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## The Balfour Lens

***Palestine . . . is in constant danger of conflagration.  
Sparks are flying over its borders all the time and it may  
be that on some unexpected day a fire will be started that  
will sweep ruthlessly over this land.***

*—Dispatch from Otis Glazebrook, U.S. consul  
general in Jerusalem, December 1919*

In April 1922, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives convened a rather remarkable hearing to debate a joint congressional resolution endorsing the Balfour Declaration.<sup>1</sup> A little over four years earlier, in November 1917, Britain’s foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, had put the weight of the British Empire behind the creation of “a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine, with the stipulation “that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.” Palestine was then part of the crumbling Ottoman Empire; it came under British control following World War I, formalized in 1923 as a League of Nations mandate. As in other parts of the Levant (including Syria), however, Arabs, who then made up more than 90 percent of Palestine’s population, also hoped for independence.

Ten outside witnesses were called to testify at the four-day hearing, including Fuad Shatara and Selim Totah, two Palestine-born U.S. citizens who spoke against the resolution and were the last witnesses to address the committee. “This is our national home, the national home of the Palestinians,” said Shatara, a Brooklyn surgeon and native of Jaffa, “and I think those people are entitled to priority as the national home of the Palestinians and not aliens who have come in and have gradually become a majority.”<sup>2</sup> Totah, a young law student originally from Ramallah, attempted a less confrontational approach: “You gentlemen and your forefathers have fought for the idea, and that is taxation with representation. We are asking for the same principles. By the operation of the Balfour Declaration a majority of Jews will be established in Palestine, and after a while by their majority they will govern the native people. Would you stand for things like that in California if the Japanese should come in and after 20 or 30 years become a majority and establish a republic of their own? Not for a moment. How would you expect 93 percent of the people in Palestine to stand for that?”<sup>3</sup>

Totah’s words sparked a heated exchange with members of the panel. “Your point is that the people should be given control of the country and shut the Jews out,” said New York Congressman W. Bourke Cockran, a strong supporter of the bill.

In particular, Totah’s insistence that the Arab majority be given a say in determining the policies of the country was met with hostility and derision, as illustrated by the following exchange between Totah and Cockran and another strongly pro-Balfour lawmaker, Ambrose Kennedy of Rhode Island.

**MR. TOTAH:** If they come to establish a majority, the natives have a right to limit immigration as this country has a right to control immigration.

**MR. KENNEDY:** But we are an organized government. There is no one over there.

**MR. TOTAH:** But that does not cut out the equities of the situation.

**MR. KENNEDY:** These Jews are making this land fertile where it was sterile.

**MR. TOTAH:** No, sir; I disagree with that in its entirety.

**MR. KENNEDY:** The places that are fertile are not sterile now. The lands that those Jews have taken, this report states, have been lands that were sterile when they got them and they have turned them into fertile lands.

**MR. TOTAH:** We could do that ourselves.

**MR. KENNEDY:** That is another matter. That is a fact that the Jews are doing that. There is no doubt. It is conceded that what you want is to be yourselves given control of this land.

**MR. TOTAH:** To develop it.

**MR. COCKRAN:** And not allow the Jew to enter in, peacefully or otherwise.

**MR. TOTAH:** We do not say that.

**MR. COCKRAN:** Peacefully or otherwise, even to buy it, no matter what the result, if they should become a majority.<sup>4</sup>

Cockran had the last word in the hearing.

And so began U.S. involvement in what is now the century-old conflict between Arabs and Jews in the Holy Land. A few months after the hearing, Congress voted overwhelmingly to endorse the goal of establishing a Jewish “national home” in Palestine. Although highly controversial both inside and outside American government circles, including within the American Jewish community, the Balfour Declaration became the primary lens through which American politicians viewed Palestine, the Zionist project, and Palestine’s Arab inhabitants. Britain’s experience as a superpower attempting to mediate between two groups with competing national claims while leaning heavily toward one of them in Palestine offered a preview of many of the problems that would later confront American peacemaking between the Israelis and the Palestinians. By the end of the Mandate in 1948, the basic elements of American policy toward the conflict and the Palestinians had begun to take shape: admiration, particularly on Capitol Hill, for Zionist economic, political, and even

military power; a parallel antipathy toward a highly nationalistic and often opportunistic Palestinian political leadership; and a deeply conflicted attitude on the part of U.S. policymakers over how best to resolve the conflict.

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### BALFOUR AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The British began warming to the idea of a Western-oriented, Jewish outpost in the eastern Mediterranean during World War I, as a way both to strengthen the war effort and to advance their own colonial ambitions in the region.<sup>5</sup> Sentimental factors, including a religiously inspired fascination with the Holy Land and sympathy for the plight of Europe's persecuted Jews, also played a role in Britain's embrace of Zionism. As the land of the Bible and the birthplace of Christianity, Palestine was regarded by many as the natural birthright of Jews (and hence also Christians), which required that the land be "reclaimed" and "restored" to its "rightful owners."<sup>6</sup> Such views were prevalent in the United States as well, being held by many government officials, members of Congress, and even President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>7</sup>

For the country's Arab inhabitants, however, the designation of Palestine as a Jewish national home posed an irremediable threat. As in other parts of the Levant, nationalist sentiment in Palestine was expressed mainly through the language of pan-Arabism. But by the early 1920s, the focus of Palestinian political aspirations had begun to shift away from a unified Greater Syria to an independent Arab Palestine.<sup>8</sup> In addition to anonymizing the country's Arab majority as "existing non-Jewish communities," the authors of the Balfour Declaration were careful to confer only "civil and religious rights" on the Arabs while avoiding any reference to their political or national rights. The question was debated within official British circles prior to the Declaration's publication. When queried about the implications of a Jewish national home for the country's Arab inhabitants, Arthur Balfour famously replied, "In Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country. . . . The Four Great

Powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.”<sup>9</sup> The Zionists meanwhile had made no secret of their goal of making Palestine “as Jewish as England is English” through immigration and colonization. To most Palestinian Arabs, therefore, the Jewish national home was “an objective that, from its inception and logic, would lead either to the Palestinians’ permanent subjugation in their own patrimony or, as it turned out, the destruction of their national existence.”<sup>10</sup>

Although the idea of transforming Palestine into a Jewish national home remained highly controversial and the subject of intense debate both inside and outside of government, for a variety of sentimental, cultural, and political reasons both the White House and Congress came down in favor of the Balfour Declaration and Zionist plans to colonize Palestine. In keeping with the State Department’s policy of neutrality, President Woodrow Wilson’s administration stopped short of officially endorsing the Balfour Declaration, although the president personally communicated his sympathies to leaders of the Zionist movement, and occasionally did so publicly as well. Wilson’s thinking was heavily influenced by prominent Zionist figures such as Louis Brandeis, a close confidant whom he later appointed to the Supreme Court, as well by his own religious upbringing.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, his views on the subject were not especially nuanced or consistent. Although an ardent believer in the liberation of colonized peoples and the right of self-determination, as a devout Christian and the son of a Presbyterian minister Wilson was also deeply attracted to the idea of the “rebirth of the Jewish people . . . as a blessing for all mankind.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Wilson’s concept of a Jewish homeland went beyond what was laid out in the Balfour Declaration; he informed Chaim Weizmann, the head of the World Zionist Organization, in January 1919 of his hope that “in Palestine shall be laid the foundations of a Jewish Commonwealth,” for which he offered his “entire support . . . full and unhampered.”<sup>13</sup>

Wilson’s casual pronouncements about the Balfour Declaration irritated officials at the State Department, who cautioned him against

being overly supportive of the Zionist cause. Officially, Palestine was regarded as a British affair and American officials were keen to avoid “foreign entanglements.” American diplomats, particularly those based in the region, also understood the potential for bloodshed in the Holy Land. “There is no difference of opinion that the opposition of the Moslems and Christians to granting any exceptional privilege to the Jews in Palestine is real, intense and universal,” the U.S. consul general in Jerusalem, Otis Glazebrook, told delegates at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.<sup>14</sup> The King-Crane Commission, appointed by Wilson in early 1919 to ascertain the wishes of the local populations in Arab regions of the former Ottoman Empire, came to a similar conclusion. Among other things, the commission found Palestine’s Arabs to be “emphatically against the entire Zionist program” and concluded that to “subject a people so minded to unlimited Jewish immigration, and to steady financial and social pressure to surrender the land, would be a gross violation of the principle” of self-determination. The King-Crane Commission’s final report was completed in August 1919 but was not published until three years later, by which time the Mandate, incorporating the concept of establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine, had already been approved by the League of Nations, and the U.S. Congress had completed its deliberations on the subject.<sup>15</sup> Several of Wilson’s advisers expressed similar concerns as those of the commission members. Secretary of State Robert Lansing asked how Wilson’s commitment to self-determination could be “harmonized with Zionism, to which the President is practically committed.”<sup>16</sup> The president’s legal adviser, David Hunter Miller, argued similarly that “the rule of self-determination would prevent the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.” Wilson heard similar warnings from members of his delegation to the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>17</sup>

However, members of Congress were even more enthusiastic in their support than Wilson. The American Jewish community at the time was still deeply divided over political Zionism and the question of whether Jews constituted a nation.<sup>18</sup> However, by this point “a pioneering Zionist lobby” with the ability to make support for a Jewish homeland into an election issue was already an established presence on Capitol Hill.<sup>19</sup> In

1919, a majority of American lawmakers were publicly supportive of Zionist objectives,<sup>20</sup> before the House and Senate gave their formal approval to the creation of a Jewish national home in September 1922. In approving the joint resolution, members of Congress made one modification to Balfour's original formula, stating that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of *Christian and all other* non-Jewish communities in Palestine" (emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> Despite their strongly pro-Zionist leanings, members of Congress nonetheless engaged in a relatively lively debate over the issue—an increasingly rare occurrence on Capitol Hill today on matters concerning Israel. Although no members of Congress from either party spoke against it, five of the ten witnesses called before the House Foreign Affairs committee hearing in April 1922 testified against the Jewish national home, including two rabbis who represented the Reform movement and two Palestine-born American citizens. The arguments in favor of a Jewish homeland drew heavily on the Bible, the history of Jewish persecution, and notions of manifest destiny, all standard themes emphasized by the Zionist movement at the time.<sup>22</sup> Palestine was described as "a devastated and sparsely settled land," a country that was "underdeveloped and underpopulated" with "no civilization" to speak of. Meanwhile, Arab opposition to Zionism was attributed to ancient religious hatreds, outside agitators, or a stubborn resistance to "civilization."<sup>23</sup>

The two Palestinian witnesses, Shatara and Totah, spent much of their time attempting to refute these claims, though they met with little success. The most passionate voice of opposition to the measure came from Edward Bliss Reed, a professor of English literature who had spent several months in Palestine as a volunteer with the American Red Cross. In Bliss's view, the Balfour Declaration clearly gave one group preference over another and was therefore "thoroughly un-American." Bliss doubted whether "any State will ever prosper founded by such means because people are the same all over. . . . How would you feel if the German troops were holding you down until enough Frenchmen came in to take possession of the State."

