

CHAPTER III

POLITICS OF RESOURCE CONFLICT

Palestine is one of the few countries in the world whose ancient history continues to play a major role in shaping its present and future. For this reason it is important to understand some of the fundamental historical transformations whose impact still affects the lives of the population groups inhabiting Palestine. Obviously, the history of Palestine is far too complex to be reviewed in detail in this synopsis. Therefore the emphasis will be placed on revealing the economic ramifications of political change-overs during the past 40 years. The latter section in this chapter deals with the dynamics of resource conflict in the wake of Israeli occupation in 1967.

Arab tribes inhabited Palestine long before the rise of Islam. But a turning point in their presence was marked by Islamic conquest, which resulted in the taking over of greater Syria from the Romans in 636. Shortly after its occupation by Moslem Arabs, Palestine became an integral part of the Islamic Empire, whose capital was located only a few hundred miles away, either in Damascus or Baghdad. The interest of Moslem Caliphs in Palestine was originally motivated by religious beliefs,¹ but it was later immensely deepened by its strategic location as a central junction between the two wings of the Islamic Empire.

After the collapse of the Abbassyte dynasty in Baghdad, the Ottoman Turks had sufficient power to take over moslem countries including Palestine. Their rule extended for about four centuries (1517-1918) during which they managed to extend their empire still further.

1. Jerusalem was cited in the Koran as the third most holy place in Islamic heritage, after Mecca and Medina, both in Saudi Arabia.

But despite their considerable military victories and firm commitment to the Islamic faith, the Ottomans' rule of non-Turkish moslem regions was of a colonial character.

Direct exploitation of economic resources of other countries accelerated in the later years of Ottoman rule with Turkey falling into political and economic decline. The Ottoman Empire disintegrated in the wake of World War I and new occupation powers stepped in, dividing among themselves what was the Islamic Ottoman State.

The economy of Palestine under the Ottomans was characterized by extreme poverty and class exploitation. In their endeavour to rally support of tribal leaders and the wealthy bourgeois, Turkish rulers began to offer their favours to local proteges. The best they had to offer for that purpose was land, the vast majority of which was regarded as "emirate", i.e. owned by the Emire (prince), or in other words, state-owned. By the end of Ottoman rule, most of Palestine's arable land was bestowed on wealthy families, many of whom were in fact Lebanese and Syrian. Palestine was hence affected by feudalism on a scale comparable to that of Iraq and Syria.

Palestine was occupied by British forces in 1918 and was put, shortly after, under British mandate by the League of Nations. That came only one year after the British government made their famous Balfour Declaration in which they "viewed with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish People and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object".¹

1. Vivian Bull, *op cit*, p 19.