev Triangle") passed under the control of the Governor of Syria. The Hejaz railroad, laid in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century form sort of demarcation between the land east of the Jordan River and the desert, a line that was frequently identified with the eastern border of Palestine.

The lack of clarity regarding the border of Palestine before 1918 found expressions in dozens of assorted publications written in the eve of World War I. Thus different Jewish Encyclopedias (In English, Russians and Hebrew) placed Palestine "between two lines drawn from the Mediterranean eastward – the lower one from the southeast corner of the Mediterranean through the southern end of the Dead Sea, and the upper from Tyre to the southern foot of the Mount Hermon. Palestine extends therefore from 31 to 33 20 North Parallel. "Another Jewish Encyclopedia puts the southern line in Gaza and the north line in Sidon. The Encyclopedia Britannica explained that "Palestine is a geographical name of rather loose application". In its 1911 edition it states that "we may describe Palestine as the strip of land extending along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea from the mouth of the Litany or the Kasamiya River (33 20 N) southward to the mouth of Wadi Ghuzza; the later join the sea at 31 28 N, a short distance south of Gaza' and runs thence in a south-easterly direction so as to include on its

northern side of Beersheba. Eastward there is no such definitive border... Perhaps the line of the pilgrim road from Damascus to Mecca is the most convenient possible boundary... East of the Jordan River the limit adopted are from the south border of Hermon to the mouth of the Mujib (Arnun) River. German,

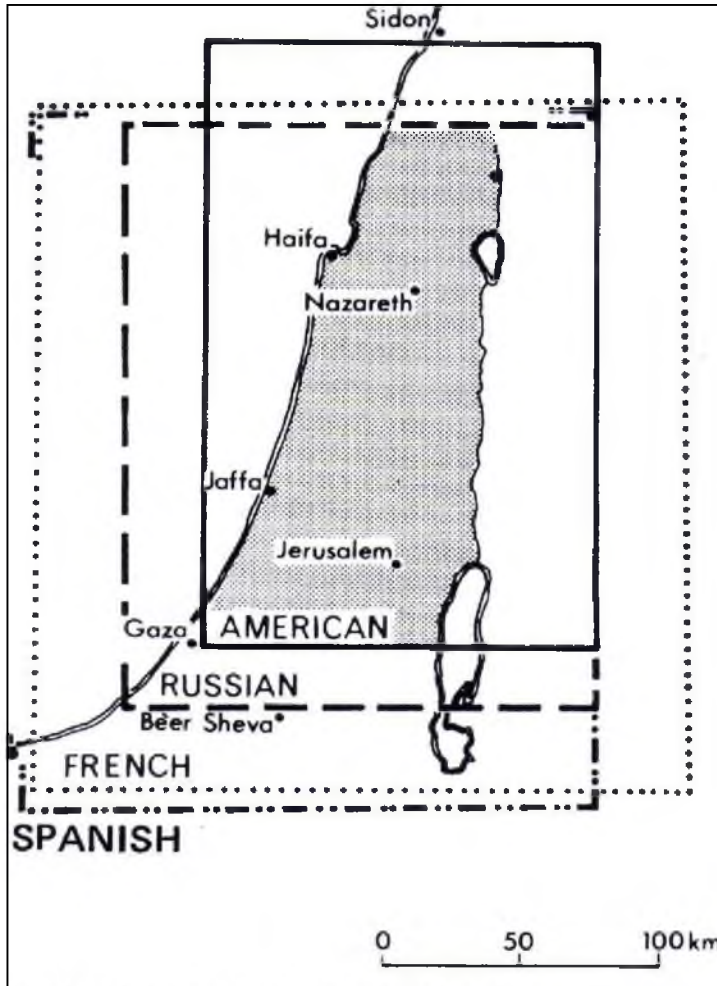


Fig 2. Different descriptions of region

French, Russian, Polish, Spanish, Portuguese and other European encyclopedias, all gave different descriptions. The American view of Palestine was as hazy as that of the Europeans. One encyclopedia (*United Editors Encyclopedia and*

*Dictionary*) described Palestine as "bounded west by the Mediterranean, east by the valley of the Jordan, north by the mountain ranges of the Lebanon and the glen of the Litany, and south by the desert of Sinai, Lat. 31 15 – 33 20 N., Long. 34 20 – 35 30 E.". A broader picture were given by *The New Stanford Encyclopedia* which put Palestine between 31 – 33 30 N. and 34 20 – 36 E. and *the Encyclopedia Americana* had yet another version "it is situated between lat. 31 30 and 33 30 N.; Long. 34 30 to 36E. .