The counterargument was put forward by Louis Lipsky of the Zionist Organization of America. According to Lipsky, the Arabs in Palestine

“were entitled to what is called ‘individual rights,’” but “the self-determination principle certainly has no application” to them, since “the inherent right of self-determination had to do not with groups of people who happened by accident to be occupying a certain territory; it had to do with races, with nationalities.”<sup>24</sup> The claim that Palestinians were not a “real” nation, and thus not entitled to self-determination, has proved to be remarkably durable, as illustrated by Newt Gingrich’s 2011 reference to “an invented Palestinian people.” A few of the bill’s more strident supporters, including Congressman Walter Marion Chandler of New York, a Republican, went even further. Despite having skipped the hearing, Chandler delivered a passionate and long-winded defense of the resolution on the House floor later that summer. The Arabs, Chandler insisted, should be given a choice: “If they will not consent to Jewish government and domination, under conditions of right and justice, or to sell their lands at a just valuation and to retire into their own countries, they shall be driven from Palestine by force.”<sup>25</sup>

### AN UNWORKABLE MANDATE

Following the Allied victory, the newly formed League of Nations awarded Britain a “mandate” over Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq, with the stated aim of preparing the local populations for independence. Lebanon and Syria became French mandates. (Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Transjordan were designated Class A mandates, meaning that they were considered “independent nations” in all but name, subject only to the “administrative advice and assistance” by the mandatory power.) In Palestine, however, instead of preparing the local Arab population for an independent state in Palestine, the British continued to maintain their commitment to establishing a Jewish national home there. This led to periodic unrest and outbreaks of violence, in 1920, 1921, 1929, and 1933, culminating in the Arab Revolt of 1936–39.

Although the British had officially ruled out the eventuality of a Jewish state in the whole of Palestine, the goal of creating a Jewish national home was incorporated into the terms of the Mandate, thus ensuring Palestinian political opposition to British rule as well as to the





Source: Adapted from United Nations map

Zionist project. The Palestine Arab Congress, the earliest attempt at forging a national leadership for the Arab population, sent delegations to various foreign capitals to plead the Arab case. Representatives of the Arabs also lodged legal challenges to the Mandate on the ground that the Balfour Declaration violated their right to self-rule.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, British authorities and members of the growing Jewish community in Palestine became targets of mass protests, general strikes, boycotts, and periodic violence. The British in turn dismissed the Palestine Arab Congress and its leadership, the Arab Executive, as unrepresentative and refused to recognize them until they explicitly accepted the terms of the Mandate, including the Jewish national home.<sup>27</sup> The commitment to developing Palestine as a “national home” for the Jewish minority also conflicted with the Mandate’s ostensible mission of preparing the local population for self-rule.<sup>28</sup> British attempts to reconcile these two essentially irreconcilable ends resulted in confusion and frequent policy reversals, earning the enmity of both communities and ultimately making the Mandate unworkable.

The conflict was accentuated by the vast gap between a Palestinian Arab society that was traditional and largely agrarian and a Jewish community made up primarily of Western-educated European immigrants, differences that were also reflected in the political trends of the two communities.<sup>29</sup> The fact that the Zionists also enjoyed the financial backing of wealthy European and American Jews and the patronage of the powerful British Empire added to the imbalance, despite the Arabs’ demographic advantage. In addition to establishing in 1922 the Jewish Agency, the proto-government of the growing Jewish community in Palestine, the British also provided training, arms, and other support to Zionist paramilitary groups.<sup>30</sup> British offers to set up a parallel “Arab Agency” were rejected outright by the Arabs, who instead insisted on the creation of a representative assembly, a privilege they had enjoyed under Ottoman rule. But both the British and the Zionists opposed the idea of representative government until such time as a Jewish majority could be achieved through immigration.<sup>31</sup>

The most dominant Palestinian political figure to emerge at the time was Amin al-Husseini (1897–1974), a charismatic activist from a

prominent Jerusalem family, who in 1921 was installed by the British as the grand mufti of Jerusalem but later fell out with the mandatory government. By the mid-1930s, al-Husseini, a nationalist with shrewd and often ruthless political instincts, had emerged as the undisputed leader of Palestine's Arab community and continued to dominate Palestinian politics even after his exile in 1937. The dilemma facing al-Husseini and the Arab Executive was one that would confront future generations of Palestinian leaders as well: acquiescing in a political process seen by most Palestinians as fundamentally unfair would leave them vulnerable domestically, while boycotting the process altogether would only cement their political marginalization. Publicly, Arab leaders felt compelled to reject anything that could be seen as legitimizing the Jewish national home, including the Mandate itself. As a practical matter, most of the Arab leadership maintained relatively friendly ties with British officials.<sup>32</sup> Their ability to maintain this delicate balance would ultimately depend on the extent to which they were seen as successfully confronting the Zionist project and its British sponsors. But by adopting such a public stance of rejection, particularly given their relative weakness vis-à-vis the British and the Zionists, the Arab leadership in Palestine overlooked more pragmatic, if less dazzling, policy options, and ultimately set themselves up for failure.

