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America, Britain and Palestine

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Anglo-American relations between 1917 and the end of World War II were at times colored by Zionist affairs. But in that long period, during which so much happened in Palestine and with Jewry outside America, the United States Government generally observed a clear line of demarcation, recognizing that Palestine must remain a British domain, and that American Zionism was exclusively an internal, domestic affair. Only with the end of World War II, after laborious Zionist exertions, did America begin intervening in Britain's Palestine policy. This was at a time when the relative power of America in world affairs was at a peak.

Emanating from circumstances created by World War II, this development could not have evolved otherwise. But it also involved a concentrated Zionist effort, and to a large extent resulted from the transfer of Zionist activity from London (where the British Government after 1938 abandoned its support for Zionist aspirations) to Washington, where the Zionists hoped to capitalize upon their recently acquired and ever-growing influence. Initially, it was not a success story, nor did it develop the way Zionists expected. During the first phase, up to mid-1942, world Jewry remained

quiet, not desiring to arouse Moslem Arab indignation against the Allies. Only when the fortunes of war shifted in favor of the Allies, and after some of the horrible details of the Nazi extermination of European Jewry reached Jewish communities outside Europe, was the silence broken. Shock from the unprecedented atrocities and exasperation over "the world's inaction" to save the Jews created a mood which swept away almost every earlier taboo. Various Jewish anti-establishment organizations in America, such as those created through the propaganda empire of Peter Bergson, helped overcome the cautious attitude of traditional Jewish leadership. They also abetted a new aggressive style in American Zionist behavior. More and more American Jews — but also increasing numbers of the general American public — not only accepted this style but even followed it enthusiastically. There was hardly a sector of the American public which dared open opposition to the Zionist agitation. The new approach generally ignored any possible effect upon the war or, indeed, on the attitude of the Roosevelt Administration toward the Zionists. Despite a lack of agreement and quarrelling over details, this new policy enabled Zion-

ists and “non-Zionists” (Bnei Brith and others) alike to pave the way for almost unanimous support within Jewry for the new Zionist objectives. At the end of 1943, the American Zionists, fulfilling their

dream of half a century, became “spokesmen for American Jewry.” Political scientists came to regard Zionism as the most influential ethnic pressure group on America’s foreign policy.

ZIONIST POLITICAL INFLUENCE DURING WORLD WAR II

Far from being the case five years earlier, no serious American attempt was made to prevent the introduction in May 1939 of the anti-Zionist White Paper policy. Such evasion by the Roosevelt administration continued throughout the war, based on the premise that an early approach might delay “unconditional” victory over the Axis powers. That policy did not change until Roosevelt’s death, and it reinforced the determination of the two most important sections of the Zionist Movement — the Yishuv in Palestine and the American Zionists — to search for ways of fighting the White Paper. Already in 1944, Roosevelt found it increasingly difficult to ignore “wild” Zionist pressure to intervene in Britain’s Palestine policy. In Palestine itself, during the war, “dissident” groups of Revisionist origin had launched a “war of liberation” against Britain, and the Jewish Agency-controlled Haganah (the quasi-military arm of the organized Yishuv) was preparing to follow a similar course, should the necessity arise.

This development was characterized by increasing Zionist impatience and militancy. During the war no Zionist party maintained its previously held position: all moved toward “extremism”. Yet, throughout the war and even later, there was no overall coordination of Zionist strategy. Inner strife within Zionist ranks was as strong as ever, and at times “militants” and “moderates” seriously considered co-

operating with outside elements in order to eliminate their opponents. Paradoxically, in the final account, this situation did little to harm the joint cause, and occasionally even helped in protecting Zionism from danger.

Another characteristic feature of this period was the “Messianic” foment which, at certain times and places, developed into an “all-or-nothing” attitude. During the war, world Jewry was faced with the grim constellation of Nazi extermination of their European brethren and the closing of asylum outside Europe — foremost, the proposed Jewish National Home in Palestine. At the peak of this agony, the American Jews were inspired by visitors from other Zionist centers, such as Weizmann, Jabotinsky and Ben-Gurion, who imbued them with the idea of a Jewish State, to be established in Palestine by the Big Powers immediately after the war. They were very susceptible to the two seemingly contradictory convictions that these visitors brought with them: that the world was cold and indifferent to the fate of the Jews and therefore the Jews must learn to fight vigorously for survival; and that such a world now “owed” the Jews a state in Palestine, in compensation for immeasurable suffering. A common “Messianic” belief was now accepted by the American Zionists as gospel, and their new arch-militant leaders, including Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, began preaching it from mid-

1943 onwards: “the hour of redemption had struck,” and “the Jewish people have nothing to lose” and much to gain by translating their grief and anger into political power.

