



## THE PAST AS PRELUDE: ZIONISM AND THE BETRAYAL OF AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES, 1917–48

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*Drawing on State Department records and other contemporary sources, this article shows how biblical romanticism took precedence over traditional democratic values in shaping the U.S. Middle East policy as far back as 1917, when it supported Zionism's aims in Palestine against the wishes of 92 percent of the population. The article also makes clear that a dynamic remarkably similar to later patterns was already in place as of the 1920s: a presidency swayed by religious belief and electoral considerations, a Congress powerfully influenced by the Zionist lobby, a State Department attempting to steer a middle course and resist Zionist pressures, and an Arab American community unable to gain an effective hearing. Thus, the anti-Palestinian rhetoric of today, with its "doublespeak" overtones, has deep roots in the past.*

### AMERICAN PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS: THE ROOTS OF DOUBLE STANDARDS

In the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, Arab Palestine meant little to most Americans. When they thought of Palestine they thought of the Holy Land. A well-rooted religious romanticism defined Palestine as the biblical land of milk and honey, the Old Testament land of the Jews and the New Testament land of Jesus. This conception, although based on fundamentalist belief, transformed an ancient mythical place into something more real and more important in the Western mind than the contemporary Palestine inhabited by hundreds of thousands of Arabs. Indeed, Arab and Muslim Palestine was seen as a travesty. With the advent of Muslim control in the seventh century, Christian dominance over this sacred place was lost, and the Muslims allegedly proceeded to turn the land of milk and honey into a "land of dust."

By the end of the nineteenth century, the aggressive imperialist spirit in the West made Palestine a candidate for reconquest. If Palestine could be taken, it could be made part of the modern, progressive West and once more

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a land of plenty. This goal seemed realizable with the British victory over the Ottoman Empire in World War I. As Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Champ Clark put it on 24 December 1917, "so far as the war operations are concerned, the one thing that pleases most people is the capture of Jerusalem, 'the Holy City.' That rejoices the hearts of Jews and Christians. . . . After these hundreds of years the dream of Peter the Hermit, Richard Coeur de Lion and their fellow crusaders is an accomplished fact."<sup>1</sup> With the Balfour Declaration, the Christian British "crusaders" allied themselves with the Jewish Zionist movement, and the redemption of Palestine proceeded as a joint "Judeo-Christian" venture. A review of U.S. newspaper reporting on Palestine from 1917 to 1948 shows that Americans understood the colonial dynamic that this alliance set in motion in terms of the mission described above.<sup>2</sup>

American Zionists took advantage of this outlook to organize support for their cause. In so doing they made a further connection between Zionism and the American heritage. Louis Brandeis, the most effective of the early American Zionist leaders, linked the Puritan concept of America as a "second promised land" with the Zionist aim of reclaiming Palestine, the first promised land. "Zionism is the Pilgrim inspiration and impulse over again," he said.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, he identified Zionism with a redemptive social reform consciousness that was prevalent in the United States at that time, claiming that Zionism represented "in Jewish life what Progressivism does in general American life."<sup>4</sup>

The result of all this was the creation of an enduring set of double standards that has shaped American popular perception and political action on Palestine. The ideals Americans hold dear, such as self-determination, democracy, and political and civil rights, were found applicable only to those who could be identified positively with the Holy Land religious mythology and could best be assigned to those assumed to share American values. The Zionists seemed to fit this picture while the Palestinian Arabs did not. As we shall see, these considerations overrode other factors, such as who might or might not constitute the majority population in Palestine. Thus, long before the Holocaust, these other religiously and culturally defined perceptions led Americans into the Zionist camp.