Each round of violence was followed by a new British commission of inquiry, most of which attributed the unrest to Arab fears of losing their land or livelihoods to Zionist immigration. The inquiries typically led to new policy statements, or white papers, that recommended changes to the Mandate regime but that were very often ignored or suppressed. The first of these, the Palin Commission, attributed the unrest to the Arabs' "sense of betrayal" at the nonfulfillment of British promises of independence and their ongoing fears of Jewish political and economic domination. The commission's final report was never published, in anticipation of Zionist objections.<sup>33</sup> The Passfield White Paper of 1930—issued following the mini-rebellion of August 1929 that had been triggered by a dispute between Muslims and Jews over the Western Wall in Jerusalem's Old City—recommended putting limits on Jewish immigration and land purchases while downgrading the Jewish

national home to “a consideration that would enjoy continued support but was not central to mandate governance.” Several days of violence left 153 Jews and 116 Arabs dead, leading to two new inquiries, the Shaw Commission (March 1930) and the Hope Simpson Commission (October 1930). Given the emotions surrounding the holy site of the Wailing Wall and the potential for broader conflagration, the League of Nations launched a separate investigation into the competing claims of Muslims and Jews over the Wall.<sup>34</sup> Under pressure from Zionists and their supporters in Parliament, however, British authorities disavowed the white paper. While Zionists breathed a sigh of relief, the episode convinced the Arabs of the futility of continuing to engage in the political process.<sup>35</sup>

It was also through the violence of 1929 that many in Washington and the broader American public were first introduced to Palestine and the Palestinians. Until then, American interests in Palestine had been viewed mainly in terms of American charitable activities or the small number of (mostly Jewish) U.S. citizens in Palestine. Even American consular officials in Jerusalem had very little to say about Palestinians or their political concerns for the first decade or so of British rule.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the August 1929 disturbances were covered fairly extensively by the American consul general in Jerusalem, Paul Knabenshue, who reported that the “basic cause of the serious troubles . . . arises out of the Balfour Declaration.” Knabenshue’s report went on to state, “It is quite evident that the Zionists’ ambition was, and still is, to convert Palestine into . . . a Jewish state and by economic pressure to force out the Arabs, or reduce them to impotency, until Palestine should become as Jewish as England is English.”<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the relatively nuanced dispatches of U.S. diplomats, American press accounts, which were heavily influenced by Zionist accounts, characterized the unrest as “race riots” or the result of religious fanaticism. For example, a report by the *Washington Post* editorial board described the violence as “a fanatical outbreak of holy-war fervor originating in incidents at the century-old Wailing [Western] Wall.”<sup>38</sup> A handful of Arab American organizations attempted to provide an alternative perspective, but their efforts were negligible in comparison to the information put out by American Zionists.<sup>39</sup>

American interest in Palestine intensified following the Arab Revolt of 1936–39.<sup>40</sup> It also marked a decisive moment for the Mandate, Palestinian politics, and the Zionist movement. By 1933 the Jewish sector of the economy had surpassed that of the Palestinians.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, the rise of Nazi Germany and the persecution of European Jews led to a massive influx of Jewish immigrants into Palestine. Between 1932 and 1937, approximately 184,000 Jews arrived in Palestine, doubling the size of the Jewish population.<sup>42</sup> As a result, “the possibility that they could be outnumbered in their own country came to be a growing concern for the Palestinians, even as that same outcome promised security, victory and absolute sovereignty to the Zionists.”<sup>43</sup> Unlike earlier disturbances, which had mainly targeted the Jewish community, the 1936 uprising was directed at British rule. Among the first casualties of the rebellion was the old leadership of the Arab Executive, which was replaced by the Arab Higher Committee (sometimes referred to as the Higher Arab Committee), an umbrella comprising local committees and political parties headed by the grand mufti, Amin al-Husseini. In mid-1937 the Royal Peel Commission report for the first time proposed partitioning the country into separate Jewish and Arab states, reigniting the uprising. The British responded with unmitigated force, demolishing large sections of Jaffa, Palestine’s largest city and the epicenter of the rebellion, while dismantling the Arab leadership. The Arab Higher Committee was outlawed and most of its leaders were jailed, executed, or deported. Al-Husseini had managed to flee the country in October 1937 and remained in exile for the remainder of the Mandate, which ended on May 14, 1948.

For the Zionists, the rebellion gave new urgency to the goals of establishing a Jewish state and creating a Jewish army. The Zionist leadership inside and outside Palestine had conditionally accepted Peel’s partition proposal, and by 1939 the latter was also within reach. The Haganah, the armed wing of the Jewish Agency and the largest of the Zionist militias, had a trained force of roughly 20,000 men.<sup>44</sup> This was in addition to smaller, more radical “revisionist” groups such as the Irgun Zvai Leumi (National Military Organization, the Irgun for short) and the Stern Gang (also called Lehi, from Lohamei Herut Israel,

Fighters for the Freedom of Israel), the forebears of today's Likud Party. Unlike the more pragmatic "labor" Zionists who dominated the Jewish Agency, who were prepared to accept a Jewish state in any portion of Palestine, the Revisionists sought to establish Jewish sovereignty over the whole of Eretz Yisrael, "the Land of Israel," including the territory east of the Jordan River known as Transjordan, which later became Jordan.<sup>45</sup> The revolt had also galvanized Arab solidarity in support of Palestine. The Pan-Arab Congress of September 1937, in which delegates from across the Arab world convened in Bloudan, Syria, to reject partition and demand an end to Jewish immigration, marked the unofficial entry of the Arab states into the conflict.