At the Biltmore Conference of May 1942, Ben-Gurion succeeded in persuading the American Zionists to accept outlines for a policy so “daring” that even his own executive in Jerusalem found it “premature”. By September 1943, however, this program was accepted by an assembly representing almost every American Jew-

ish organization. Zionist organizations in Palestine and other countries outside Europe now lagged behind the American Zionists in this “Messianic” enthusiasm. By the winter of 1944, Silver had become the leading figure of the American Zionist Emergency Council, and he decided upon a campaign aimed at passing two pro-Zionist resolutions in Congress. He became convinced that his massive lobby, both in Washington and at the grass roots level, would gain overwhelming support in the country’s legislature.

LONDON’S ABORTIVE WARTIME PALESTINE PLAN

Ironically, while Roosevelt became increasingly convinced of the impracticability of a Zionist solution and refused to support the line taken by Silver, the British Government began to consider seriously abrogation of the White Paper. Influenced by Churchill’s somewhat eccentric sympathy for Zionism, the War Cabinet in July 1943 began planning replacement of the White Paper by a final solution through partition. The Cabinet then felt that the final phase of the war would be a better time for tackling the problem than the post-war era. Only subsequent inner opposition, and the growing symptoms of militancy among the Palestinian Jews themselves, led the Cabinet to postpone implementation of such a scheme until after the war.

Strict adherence by the Cabinet to one principle, however, proved very harmful to the British cause. The Cabinet, designating its stand on this issue top secret until implementation was possible, decided to exclude the Zionists and the Arabs, and even the United States, from all knowledge of its plans. An asymmetric relationship conse-

quently developed between the two major powers, in which the British were told of various American schemes and initiatives, but never reciprocated with their plans.

In any event, neither the British scheme nor any naive American improvisation led to a practical breakthrough. Ibn Saud — whom Roosevelt regarded as the Arab leader most suited to make peace with the Zionists — was very kind to the President and to his emissaries, but he was utterly hostile to any Zionist idea. Implementation of the British partition scheme was repeatedly postponed, until all hope was lost. And since very few had known of such a British plan, Britain appeared to both the Zionists and to America as doggedly adhering to the White Paper. This impression augmented Zionist belligerency toward the end of the war and pushed public opinion, particularly in America, to the Zionist side. It appears that when Harry Truman came to power in the spring of 1945, he too shared the conviction that Britain, in a Machiavellian manner, had all along been satisfied with its White Paper.

ZIONIST ATTEMPTS TO INFLUENCE ROOSEVELT

Meanwhile, two conflicting tendencies emerged simultaneously in America, both affecting Middle Eastern policy. On the one hand, mounting Zionist pressure, fed by the increasing support of the American general public and of Congress, sought radical, pro-Zionist action. On the other hand, the scare of an oil shortage, concern for the welfare of American troops in Moslem countries, and the danger to other seemingly vital American interests if she indeed intended to depart from isolationism awakened a stronger American desire for Arab goodwill. This coincidence was to become a source of profound embarrassment to the United States foreign policy-makers. In the summer of 1943, with the rising concern of the British Government — despite its temporary pro-Zionist inclination — over massive Jewish efforts toward arms acquisition and over the spread of Jewish terrorism in Palestine, a field of common endeavor emerged between the two governments, namely an attempt to dampen Zionist agitation.

This cooperation gave birth to a joint Anglo-American statement condemning "Zionist extremism" as thwarting the Allied war effort. Somehow, at the last moment, the American Zionists and their new supporters within and outside the Administration managed to stem this move. Roosevelt's policy now became more ambiguous than ever, soothing statements being made simultaneously to both the Jews and the Arabs. Only the former received these reassurances publicly, for secret diplomatic channels conveyed them to their Arab addressees. Considerable disagreement on tactics had developed within the Zionist Emergency Council as to how far confrontation with Roosevelt could go without harming their own cause.

Roosevelt's "talking both ways" (as his Secretary of State, Hull, later described it) to the Arabs and the Jews reached a peak toward the end of the war. In his last year in office, Roosevelt was determined to curb mounting Zionist pressure. After the failure to issue a joint Anglo-American statement, he scored temporary success by shelving pro-Zionist resolutions in Congress. But he was considerably disarmed during the 1944 presidential election campaign by the flood of pro-Zionist utterances. Once both American parties had adopted this line, and particularly when the rival candidate, Dewey, had done so, Roosevelt himself was forced to follow suit. This was the result of skillful Zionist tactics, guided by Silver. Rather than supporting the Democrats as in the past, the Zionists openly put their vote up for auction.