### WOODROW WILSON'S "SELF-DETERMINATION" AND PALESTINE

On 8 January 1918, Woodrow Wilson appeared before a joint session of Congress to define the war aims of the United States as its troops prepared to enter World War I. These were his famous Fourteen Points, many of which sought to rationalize the carnage as a way of achieving a world of democratic institutions and freedom. Central to these goals was the promise of self-determination for peoples previously ruled by enemy empires. For instance, point 12 read, "nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely un-

molested opportunity of autonomous development.”<sup>5</sup> The president followed this up a month later, again in an address to Congress, with the assertion that “every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned, and not as part of any mere adjustment or compromise of claims amongst rival states.”<sup>6</sup>

These sentiments no doubt reflected certain general principles—such as the need to “make the world safe for democracy”—that Wilson believed in. As it turned out, however, their benefits were to be reserved for Europeans in places like Belgium and Poland. When it came to the Middle East the notion of self-determination ran counter to British and French imperial ambitions. Wilson’s opposition to these interests of his allies was undermined by the United States’s own status as an imperialist power: there is no record of Wilson ever having considered granting self-determination to the Philippines. It must also have been undermined by the fact that Wilson himself was by no means devoid of racism and that he had segregated a number of federal government agencies. To Wilson, non-European peoples were inherently inferior and in need of guidance from the more civilized white population.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, the president negotiated a compromise with the British and French that resulted in the mandates regime, which fit Wilson’s racial paternalism and the expansionism of his allies. At first glance, it appeared that the mandate system was the embodiment of Wilsonian idealism. Regarding the Middle East, Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant defined the mandate regime as follows: “to those colonies and territories which . . . are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization.” It also notes that “certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone. The wishes of these communities must be a principal consideration in the selection of the Mandatory.” In other words, the job of Western nations such as Britain and France as mandatory authorities in the lands of the former Turkish empire was to tutor the natives in the skills of self-government. No one, at least among the Western leadership, bothered to note that the tutors were themselves recently responsible for the bloodiest and most self-destructive war in history.

In truth, the mandates actually masked the spread of the very sort of empire that Wilson was supposed to oppose. This can be seen in the fate of the King-Crane Commission of 1919. Wilson allowed the commission to come into existence because of the insistence of Howard Bliss, an American missionary and president of the Syrian Protestant College (later American University) in Beirut. Bliss was at the time “the most influential American in the Middle East”<sup>8</sup> and represented the Protestant missionary establishment that

Wilson believed in and supported.<sup>9</sup> Bliss wanted at least the leading classes of Greater Syria to be able to express their preferences for a supervising mandatory, and the commission was to ascertain this preference.<sup>10</sup> He had a naive hope that the United States would get the job. Wilson, cornered by his championship of self-determination, could hardly refuse the influential Bliss. Self-determination and free choice of a mandatory, however, threatened the expansion of the British and French empires into conquered Ottoman territory as well as Zionist ambitions in Palestine. While the commission went through the motions, and its report made clear Arab desires for “autonomous development” and opposition to Zionism, nothing was to come of its findings.

Probably Wilson himself did not take the commission’s mission very seriously, particularly when it came to Palestine. In January 1919, David Hunter Miller, the legal adviser to the American mission at the peace talks at Versailles, warned Wilson that “the rule of self-determination would prevent the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.”<sup>11</sup> Wilson paid little attention. Indeed, Palestine, as the Holy Land, was to be an exception to all rules. For President Wilson, a religious Presbyterian who read the Bible every day, the legacy of the Old Testament was more important than, as Lord Balfour put it, “the desires and prejudices of 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.”<sup>12</sup> “To think,” Wilson once mused, “that I, a son of the manse, should be able to help restore the Holy Land to its people.”<sup>13</sup> If there was to be self-determination in Palestine, it was not to be up to the Arab majority, for they were of no consequence in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Thus, on 2 March 1919, a few months after Hunter had pointed out that the realization of Zionism violated the president’s own stated principles, Wilson told the Zionist leader Rabbi Stephen Wise, “Don’t worry Dr. Wise, Palestine is yours.”<sup>14</sup>

### **DOUBLE STANDARDS IN PRACTICE: CONGRESS**

Almost from its inception, the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) sought to be an influential political lobby. This was apparent in its efforts, through Brandeis, to encourage Wilson’s support for the Balfour Declaration. But the most consistent and energetic government support would come from Congress.

