

Palestine 36: Britain's brutal suppression of the Palestinians during the 1936-39 Arab Revolt

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18 November 2025

Palestine 36 is an important historical feature film that deals with the causes and events of the first phase (1936-7) of the Great Arab Revolt that took place between 1936 and 1939 and was suppressed with great brutality by the British army.

The mass Palestinian uprising, its defeat and the expulsion and imprisonment of its leaders at the hands of the British army is largely unknown outside the Middle East, particularly in Britain itself. While most of Britain's former possessions were able to achieve formal independence, Palestine was one of the few that did not.

The 1936-39 Arab Revolt was one of a number of bitter anti-colonial struggles against British imperialism, including 1919-21 in Ireland that led to its partition into the Irish Free State (now the Republic of Ireland) and occupied Northern Ireland, the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, the Iraq Revolt of 1920, the Malayan Emergency 1948-60, the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya 1952-60, the 1955-59 Cyprus Emergency and Aden 1963-67.

The 1936 Palestinian uprising was the longest and largest revolt and strike (from April to October 1936) against British colonialism at that time. But the defeat of the 1936-39 Revolt was crucial in paving the way for the establishment of the Zionist state in 1948, the defeat of the Arab armies in 1948-49 and the expulsion and dispossession of the Palestinians, known as the Nakba. The methods used by the British were to foreshadow those of successive Israeli governments.

Palestine 36, directed by Annemarie Jacir (*Salt of This Sea*, *When I Saw You* and *Wajib*) and produced by Ossama Bawardi and Azzam Fakhridin for Philistine Films, with backing from the BBC and the British Film Institute (BFI) among others, debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival where it received a 20-minute standing ovation. It has been selected as the Palestinian entry for the Best International Feature Film at the Oscars.

Tickets for the film's screening at the BFI London Film Festival were sold out immediately. It is now being shown at the London Palestine Film Festival (November 14-28).

The film, while a work of fiction, is based upon actual events and historical figures. Researched and prepared with great attention to historical detail, to the extent of rebuilding villages and planting cotton fields that are still in use today, and incorporating colourised black and white film found in Britain's public archives at Kew, in London, the film took almost eight years to make.

The onset of Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinians coincided with the start of filming, forcing the cast and crew to move from the West Bank to Jordan, although they were eventually able to return to Palestine.

The scope of *Palestine 36* is ambitious and there is a lot to take in, not all of it easily understood without prior knowledge of the broader political and economic context, the nature of the Palestinian leadership and the events themselves.

The film starts by showing, through a series of fragments that depict the lives and struggles of several Palestinians, the social pressures and conflicts that led to the uprising in April 1936.

These include Yusuf (Karim Daoud Anaya), a young, initially apolitical man from al-Basma, a small farming village, who works as a driver for Khoulood (Yasmine Al Massri), a journalist who works under an assumed male name with her wealthy husband Amir (Dhafer L'Abidine), a newspaper owner; Yusuf's neighbour Rabab (Yafa Bakri), a widow; Rabab's parents (Hiam Abbas and Kamal El Basha) and her young daughter, Afra (Wardi Eilabouni), villagers facing escalating threats from settlers; Afra's friend Kareem (Ward Helou), the young son of the village's Christian priest, Father Bolous (Jalal Altawil). Khalid (Saleh Bakri), a port labourer, is driven to rebel by brutal working conditions.

Palestine's economy, largely agricultural, had been disrupted by World War I and the carve up of the Syrian provinces of the former Ottoman Empire by the French and British.

The two imperialist powers were awarded "Mandates" by the newly established League of Nations, designated a "thieves' kitchen" by Lenin, to govern Syria/Lebanon, in the case of France, and Palestine and Transjordan (now Jordan), in the case of Britain, for 25 years prior to independence. Britain's Mandate included the infamous 1917 Balfour Declaration that supported the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, where the Jews formed only a tiny minority. Its purpose was to provide Britain with a custodian, in a strategic location, of its broader political and economic interests in the oil-rich region.

Jewish immigration into Palestine increases, particularly after Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933, to the extent that Jews constitute more than one quarter of the population by the mid-1930s and have control of much of the more advanced sectors of the economy. Peasants are forced off their land and entire villages are evicted as absentee landowners sell their property to the incoming settlers, aided and abetted by the British. As Yusuf explains, "We are losing land daily, and many farmers have been evicted from their lands".

The landless peasants are driven to seek jobs in the towns where Khalid, the port worker, was savagely beaten when he asked for overtime pay. Wages are already lower than those paid to newly arrived Jewish workers. The exorbitant taxes levied by the British impose a further burden.

The influx of Jews along with capital from Europe had enabled them to set up workshops and factories that employed Jewish labour, dividing the economy into Palestinian and Jewish sectors. It was the Histadrut, the Zionist trade union federation, with the support of the British authorities, that played a key role in buying up land and setting up Jewish factories, farms, banks, welfare organisations, social and health insurance schemes, and cooperatives. It opposed the employment of Palestinian labour in both its own and other Jewish enterprises, paving the way for ever-increasing

hostility between Arabs and Jews.