Politically, however, the American Zionists achieved very little during the war. The only meaningful success was the mass recruitment of Jewry itself, accompanied by a ramified political machinery supported by many non-Jews. But when the war ended, all their seeming gains, in the form of election planks and presidential promises, seemed to vanish into thin air. Despite Roosevelt, Palestine was not discussed at the Yalta Conference, and the subject found no place in the mutual post-war arrangements. Roosevelt's abortive conference with Ibn Saud in February 1945 underlined the reality that any Big Power acting in favor of Zionism would meet massive opposition from the Arab world. In the changing post-war alignment, the Arabs had to be taken into account by both Britain and America. The secret British partition scheme now lay in ruins, and any alternative seemed just as unpalatable. What remained intact was the White Paper.

TRUMAN'S INTERVENTION IN BRITAIN'S POLICY

The phase of intervention by America in British policy in Palestine had at last begun. But, at least in the beginning, it was a very special sort of intervention, far from what Rabbi Silver had anticipated. Truman, who attained office through the "back door", was a *sui generis* president, motivated by ideas and concepts different from those of his predecessor. His motives were much simpler, and his stubbornness much greater. He was also an unknown quantity for the Zionists, and it was unclear where his initial approach on the Palestine issue was to lead.

Truman began with a genuine humanitarian sentiment toward the survivors of the Holocaust rather than any conception of a Jewish State. At first he even seemed uninterested in impressing the American voter, for his moves were kept secret between May and October 1945. When eventually he demanded that Prime Minister Attlee allow some 100,000 Jewish displaced persons to enter Palestine, he considered it necessary, in light of his predecessor's relations with Arab rulers, to emphasize that this was the extent of his initiative. At the time the Jewish DPs seemed to him to be a problem of limited scope, one that could be solved by the new Labour Government in the manner he was advocating. His personal advisor on this issue, Earl Harrison, held the same opinion. Truman was willing to allocate considerable American funds for the project but, significantly, not a single American soldier.

Indeed, the continued adherence of the

American Government to this principle became one of the sources of the Anglo-American Palestine imbroglio, with the British interpreting American cooperation as including the dispatch of troops. Somewhat to his surprise, Truman discovered that the Labour Government found it impossible to carry out his demand. He failed to appreciate the factors limiting the British Government, just as Attlee and Bevin later failed to grasp Truman's own limitations. This further development of poor communications between the two powers resulted in a deadlock that gradually abetted Truman's "drift" toward support of Zionist objectives. The British refused to accede to Truman's demand for the admittance of 100,000 DPs unless certain prior yet unattainable conditions were met, such as the disbanding of the clandestine military organizations in Palestine.

The DPs had become the sharpest Zionist weapon against the White Paper. The mere publication of Truman's plea had encouraged a massive (and largely uncontrolled) movement of Jews from all over Europe toward the American and British zones in Western Europe. Soon the number of DPs there had more than doubled. American dissatisfaction with the British reaction, and the general public feeling of guilt toward the survivors, inevitably curtailed the severity of British reaction to the growing illegal immigration into Palestine, organized by the Mossad division of the Haganah. Even the handling of the Jewish terror problem softened.

ANGLO-AMERICAN ATTEMPTS TO FORMULATE POLICY

The Labour Government, to be sure, was not deaf to the plea by Truman, which came just when a new scheme for provincial autonomy in Palestine was about to be enacted. According to this plan, the continued British administration of the Mandate would gradually extend more autonomy to both Jews and Arabs, eventually leading to partition. As soon as Attlee and Bevin recognized the seriousness of the American intervention, they called off implementation of their scheme and sought to harness American cooperation. The result was the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry and the various subsequent Anglo-American teams of experts active during most of 1946. But whenever and wherever these joint teams managed to agree, the respective heads of state failed to do so. The American experts could not appreciate the "imperative need" of their President to score a victory on the 100,000 DP issue, regardless of the other aspects of the problem. Similarly, the British representatives often failed to grasp the crucial importance Bevin now attached to winning Arab goodwill.