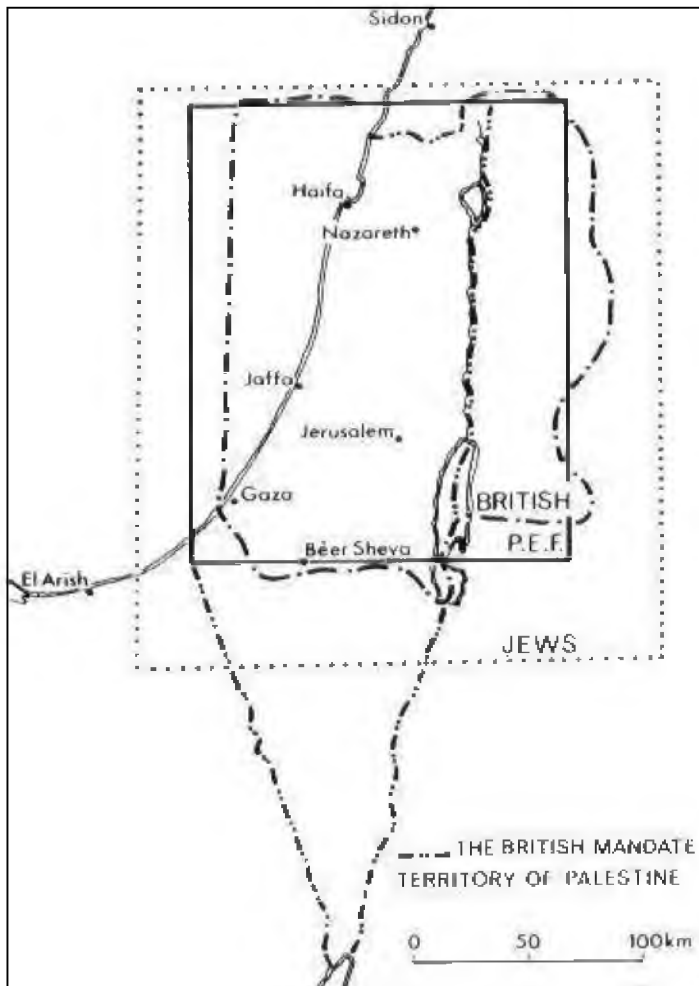


Fig. 3. British mandate territory by Osborn



A famous American map of that age (made by Rev. H.S. Osborn) showed Palestine which occupying the area between 31 – 32 42 N. and 34 25 – 36 30 E.

Thus, the more descriptions that were written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, more confused picture are seen. But even though the descriptions differ, the area of agreement is still considerable. "Consensus Palestine" in the eve of World War I covered about 10,000 sq. miles and was bounded in the north by the lower Litani (Kassamiye) River and in the north-east by the southern foot of the Mount Hermon; the eastern line was either the Jordan River, or a line same miles to the eastward; the southern line passed from the Wadi Arnon, through the southern point of the Dead Sea and Beersheba westward to the mouth of Wadi Gaza. This minimal core area is approximately the British perception which is the Biblical perception of Eretz-Israel – Palestine - the area "between Dan and Beer Sheva".

Others preferred a larger Palestine, extending south-west toward Raffia and eastward toward Longitude 36 E. There was therefore a very large area of disagreement, showing the confusion surrounding the extent of this ill-defined, yet familiar area.