In the meantime, al-Husseini turned his attention to another rising power on the regional and global scene, the United States. In August 1937, just as the rebellion was starting up again and a few weeks before he went into exile, al-Husseini paid a visit to the American consul general in Jerusalem, George Wadsworth II, on behalf of the Arab Higher Commission. Husseini sought the meeting following reports that the United States planned to invoke its right under the 1924 Anglo-American Treaty to be consulted on changes in the Mandate, a sign that it was potentially moving away from its official position of neutrality—in which case, al-Husseini hoped to dissuade the Americans from weighing in on behalf of the Jews. "If the United States is upholding the Jews out of sympathy for them," al-Husseini stated, "it should be remarked that the Arabs are more deserving of that sympathy as they are in the right and are the owners of the country and the victims of aggression." Al-Husseini went on: "The United States enjoys in Arab countries great respect and affection and a moral standing of great value which are a result of the accomplishments of groups of Americans over a great number of years." Wadsworth explained that the policy of consulting with the mandatory authorities in Palestine applied to all of the mandate regimes, including Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Wadsworth further reassured al-Husseini that the United States "was not departing from that impartiality which has for many years characterized the various good works of the United States in the Near East for which the Arabs had every cause to be gratified."<sup>46</sup>

Despite the severity of the crackdown, the revolt produced a major shift in British policy. Acknowledging that it could not “both concede the Arab claim to self-government and secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home,” the 1937 Peel Commission declared the Mandate to be “unworkable.” But the commission’s findings were not a vindication for the Arabs. Despite concluding that the “Arabs of Palestine . . . are as fit to govern themselves as the Arabs of Iraq or Syria,” the Peel Commission also recommended partitioning the country into separate Jewish and Arab states, with the latter incorporated into Transjordan.<sup>47</sup> The Arabs saw partition as a renegeing by Britain on its pledge not to support Jewish statehood, but they also had another reason to reject Peel’s proposal. The partition scheme was framed as a “transfer of land and population,” which in practical terms meant uprooting hundreds of thousands of Arabs. In contrast to the tiny proportion of Jews, numbering a little more than a thousand, who fell inside the borders of the proposed Arab state, the proposed Jewish state would have included close to a quarter million Arabs, or roughly half its total population.<sup>48</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Peel Commission was not the last word. Peel’s findings were later overturned by the Woodhead Commission of 1938, which paved the way for a new British white paper. The May 1939 white paper shocked the Zionists by declaring “unequivocally” that Palestine should not become a Jewish state and imposing tight restrictions on Jewish immigration. Instead of partition, Britain would help set up a unitary state to be established in ten years. The Zionists’ denunciation of the new policy was understandable; Palestinian leaders’ rejection of the white paper was more difficult to comprehend. The decision undoubtedly reflected the Arabs’ intense distrust of the British, who had rarely followed through on their pledges. But it was also a question of leadership—or, in the case of the Palestinians, the lack of one. With most of their leaders in jail or in exile, the Palestinians had no competent authority that could adequately assess and represent the needs of the people on the ground. Even so, many if not most of the Arab Higher Committee’s members were inclined to accept the white paper, as were most Arab states. Al-Husseini himself had briefly toyed with the idea before finally rejecting it out of deference to the guerrilla leaders

in the field.<sup>49</sup> The decision nonetheless proved extremely costly in the long run.

Notwithstanding Wadsworth's assurances to al-Husseini in the summer of 1937, American political attitudes toward Palestine increasingly aligned with those of the Zionist movement, including on such controversial ideas as transfer. The possibility of inducing the Arab population to leave Palestine, voluntarily or otherwise, had always been part of Zionist thinking. Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, had written of a desire "to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries whilst denying it any employment in our own country." By 1932 the Jewish Agency was also discussing the "transfer of the Arabs of Palestine." A few Zionist thinkers opposed transfer on moral grounds.<sup>50</sup> However, following the Peel Commission report, transfer became part of the official policy debates in London and Washington. "Let the Arabs be encouraged to move out, as the Jews move in," declared a December 1944 statement by Britain's Labour Party, which also publicly condemned the 1939 white paper.<sup>51</sup> Representatives of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency openly discussed it with U.S. officials.<sup>52</sup> A 1942 postwar planning paper by the State Department concluded, "For the Jewish State to be successful, it might also be necessary for large numbers of the Arabs living there at present to be transplanted elsewhere."<sup>53</sup> One senior State Department official even proposed the use of American military power to help carry it out.<sup>54</sup> Others within the State Department found the idea of forcible removal to be morally abhorrent as well as a violation of international law. For example, the American envoy to the Vatican, Myron Taylor, cited the 1941 Atlantic Charter, which, he argued "refers to the protection of peoples in their home and in their not being forcibly moved about at the will of anyone else. That is quite a hurdle to get over if you are going to eject a million people from Palestine."<sup>55</sup> Even President Franklin Delano Roosevelt toyed with the idea of relocating several hundred thousand Arabs from Palestine, occasionally broaching the topic with others, including Chaim Weizmann and Justice Louis Brandeis.<sup>56</sup> Ironically, it was British officials who attempted to disabuse the president of



the idea on both practical and moral grounds.<sup>57</sup> In 1945, former president Herbert Hoover proposed relocating Palestine's Arab population en masse to Iraq.<sup>58</sup> Hoover, who was closely associated with the Revisionist wing of the Zionist movement, touted his proposal as a "constructive humanitarian solution."