By 1922, the Zionists were politically powerful enough to approach Congress. In March and April of that year, a Zionist delegation from Massachusetts met with Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and another from New York met with Representative Hamilton Fish. Both sought the introduction of a joint resolution in support of the Balfour Declaration. They were quickly accommodated. Prior to the vote, hearings were held on the bill by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, led by Fish. Typical of the attitudes expressed was that of Representative W. Bourke Cockran of New York, who likened Jewish immigration into Palestine to the white man’s arrival in the New

World.<sup>15</sup> (The Zionists at this time were comparing Palestinian resistance to that of American Indians.<sup>16</sup>) Later, Fish would say of the Zionists, “they will fashion their government after the ideals of ours and believe in our flag . . . because it represents freedom, liberty, and justice and that is what we want to eventually see in Palestine.”<sup>17</sup>

Freedom, liberty, and justice for whom? Well, not the Arabs who had despoiled the Holy Land. In a study entitled “American Images of the Arabs,” Cindy Lydon tells us that “a survey of Congressional Opinion reveals that virtually no favorable characterizations of Arabs found their way into debates on Middle Eastern issues during the lengthy period from 1919–31.” Most of these debates had to do with Palestine, and in them “the Arab was depicted as backward, poor, and ignorant” while Zionist colonization held out the promise of turning “a ravaged and spoiled land” into a modern, Westernized version of “the land of milk and honey.” Furthermore, Lydon shows that Congress considered support of the Zionist movement as “in line with the principles of self-determination.”<sup>18</sup>

Getting Congress and Americans generally to ignore the democratic rights of an alleged “backward, poor, and ignorant” majority and to assign those rights to a minuscule Western minority who shared their Judeo-Christian heritage was an easy success for the American Zionists. Ignoring native rights had been a sine qua non of the Western imperialist expansion that had been going on since the 1870s, and it fed the assumption that the natives did not know what was good for them. As the *Washington Post* put it in February 1921, “It was supposed that they [the Arabs] would welcome the substitution of the enlightened rule of civilized countries like France and Britain . . . for the tyrannous and inefficient rule of the sultan. But the expected enthusiasm failed to materialize, and the provinces of the former Turkish empire . . . showed that they preferred self-government with all its faults to good government under a foreign power.”<sup>19</sup> To all of this can be added the fear and dislike of Islam that had been prevalent in the Christian West at least since the Crusades. Indeed, the British army that captured Palestine was consistently depicted in the American press as latter day crusaders.<sup>20</sup>

This environment greatly aided the Zionist aim to have the U.S. government “recognize the Jewish nation as one of those oppressed smaller nationalities which must have an opportunity to assert themselves.”<sup>21</sup> The joint congressional resolution of 1922 in support of the Balfour Declaration was a step in that direction. In taking it, the U.S. Congress became a champion of a double standard that reserved the right of self-determination for the minority Jews while denying it to the majority Palestinian Arabs.

It was not that there were no voices on the other side. During the 1922 congressional hearings, Arab Americans testified. They explained that the

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“Arab people of Palestine ask, first, that a national government shall be created that will be responsible to a parliament elected by those inhabitants of Palestine who live there.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, while Arab Americans were advocating a democratic Palestine, the Zionists had to suppress democracy in Palestine as long as they were a minority. As Chaim Weizmann put it to Arthur Balfour in a May 1918 letter, “the democratic principle, which reckons with the relative numerical strength and brutal numbers, operates against us, for there are five Arabs to one Jew.” Under such circumstances, democracy would be manipulated by “the treacherous Arab” to prevent the Zionist appropriation of Palestine.<sup>23</sup> No one in the U.S. Congress saw any problem with this point of view. When in 1917 a Zionist spokesman had declared that giving Palestine to the Jews was “part of the plan to make the world safe for democracy,” there was no sense of contradiction.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Congress was solidly pro-Zionist from 1922 onward. The fact that early on the ZOA had encouraged American Jewry to petition, campaign, and pressure their local politicians to support the cause made Palestine and Zionism a domestic political issue long before the Holocaust. As a result, during the Palestinian Arab uprising of 1929 and the rebellion of 1936–39, congressional statements unanimously backed the Zionists and castigated the Palestinians as savages. For example, on 1 September 1929, while the Palestinians were in open rebellion against Zionist colonization, Senator Robert F. Wagner expressed the American consensus that the “accumulated decay of 2,000 years had been supplanted by Western Civilization” thanks to “the personal sacrifice of thousands of the best of the Jewish race.” Then he asked, “is all this to be swept away . . . by the cowardly dagger of the assassin?”<sup>25</sup>