#### **The creation of Modern Palestine**

As it was seen, Palestine had no clear territorial definition before World War I. During that war, Britain and France concluded an agreement concerning the future of the Middle East depending on the future victory of the Allies in the War. As concerning Palestine, the Sykes-Picot agreement (as it was known, after the names of Sir Mark Sykes, the British delegate and Mr. George Picot, the French delegate) presents a new map' in which only small portion of even the minimal view described above' was used to present "an international area" govern by Britain, France, Russia and Italy, with a representative of the Arab Moslems. Other areas were designated to be given to Britain, France or the two Arab states, which were designated to be created in the Middle East. Thus Palestine itself was diminished to it smallest form ever presented.

The Sykes-Picot agreement, although never been applied, was the basic for the British-French discussion

concerning Palestine, after the War's ending. This Palestine, as we know it today, was established by Britain after World War. The British Mandate for Palestine was granted by the League of Nations in 1922 and came to force in 1923.

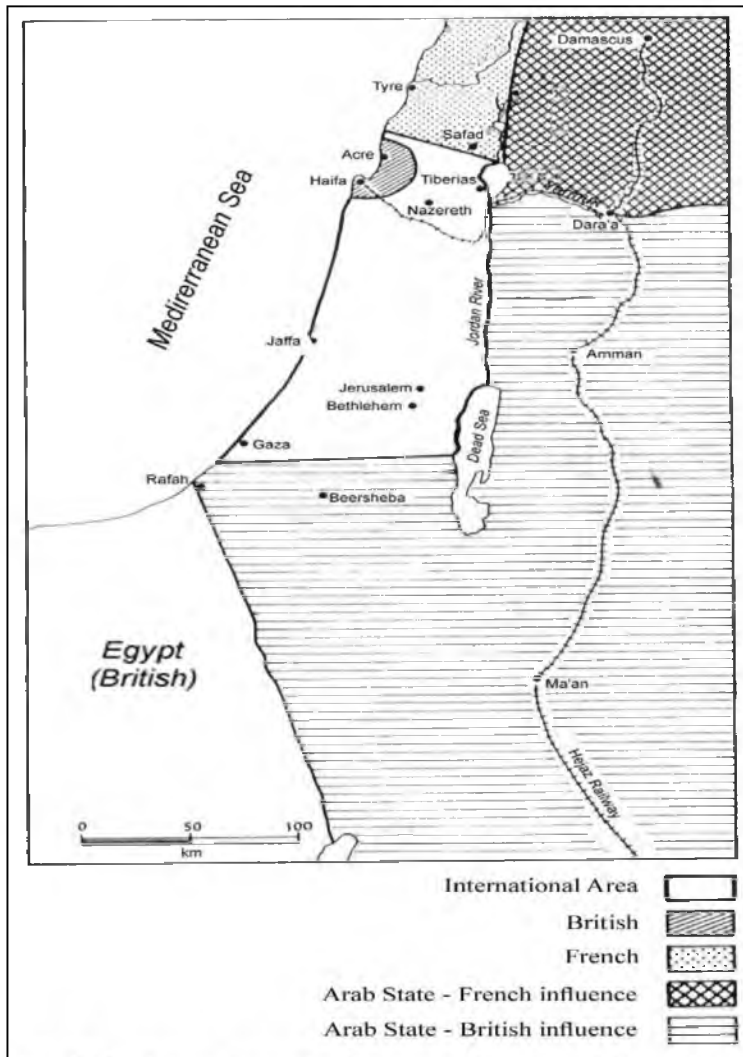


Fig. 4. Division the region between British and French influence

The Mandate decree never gave any boundaries to Palestine, a burden put in the British hands. Before the Mandate was granted, the Zionist Organization was asked to

give its opinion concerning its view of the area designated to become the Jewish National Home. In a memorandum presented to the "Committee of the Ten" at the Peace Conference in February 1919.