However, these economic processes and the Jewish settlers are not the focus of the film. In an early scene, one of the villagers responds to a question from her daughter about why the Jews were coming to Palestine by saying, “Because their countries do not want them”.

The film correctly identifies the rebellion as primarily directed against the British and focuses on the callous actions of the British officers who “don’t want another Ireland”. These include the high commissioner (Jeremy Irons), the rabid Christian Zionist army officer Orde Wingate (Robert Aramayo), who is portrayed as a sadist, and a liberal administrator (Billy Howle), who eventually, disgusted with the British role in Palestine, quits his job.

The film’s diverse threads coalesce as the rebellion erupts in April 1936, launched spontaneously by young militants, taking both the Palestinian leadership and the British by surprise. It follows other uprisings and unrest in the Middle East, reflecting anti-colonialism and resistance to the tribal leaders. The Arab Higher Committee, a coalition of Palestinian’s feudal and clerical leaders, declares a general strike in May. They demand independence from British colonial rule and the end of British support for Jewish immigration and land sales to the Jews.

As the uprising begins, the Palestinian workers win widespread popular support in towns and villages, with the film showing Khalid collecting money from passengers on a train, with one lady donating her jewellery. The strike halts commercial and economic activity in the Palestinian sector and the British respond by declaring martial law.

The film shows the course of the uprising through the experiences of these characters and the brutal measures the British army takes to suppress it, including house and village demolitions, beatings, collective punishment, curfews, mass arrests and the detention of male villagers.

As the revolt spreads, the army brings in the Royal Air Force and reinforcements from Egypt and elsewhere. It sets up “peace bands” and armed police units recruited from the Zionists. When volunteers come from Lebanon and Syria to support the uprising, Charles Tegart, a British official played by Irish actor Liam Cunningham, proposes building a wall that would separate Palestine from its northern neighbours. The leaders of the Revolt are sent into exile in the Seychelles, Kenya and South Africa, although a few managed to escape to Lebanon.

All these measures have been faithfully copied by the Zionists since 1948 and are now near daily events in the West Bank.

It is Captain Wingate who explains the reasoning behind Britain’s actions: “The Zionists provide the key to preserving the empire”, he says. One might add that Wingate’s words are an equally apt description of the Zionists’ role for US imperialism in the Middle East. When questioned by the skeptical liberal administrator, Wingate says, “Perhaps you should consider what side of history you want to be on”.

As the uprising spreads throughout the summer of 1936, Britain sets up the Palestine Royal Commission under Lord Peel to investigate its causes. Reporting in July 1937, it stated that the League of Nations Mandate had become unworkable and recommended the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state linked to Transjordan, and population transfers, findings that presaged the United Nations’ partition proposal, approved by the UN General Assembly in November 1947.

In the autumn of 1936, the Arab Higher Committee—at the behest of Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Transjordan, all dominated by Britain—agreed to appear before the Peel Commission and called off the general strike, although unrest continued until the Commission published its report, sparking a renewed outbreak of the strike and rebellion that lasting till the start of World War II.

The film does not really address the issue of the Palestinians’ political leadership, its class composition—landowners, clerical leaders and middle-class layers—the various political parties, largely based on different groups of the leading families, and their ideology. But it shows some of the

wealthy Palestinian bourgeoisie hobnobbing with the British and hints at divisions. It does not show how the British consciously sought to sow divisions between the leading families.

Some, at least, collude with the Zionists. The journalist Khoulood is outraged when she finds that her husband has published an article opposing the Revolt. She insists on countering its arguments in the newspaper. When she later discovers that it was written not by a Palestinian journalist, but the Zionists who had been paying her husband, she leaves him.

There is no mention of the role of either the Palestinian Communist Party or the Soviet Union. While some Palestinian Jews had formed the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) in 1921, this was perpetually divided between Jews, who formed the majority, and Arabs, and was subject to frequent splits. This was because the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, which had turned its back on international socialist revolution and the Theory of Permanent Revolution that underpinned the 1917 October Revolution in Russia in favour of “building socialism in one country”, used the PCP to serve its foreign policy needs.

The unprincipled twists and turns of the Kremlin bureaucracy and its subordination of the various communist parties in the Third International, including the PCP, to bourgeois nationalism, and participation in the Popular Front alliances with capitalist parties, had a disastrous impact on the PCP. It led to the PCP subordinating itself to the Arab Higher Committee in support of the independence struggle. It simultaneously treated the Jews as one hostile body, thereby ignoring the class differentiation among them and failing to make a class appeal to Jewish workers for the socialist reorganisation of Palestine—leading to the splintering of the party along nationalist lines.

The Palestinians endured enormous hardship during and after the Revolt. The strike devastated their economy and the fighting destroyed their crops and orchards. Many lost their homes as well as their livelihoods. The British security forces killed around 5,000 Palestinians and wounded nearly 15,000 during the three-year revolt. They assassinated, exiled, imprisoned and divided the Palestinian leadership. Without the full force of the British military, the Zionist project could never have succeeded.

The turn to history is an important development and the film makes a valuable contribution by showing the role of British imperialism in suppressing the Palestinians in the period before the 1948 Nakba, whose antecedents are rarely explained.



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