It is a testimony to how solidly Zionist the Congress had become that during World War II, it repeatedly tried to pass pro-Zionist resolutions that the State and War Departments warned would undermine British and American military positions in the Middle East and North Africa. For instance, in March 1944, General George Marshall, the army chief of staff, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that a pro-Zionist resolution then under consideration calling for open Jewish immigration into Palestine would cause unrest in the Arab world and give a boost to Nazi propaganda efforts in the region.<sup>26</sup> This delayed the resolution but did not stop its passage. Typical of the responses to Marshall was that coming from Senator Robert Taft. After confessing to the *New York Times* that “I am no expert in military affairs and I do not know enough about military conditions in North Africa to affirm or deny the alleged position of the Secretary of War and General Marshall,” Taft proceeded to do just that—to deny the “alleged position” and to declare, “I strongly suspect that the real objection [to the resolution] is political and not military.”<sup>27</sup> What political interest could the chief of staff have had in stopping the resolution other than the allied military position in the Arab world? Taft and his fellow senators and representatives, on the other hand, seemed to have so much political interest in supporting the Zionists that doing so

had become at least as important as the war effort in the Middle East. According to assessments by the Division of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the behavior of the U.S. Congress when it came to pro-Zionist resolutions “led to a material weakening in the American psychological position in the Near East.”<sup>28</sup>

### TRYING TO STAY NEUTRAL: THE STATE DEPARTMENT

From the issuing of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 until 1948, the State Department’s NEA argued for official U.S. neutrality on the issue of Zionist aspirations in Palestine. The tone was set by Allen Dulles, head of NEA in the early 1920s, in several memos written in May 1922. According to Dulles, America had traditional interests in the region that should define its policies. Zionism, however, was not a traditional U.S. interest. The State Department saw it as a movement of foreign origin, the aims of which had to do with a European sphere of influence in the Middle East. To support it incurred the risk of “entanglement” in European political affairs. This ran counter to U.S. foreign policy toward Europe and its imperial offshoots almost from the nation’s beginning, and the years following World War I were particularly isolationist. Thus Dulles observed that the “Department has no desire to interfere in matters which primarily concern the relationship between the mandatory power and the natives of Palestine.”<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere he explained that he felt “strongly that the department should avoid any action that would indicate official support for any one of the various theses regarding Palestine, either Zionist, [Jewish] anti-Zionist, or the Arabs.”<sup>30</sup>

This position did not mean the State Department or NEA was anti-imperialist or objected either to British control of Palestine or Jewish immigration into the country—as long as these activities did not harm U.S. interests as the department understood them. Indeed, the State Department and the interwar presidents consistently resisted pressure from the Zionists and their congressional allies to criticize the British in Palestine when they adopted policies seemingly unfavorable to the Jews. They also did not respond to demands of Arab Americans and others to speak out against British policies that denied democratic rights to the Palestinian Arabs. For instance, during the 1929 uprising American Zionists and Arab Americans sought to sway U.S. policy concerning the British in Palestine, albeit in different directions. President Herbert Hoover responded by telling visiting Zionist leaders that he had faith in British policy in Palestine,<sup>31</sup> and Secretary of State Henry Stimson did likewise. As for the Arab American demands, they were ignored.