Following a long explanation of the country's economic, political and geographical condition, the Zionist Organization demanded that Palestine should be formed within the following boundaries, "In the North - the borderline will start in the north, at a point on the Mediterranean coast, close to and south of Sidon, and will continue along the watershed toward the foothills of the Lebanon Mountains, to the El-Qara'un Bridge (on the Litani River). From there it will continue to El-Bire, along the line which separates the basins of the El-Kuran and Tiam streams. From there the line will continue south, between the eastern and the western slopes of the Mount Hermon, to a point close to and west of the village of Biet Jan. From there the line will continue east along the watershed of the Muganiya River, close to and west of the Hejaz Railway. In the East - a line that runs closed to and west of the Hejaz Railway, to the Gulf of Aqaba. In the South - a line that will be agreed upon with the Egyptian authorities. In the West - the Mediterranean sea.

The Zionists demand was not based on historical or Biblical claims but on economic needs, for settling millions of Jews who were to return to their Fatherland and establishing a modern state in Palestine. Thus "Palestine area must be as large as possible' so it could sustain a large and bustling community, that can better carry the burden of modern government". The placement of the northern border was explained by saying that Palestine, as a semi-arid country, was dependent on the available water supply. This is why it was highly important not only to secure the water currently feeding the area but also to conserve and control them at their sources. It was claimed that Mount Hermon is the true "Father of the water" - the main source of Palestine's water, so it could not be torn away from it without damaging its economic foundations. Mount Hermon required forestation and other development investment before it could serve as the country's water reservoir, and therefore it must remain in the hand of those most interested and most capable of using it.



Fig. 5. The Zionist's demand 1919

The eastern border's position was explained by claiming that the fertile plains east of the Jordan River were economically and politically united with the area west of the river. The intensive agriculture development of the Houron and of the Gil'ad, would necessarily render Palestine in the need to an outlet to the Red sea, and would lead to a possible development of a good port in the Gulf of Aqaba. Although the Zionist's demand for a southern line running from the red Sea toward El -Arish on the Mediterranean coast was explained by having a fertile area between El-Arish and Gaza, needed for the Jewish future immigration, they concealed it from their

demands because of the British sensitivities about changing the 1906 Egyptian line.

Britain, who got the Mandate to govern Palestine, in order to bring it to independence while helping to establish there the Jewish National Homeland, draw new lines for Palestine, partly on their own (in the south and in the East), partly (in the north and northeast) through negotiation with France, who got the mandate to rule Lebanon and Syria.

In comparing the territorial perception with the first political boundaries of Palestine, drawn in the 1920<sup>th</sup>, it seems that only the most conservative eastern line, the Jordan River survived from the pre-war concept. It was the decision of the British Government to adopt the administrative separated line of 1906 between Sinai and the rest of the Ottoman Empire as the southwestern limit of Palestine. Thus excluded northern Sinai from Palestine but extended its area southward, to reach the Red Sea in the Gulf of Aqaba. The British Government also decided to separate the administration of Palestine (which was designated for the Jewish National Homeland) from Transjordan, which made the Jordan River the effective eastern boundary of modern Palestine. The northern limit was diminished while the southern area was extended the reach the Red Sea. In the North' a French pressure excluded the Litani River Basin from Palestine but enable Palestine to includes the Galilee "Finger handle" in it.

Thus, the Zionist's full demands were never accepted. This led to the notion of "the taking of our area" by those who did not accept the British Activities. Some made song saying that the two banks of the Jordan River are ours". Other talk about the Lebanese Galilee, referring it as being part of Palestine. Those dreams never died and one can still see them in Israel text books.

The outcome of the British creation of Modern Palestine lives up to now. From the 1920's onward, British Palestine with its 27,000 sq. km., became known to everybody as "this is Palestine" Any pre- mandate period's boundary lines were vanished and today, whenever one speaks about Palestine, it is British Palestine. Every body who lived in that area from 1923 (the year that the final boundary, the northeastern one was established) to 1948 became a Palestinian. Thus Britain created the Palestinian nation by creating its boundary. The

same hold true for the Jordanians, the Iraqis, the Lebanese, The Syrians, all were created as a nation by drawing their boundaries, separated the Arab nation into deferent new nations.

#### **REFERENCES**

Biger, G., 1995, *The Encyclopedia of International Boundaries, Facts on Files*, New York.

Biger G., 2004, *The Boundaries of Modern Palestine*, Routledge Curzon, London.