### **A GROWING DISCONNECT**

In the late 1930s, as the British were beginning to reconsider their commitment to the Zionist project, American politicians were moving in the opposite direction. But whereas the British, administering the Mandate, were compelled to address Palestinian concerns on some level, American politicians remained conveniently detached from realities in Palestine. By the early 1940s, the prospect of Jewish statehood began to take on an air of inevitability in Washington. The atrocities perpetrated against European Jews by Nazi Germany led hundreds of thousands to flee the continent, many of them to Palestine, as well as to an outpouring of American sympathy and mounting political pressure on Congress and the White House to support a Jewish state and to reject the 1939 white paper. By this time the United States had eclipsed Britain as the world's leading political and military power; before the end of the Mandate in 1948, it would also replace Britain as the principal power broker in Palestine. President Roosevelt and his successor, Harry S. Truman, despite their personal sympathy for the plight of the Jews and the cause of a Jewish homeland, attempted to walk a delicate line between maintaining American neutrality in the name of protecting U.S. interests in the region and trying to defuse mounting political pressure at home to support Zionist ambitions in Palestine. The fact that both presidents also had personal reservations about the prospect of a Jewish state further complicated their ability to spell out a clear American position on Palestine. By attempting to straddle otherwise incompatible positions or to split the difference between them, Roosevelt and Truman ended up diluting the official U.S. policy, which inevitably drifted toward the path of least resistance as dictated by domestic politics.

By the 1940s the British Empire, battered both physically and economically by World War II, and with the costs of maintaining its imperial domains draining its resources, was in decline. As British international power waned, the focus of Zionist lobbying and advocacy shifted from London to Washington, and the United States became the epicenter of political, financial, and military support for the Zionist project. In the period before 1948, the American Jewish community had funneled nearly \$250 million—roughly equivalent to \$2.75 billion today—along with another \$73 million investment into the growing Jewish community in Palestine. From 1901 to September 1946, contributions from American Jews to the Jewish National Fund, the agency responsible for acquiring land for colonization in Palestine, totaled £7,863,200, or more than half of the agency's net income. At the same time, the Jewish National Fund helped underwrite the annual budget of the American Zionist Emergency Council, the main Zionist lobby in Washington, to the tune of more than \$500,000.<sup>59</sup> The Jewish Agency and other elements of the Zionist movement had also developed an elaborate arms procurement and smuggling network in the United States, bypassing a government-imposed embargo on arming either side of the conflict.<sup>60</sup> In May 1942, Zionist leaders from around the world convened in New York City's prestigious Biltmore Hotel to lay out their political program. The Biltmore Program, as it became known, called for unlimited Jewish immigration to Palestine and the creation of a Jewish army, and demanded that "Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth." As the scale of the Nazi genocide against European Jewry became known, Roosevelt came under increasing pressure from American Zionists and their allies in Congress to publicly denounce the white paper and support a Jewish state. The State Department and the British urged Roosevelt not to take an overly pro-Zionist stance, which they feared could undercut the Allied war effort and drive the Arabs into the arms of the Germans and the other Axis powers, which were aggressively courting the Arabs with promises of independence and exploiting the issue of American support for Zionism.

Like others in Washington, Roosevelt viewed Britain's white paper of 1939 as renegeing on the Balfour Declaration, which in Roosevelt's

estimation had always been intended “to convert Palestine into a Jewish Home which might very possibly become preponderantly Jewish within a comparatively short time.”<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, Roosevelt had also come to believe that the Mandate was “impossible due to the two strongly competing nationalistic movements there present” and that a Jewish state “could only be established in Palestine through force.”<sup>62</sup> As a result, Roosevelt personally favored the idea of a “trusteeship,” an idea promoted by many in the State Department, in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Palestine lived together on an equitable basis.<sup>63</sup> Much as the British had done throughout the Mandate, however, the American administration made conflicting promises to the Zionists and the Arabs.

In May 1943, Roosevelt formalized the policy of American neutrality by giving formal assurances to King Abdul-Aziz of Saudi Arabia and other Arab leaders that “no decision altering the basic situation of Palestine should be reached without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews.”<sup>64</sup> In early 1944, an election year, the administration succeeded in shelving a congressional resolution endorsing Jewish statehood as a “security-military” threat.<sup>65</sup> In a message to House Speaker Sam Rayburn, Roosevelt expressed his satisfaction at the tabling of the resolution, which he said “merely illustrates what happens if delicate international situations get into party politics.”<sup>66</sup> Ironically, that same day Roosevelt met with Rabbi Stephen Wise and Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of the American Zionist Emergency Council to reassure them, and authorized them to say publicly, that his administration had never officially endorsed the 1939 white paper.<sup>67</sup> Later that year, in the midst of his own reelection campaign, Roosevelt conveyed to Zionist leaders his full support for the Palestine plank of the Democratic Party platform, which favored “the opening of Palestine to unrestricted Jewish immigration and colonization. . . . Such a policy is to result in the establishment there of a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth.” Roosevelt promised that “if reelected I shall help to bring about its realization.”<sup>68</sup> After his reelection, Roosevelt renewed the pledge of “full consultation” with the Arabs during a meeting with Abdul-Aziz aboard the king’s private yacht and again in writing just before his death in April 1945.<sup>69</sup>

The equivocation of American policy toward Palestine intensified under the Truman administration. Like Roosevelt, Truman was torn between upholding America's commitment to consult fully with both sides on matters related to Palestine and his own personal preferences, and mounting political pressure from Zionist groups and key White House advisers to back Jewish statehood and partition. Officials at the State Department continued to argue that supporting Zionist ambitions in Palestine would undermine U.S. interests in the Middle East and be seen as a breach of America's moral commitment to self-determination.<sup>70</sup> As World War II came to a close, however, the plight of a quarter million Jewish refugees displaced by the Holocaust also weighed heavily on Truman's thinking. A few months after renewing Roosevelt's pledge to the Arab states in May 1945, in defiance of the State Department Truman demanded that Britain allow immediate entry of 100,000 refugees into Palestine, which angered the Arabs.<sup>71</sup> Although Truman was genuinely distressed by the plight of Jewish refugees in Europe, he also hoped to deflect some of the pressure he faced to support Jewish statehood.<sup>72</sup> As both a U.S. senator and vice president, Truman had been vocal in his support of Zionism. Although he became more circumspect after succeeding Roosevelt in the White House, domestic political considerations remained ever-present in Truman's mind. As Truman explained to a group of American diplomats posted in the Middle East in November 1945, "I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism; I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."<sup>73</sup>