State Department officers did not object to the notion that a mandate regime to tutor the natives in self-government was right and necessary. Paul Knabenshue, the U.S. Consul General in Jerusalem from 1928 to 1932, criticized British policy in Palestine not because it was imperialistic, but because it failed to create the sort of colonial regime that operated paternally for the benefit of both Jews and Arabs. He proposed a constitutional setup with a

parliament elected according to proportional representation. His scheme, however, reserved veto power over legislation for the British authority.<sup>32</sup> Knabenshue's superiors in the State Department suppressed his suggestions not because they objected to British imperial authority in Palestine, but because they did not want to meddle with that control in any way.<sup>33</sup>

Wallace Murray, longtime chief of the NEA, consistently defended the British position in Palestine and did everything he could to fend off the political efforts of American Zionists who wanted increased U.S. pressure on the British regarding immigration and partition schemes. In July 1936, he successfully urged that Britain not be pressured on its restrictive immigration policies in Palestine,<sup>34</sup> and as of 1939 he adamantly resisted Zionist and congressional pressure against the British White Paper of that year because of the State Department's fear that pro-Zionist American interference in British Palestine might push the Arabs to support the fascists.<sup>35</sup>

Murray's concern, and that of NEA, was for U.S. interests in the Middle East and, eventually, the overriding need to prosecute a war in that region effectively. He had no objection to a Jewish presence in Palestine as long as it did not provoke Arab rebellion or Arab anti-Americanism. To this end, he consistently backed the position of Judah Magnes, a liberal American Jewish scholar who became the first president of Hebrew University and whose more moderate attitude toward power sharing with the Arabs seemed to Murray to make Jewish goals more compatible with American interests.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, it is to be noted that when Murray prescreened the public speeches of executive branch personnel that touched on the foreign policy, he never challenged statements that endorsed colonialism, imperialism, the mandate regime, or the notion that the "civilized" West was superior to the non-Western world. The only statements he challenged were those implying some sort of "entangling" commitment on the part of the United States.<sup>37</sup>

Murray was a career diplomat, not an elected or appointed official. His ability to resist the pressure of lobby groups such as the Zionists and even their congressional supporters was therefore greater than that of the president and secretary of state. He, however, was sensitive to the political position of his bosses. Thus, in July 1936, at Murray's suggestion, Secretary of State Cordell Hull began an ongoing series of diplomatic efforts to keep the British Foreign Office informed of growing American Jewish concern over Palestine.<sup>38</sup> Over time, these representations took on official form and were presented as the concerns of the American public at large. Arab American concerns, which were also being brought to the attention of the U.S. government in a consistent and organized fashion, were not passed on to the British.<sup>39</sup>

For the most part, the State Department was not anti-imperialist or anti-colonialist when it came to the Middle East nor was it anti-Semitic as some scholars have suggested.<sup>40</sup> It was simply pro-American interests, which it understood largely in traditional terms. It resisted Zionist pressure to make a Jewish Palestine one of those interests, because this would have com-

pletely alienated the region's majority population, whose trade and friendship seemed important to the diplomats. It would also have undermined the controlling position of the British, perceived as a friend and later an ally. Even as it resisted the Zionists, however, the State Department conceded that "in large measure" American interests in Palestine itself were increasingly "Jewish."<sup>41</sup> As American consul in Jerusalem George Wadsworth acknowledged in a 1936 letter to the American Jewish philanthropist Nathan Straus, "Of the 400,000 who now form the Yishuv, some 10,000 are American citizens. Of the \$300 million . . . invested in Palestine . . . some \$33 million is in the form of concrete American capital investment. . . . These new and important American interests add much to . . . the work of the Jerusalem Consulate General."<sup>42</sup> The situation created the sort of tension in the department that comes with conflicting claims and representations of interest. By 1948 Zionist claims would overcome all State Department resistance. The claim and representation that completely lost out in the process was that of the Arab Americans.

