The great Palestine Arab rebellion against the British Mandate, sometimes termed the ‘first intifada’, ran from April 1936 to May 1939. Britain’s enabling of Zionist expansion had from its outset provoked recurrent Arab violence, mainly at urban points of interface with Jewish communities. Initial outbreaks in 1936 seemed just such another instance, being inter-communal riots in Manshiyeh, the Arab-Jewish proletarian suburb separating Tel Aviv from its mainly Arab neighbor Jaffa. But despite repression by the Palestine Police, with 300 Cameron Highlanders, a quarter of the infantry then in-country, the riots inspired territory-wide Arab civil disobedience under National Committees in each main town. Elite notables hastily tried to recoup leadership by forming the Jerusalem-based Arab Higher Committee. Meanwhile, the British army, honoring ingrained small-war doctrines, engaged against rural banditti, leaving urban security, jeopardized by reciprocally escalating Arab and Jewish bombings, shootings and stabbings, to overwhelmed police. Losses of urban control, notably in Jaffa, forced High Commissioner Arthur Wauchope to invoke emergency regulations in June 1936. Meanwhile, British civil observers noted that instead of restoring order, army operations merely shifted Arab Palestine from anti-Zionism into rejection of Britain itself. These reports ironically convinced London Cabinet opinion to demand victory over Arab Palestine rather than its suasion, perceiving a cynosure of Britain’s worldwide credibility which eventually gave the army carte blanche.

Historians are re-assessing these currents as a prehistory of Britain’s post-1945 colonial “dirty wars” but invariably following the army into its rural comfort-zone. Here, regular troops were blooded, under career officers anticipating the European war and averse to grueling, tedious urban warfare, intelligence and security operations, particularly in labrynthine, sullen, alien Arab old cities. Instead, these were cauterized as no-go areas whose civil societal and economic functions atrophied, generating deeper rebellion. Belated military reactions were severe, objectifying Arab towns as enemy nodes to be reduced, not hubs of a polity to be recovered.