Hoping to forestall, or at least delay, Truman's instinctive urge to adopt pro-Zionist positions, the British proposed a joint commission, the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, to look into the issue of the Jewish refugees, immigration, and the overall fate of Palestine, which released its findings in April 1946. It recommended that Palestine "be neither a Jewish state nor an Arab state" and that the country instead be placed under a United Nations trusteeship that "accords to the inhabitants, as a whole, the fullest measure of self-government." Attempts to partition the country, the commission warned, "would result in civil strife such as might threaten the peace of the world."<sup>74</sup> A follow-up com-

mission, the 1946 Morrison-Grady Committee, recommended the creation of an Arab-Jewish federation under temporary British tutelage. Truman viewed the idea of a federated state as the single best option for resolving the Palestine question, but this idea was rejected by the Zionists and the Arabs alike.<sup>75</sup> Ironically, despite the pivotal role he played in Israel's creation, Truman's own thinking on the subject of Jewish statehood was itself rather conflicted.<sup>76</sup> According to the historian John Judis, Truman personally was "as put off by the idea of a Jewish state as he was of a Protestant or Catholic state."<sup>77</sup>

Congress's passage of a joint resolution endorsing Jewish statehood and unlimited Jewish immigration in late 1945, along with Truman's concerns over his party's fortunes in upcoming midterm elections, made it increasingly difficult for Truman to straddle the two positions. In a statement commemorating Yom Kippur in October 1946, a few weeks before the election, Truman formally rejected the Morrison-Grady Committee's proposal and reiterated his support for the immediate entry of 100,000 displaced Jews into Palestine. The statement also alluded to a "viable Jewish state" along the lines of the Jewish Agency's partition proposal, which he described as something to which "our Government could give its support." After receiving an advance copy of the statement, Prime Minister Clement Attlee of Britain sent an angry message to Truman expressing frustration at his "refusing even a few hours' grace to the Prime Minister of the country which has the actual responsibility for the government of Palestine in order that he may acquaint you with the actual situation and the probable results of your action. These may well include the frustration of the patient efforts to achieve a settlement and the loss of still more lives in Palestine"—where the British had become targets of Zionist terror.<sup>78</sup>

Truman's carefully crafted statement had been intended to appease the Zionists without explicitly endorsing partition.<sup>79</sup> Instead, it was widely seen as marking a decisive shift in America's posture toward Palestine, as one scholar put it, "injecting what heretofore had been a mere Presidential preference with the stuff of decision-making power."<sup>80</sup> Even so, Truman continued to advocate for federation until the end of his presidency while blaming the defeat of the Morrison-Grady proposal

on “British bullheadedness and the fanaticism of our New York Jews.” “When it came to Palestine,” writes Judis, “the man known for the motto ‘The buck stops here’ had had trouble making up his mind, and even when he did, he denied responsibility for his decisions.”<sup>81</sup>

That many of the lost lives alluded to in Attlee’s message to Truman were British was no doubt at the center of Britain’s frustration with the Americans. Since 1939, the Zionist underground, led by Menachem Begin’s Irgun and Yitzhak Shamir’s Stern Gang, had stepped up their campaign of violence against British authorities as well as Arab civilians in Palestine. By 1945, the Haganah had joined in the insurgency as well. In November 1944, in Cairo, the Stern Gang assassinated Walter Guinness, also known as Lord Moyne, the British secretary of state for the colonies and the highest-ranking British official in the Middle East. Following the assassination, the director of the State Department’s Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs, Wallace Murray, lamented that such “ill-considered statements in this country for political purposes have indirectly contributed to the present insecurity by giving encouragement, albeit unwittingly, to the more extreme Zionist elements such as the assassins of Lord Moyne represent.”<sup>82</sup> Two years later, the Irgun orchestrated the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which housed British government headquarters, killing ninety-one Britons, Arabs, and Jews.<sup>83</sup> The Irgun and its affiliates worked openly in the United States to raise funds and lobby members of Congress. The Zionist terror campaign, which peaked from 1944 to 1947, did little to dampen support for the Zionist cause in Washington. The British were especially riled by what they viewed as American tolerance for Zionist terrorism. “It is no secret that the terrorists in Palestine have received the bulk of their financial and moral support from the United States,” Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin told senior American officials in London in September 1947. According to Bevin, “Organizations based in the United States have carried on extensive publicity campaigns with the purpose of encouraging the Palestinian terrorists and the smugglers of illegal immigrants and of discrediting the attempts of the British Government to maintain law and order. The American Government has to an extent

subsidized these activities by exempting from income tax donations to organizations so engaged.”<sup>84</sup>

The Zionist insurgency was one manifestation of the new balance of power in Palestine. By 1946 the military arm of the Jewish Agency had a force of 62,000 well-equipped and well-trained fighters. “There is no doubt that the Jewish force is superior in organization, training, planning and equipment,” Haganah commanders told the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in 1946, “and that we ourselves will be able to handle any attack or rebellion from the Arab side without calling for any assistance from the British or Americans. If you accept the Zionist solution [partition and a Jewish state in the greater part of Palestine] but are unable or unwilling to enforce it, please do not interfere, and we ourselves will secure its implementation.”<sup>85</sup>