In any event, throughout 1946 the mutual hope of amalgamating Anglo-American Palestine policies failed to materialize, remaining a bone of contention in the renewed Anglo-American alliance now aimed at containing Soviet expansionism. Gradually, both sides gave in. Britain's linkage of the 100,000 to the disbanding of clandestine Jewish para-military organiza-

tions and the moderation of demands by the Jewish Agency gradually pushed America toward a solution which might include some form of Jewish state. Both the President and the State Department began to discern possible advantages in adopting, at least formally, the new Zionist formula of a "viable Jewish state" in part of Palestine. Once again, however, poor communications with the British Government failed to convey that the British would not accept even that formula.

These circumstances led to an important development in the American position early in October 1946. President Truman and his advisors—who were hard pressed by domestic troubles with mid-term elections approaching—misread the adjournment of the first round of Anglo-Arab talks in London as a sign that the British were on the verge of accepting a partition solution. At this point, as the Jewish Day of Atonement ended, Truman published a statement expressing support for a Jewish state in a partitioned Palestine—the first time he had done so since assuming office. The effect of the Yom Kippur statement on Attlee and Bevin was devastating. It steeled their determination to force America into a sharp dilemma: either share responsibility for carrying out a Palestine solution, or be prepared to see the issue handed over to the United Nations "without recommendations". However, the American Government continued to demand the entrance of 100,000 DPs.

BRITAIN'S LAST ATTEMPTS AT A PALESTINE POLICY

Toward the beginning of 1947, Britain herself entered a vicious circle of events. Post-war circumstances rendered her more and more dependent upon American goodwill and economic support. Without these, even her limited share in the defense of the free world against Soviet expansionism could not be borne. Therefore, Jewish terrorism and illegal immigration could not be quelled as vigorously as desired. In fact, in the face of the British withdrawal from India and Egypt, Palestine for the moment seemed strategically all the more "indispensable". To retain it as a strategic base, however, Britain would need quiet there, achievable only by a permanent solution. This meant abrogation of the White Paper, as well as a new plan that avoided confrontation with the Arab countries, whose opposition would require even greater military reinforcements and loss of considerable strategic advantage.

The only British hope was the unlikely possibility of a partition or a "provincial autonomy" scheme that would not evoke total rejection by either the Arab or the Zionist moderates. The Cabinet strove to arrive at such a plan in January and early February 1947, eventually agreeing to propose to the parties what later became known as the "Bevin plan". Certain members of the Arab League might have accepted the plan, which the British might then have tried to enforce, despite expected massive Jewish opposition. However, since the Arabs rejected the scheme and the Government faced increasing public and parliamentary pressure to cease being intimidated by America and by terrorists in Palestine, the Bevin plan was rejected and the issue was referred to the United Nations. Thus, within four weeks, the British Cabinet jumped from partition back to

the Morrison-Grady plan, and then to other forms of "provincial autonomy", in the end to give up in exhaustion.

The British, in fact, continued to hope that a policy of brinkmanship at the United Nations, and the inability of that organization to arrive at any practicable solution—or even to reach a two-thirds decision—might give them a reinforced mandate to solve the Palestine issue as they wished. Indeed, at various junctures during 1947, Britain and the United States came close to full cooperation, but a Soviet manoeuvre seems to have forestalled it. In October 1947, at the Second General Assembly, when the Russians expressed unequivocal support for the UNSCOP recommendation for partition of Palestine—when, for the first time, there was a chance for a two-thirds majority in favor of such a resolution—the United States chose to side with the Russians. In a measure of cooperation quite unique in the atmosphere of the Cold War, America and Russia together pushed the partition resolution through the General Assembly.

Britain now had many good reasons to quit Palestine and shed responsibility for its future. The British Empire had entered a period of dismemberment; Arabs and Jews were further than ever from agreement; terrorism and illegal immigration were taking an increasingly ugly turn; public opinion at home demanded a stop to the situation, one way or another. Nevertheless, the Labour Government still sought an orderly withdrawal, with the conclusion of as many "treaty rights" as possible with whomever succeeded Britain in Palestine. This was the motive behind Bevin's desire to leave his own mark upon the final phase of the British Mandate. Only the events at the United Nations Assembly in the Fall of

1947, and particularly America's position there, forced him into producing an actual timetable for the British evacuation of Palestine. It was only on December 4, 1947 that a concrete plan for withdrawal was finally accepted by the British Cabinet.

The results of the Zionist efforts were

thus not exactly what the Zionist leaders had originally sought. Their aim had been to force Britain, under American pressure, to change her policy in favor of Zionism. History shows that this failed to materialize, and that eventually Britain left the country in total disarray.