A very different picture was emerging on the Arab side. The Palestinian leadership vacuum was partially filled by the Arab states. The Saudis had taken the lead in securing assurances from the Americans. The newly established Arab League, whose formation was prompted in large part by the crisis in Palestine, helped set up a new Arab Higher Committee to represent Palestine’s Arabs in the league’s proceedings and other international forums. As an externally created body, however, and with most of its members in exile, the Arab Higher Committee lacked the organizational or military capacity to adequately deal with the end of the Mandate and the impending confrontation with the Zionists.<sup>86</sup> In May 1946, Arab League member states resolved to support the Palestinians “with arms and manpower” and threatened to impose sanctions against Western commercial and oil interests in the Middle East. Although very little came of these pledges, they laid the foundation for Arab military intervention two years later and ensured Arab control over the Palestinian cause.<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile, the exiled grand mufti, Amin al-Husseini, had been thoroughly discredited by his decision to join forces with Nazi Germany and the Axis powers. For many radical nationalists in the Arab world at the time, the Germans were seen, as one American diplomat put it, as the “less objectionable of two imperialisms.”<sup>88</sup> Al-Husseini had begun making overtures to Germany in 1940, once it became clear that there was no possibility of restoring ties

with the British, although he denied having any knowledge of the Nazis' genocidal plans for the Jews.<sup>89</sup> Al-Husseini continued to hold out the possibility of restoring ties with the British after his exile but by 1940 had concluded that there was no going back.<sup>90</sup> Despite its opportunistic nature, al-Husseini's alliance with the Nazis made him an international pariah in the eyes of British and American officials and greatly harmed his cause.

In the wake of World War II, the United States had eclipsed Britain as the leading political and military power in the world, and by the 1940s it had replaced Britain as the principal power broker in Palestine. With Britain's announcement in early 1947 that it planned to terminate the Mandate and turn the matter over to the United Nations, the fate of Palestine was now largely in American hands. Truman's interventions at key moments leading up to the historic United Nations vote of November 1947 proved to be decisive in ensuring partition. While the State Department continued to maintain that partition was "certain to undermine our relations" with the Arab and Muslim world and to insist that any plan adopted by the UN "be able to command the maximum cooperation of all elements in Palestine," the administration moved inexorably toward endorsing Jewish statehood and away from the American commitment to mutual consultation.<sup>91</sup> In August the Truman administration declared that the United States attached "great weight" to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine's preliminary finding in favor of partition, even as it continued to reassure the Arabs that it was keeping an open mind.<sup>92</sup> The tide officially turned in October, when Truman instructed his UN envoy, Herschel Johnson, to announce that the United States supported the UN Special Committee's partition plan. Under the plan, the Jews, who made up one-third of Palestine's population and owned 6 percent of the land, were allotted 56 percent of the country's territory; the Arab state, with twice the population, was allotted 44 percent of the land. Complicating matters further, roughly half of the population of the proposed Jewish state would be Arab.<sup>93</sup> Jerusalem and its surroundings would be placed under a separate international regime. The decision to divide Palestine represented a clear victory for the Zionists and an unmitigated



defeat for the Arabs. As the historian Walid Khalidi writes, “For the Zionists, partition was three-quarters of a loaf; for the Palestinians, partition was half a baby.”<sup>94</sup>

In the weeks leading up to the General Assembly vote, Truman took a number of steps to tip the scales in the Zionists’ favor. Hoping to blunt Arab and Palestinian opposition, the State Department had proposed amending the plan to make partition “as equitable and just as possible.”<sup>95</sup> However, following an “extensive campaign in Congress and the President against the scheme” by the Jewish Agency and its lobbying arm in Washington, the American Zionist Emergency Council, Truman pressed the State Department to withdraw the proposal.<sup>96</sup> With only days before the November 29 vote and support for partition just shy of the required two-thirds majority, Truman reversed an earlier pledge not to “use improper pressures of any kind” to sway UN delegations.<sup>97</sup> As the State Department and the CIA continued to warn of imminent war, the White House began actively lobbying UN members to back partition.<sup>98</sup> “During this time, we marshalled our forces,” recalled Rabbi Hillel Silver of the American Zionist Emergency Council. “Jewish and non-Jewish opinion leaders and masses alike converged on the Government and induced the President to assert the authority of his Administration to overcome the negative attitude of the State Department which persisted to the end, and persists today. The result was that our Government made its intense desire for the adoption of the partition plan known to the wavering governments.” Eddie Jacobson, a lifelong friend of Truman’s who served as a go-between with Zionist leaders, later wrote in his diary of how the president was “fighting [the] entire Cabinet and State Department to put over Partition.”<sup>99</sup> The American envoy to the UN at the time, Herschel Johnson, later recalled how David Niles, a close aide of Truman’s, had pressured them “to get busy and get all the votes that we possibly could; that there would be hell if the voting went the wrong way.”<sup>100</sup>

According to the scholar Michael E. Jansen, “[The] vote on partition in the Assembly is famous for the pressure, bribery, cajoling and use of pull which were employed . . . by the Jewish Agency and high-ranking pro-Zionist and Zionist Americans, including officials, to secure the

necessary two-thirds vote.”<sup>101</sup> As the consequences of his policy reversals became clear, Truman still tried to have it both ways, blaming his repeated wavering on the “unwarranted interference of the Zionists,” even as he continued to maintain that he was immune to Zionist influence.<sup>102</sup> Truman’s equivocation on Palestine was only just beginning.