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### DEMOCRACY AS A LOST CAUSE: THE ARAB AMERICANS

By the early 1920s a segment of the Arab American community, largely immigrants from Greater Syria, had organized and had begun attempts to express the Arab point of view to U.S. audiences, official and otherwise. They had two consistent messages: first, there should be self-determination and democratic government in Palestine; and second, the United States should not, through material aid or political pressure, favor the Zionists against the Palestinian Arabs.

The Arab American argument against Zionism first appeared in a book entitled *The Case Against Zionism* published in 1921 by the Palestine National League in New York. This was the principal Arab American organization of the day that took up the cause of Palestine. It was led at this time by Fuad Shatara, a U.S. citizen and medical doctor who had immigrated from Palestine. *The Case Against Zionism* called for free elections and parliamentary democracy in Palestine.<sup>43</sup>

It was Shatara who carried this message to Congress during the 1922 hearings on the joint resolution supporting the Balfour Declaration. He called for democracy in Palestine and pleaded with the representatives to hold off on their resolution until they could determine the will of the people of the area.<sup>44</sup> He and the Palestine National League were ignored. Self-determination in Palestine had been made the prerogative of the "progressive" Zionists.

Upon the outbreak of the 1929 Arab uprising in Palestine, the Palestine National League, now in alliance with two other Arab American groups, the

New Syria Party and the Young Men's Muslim Association, sought to contextualize the violence for the American public and officialdom. The Zionists and the American media were reporting the story in such a way that the Arabs appeared as religious fanatics and savages.<sup>45</sup> The Arab Americans issued statements, organized protest meetings, and sent delegations to Washington in an effort to counter this widespread impression.<sup>46</sup> For instance, in September 1929, Arab American representatives led by the well-known Lebanese American writer Ameen Rihani met with Secretary of State Stimson. The official statement of the Arab Americans explained the situation this way:

For ten years the Arabs of Palestine have in vain protested and petitioned both the British government and the League of Nations. . . . Their demands for a national representative government . . . have been met with a deaf ear. . . . [A]ll this time a small Jewish minority from Central and Eastern Europe, supported by funds from the United States and by the fiat of British power, have been making encroachments upon the rights of the overwhelming Arab majority. Here is the fundamental cause of the present uprising.<sup>47</sup>

The demand for majority rule did not change in the 1930s. In October 1936 a large Arab American organization called the Syrian and Lebanese American Federation of the Eastern States held a convention at Worcester, Massachusetts. At its conclusion, the organization's president, Faris Malouf, sent a petition to the secretary of state and members of Congress calling for support of Palestinian rights, which Malouf defined as the realization of "the principle of self-determination" and "government with the consent of the governed." He compared the Palestinian struggle to "the early struggles of the original 13 colonies in 1776 for independence from foreign domination."<sup>48</sup>

The next year, 1937, Rihani relayed the same message while on a national speaking tour. At the same time, Peter George, the legal adviser to the Arab National League (a successor of the Palestine National League), sent the State Department a lengthy brief arguing that neutrality in the Palestinian-Zionist conflict was in the best interests of the United States.<sup>49</sup>

George, Malouf, and other Arab American leaders would keep in regular touch with the State Department throughout World War II. In April 1941, they met in New York City with Harold Hoskins, an Arabic-speaking representative of the State Department. According to Hoskins's report, they told him that they were "not asking that the United States do anything for the Arabs." Rather, what they wanted was that the United States "not take any position officially in support of the Zionist movement."<sup>50</sup>

As noted above, the NEA favored neutrality toward Zionism. Murray actually took Hoskins's report on the New York City meeting and distributed it to

his superiors in the State Department, along with his own plea for neutrality.<sup>51</sup> The culture of the State Department, however, was such that its officers almost never engaged in public debate. While the NEA staff wrote thousands of memos to each other and the secretary of state, they gave their opinions to other branches of government, like the Congress, only when asked or when intervening in some potential or real crisis situation. Thus, having Murray agreeing with George and Malouf did not mean much in terms of countering the Zionist message.

This became obvious in February 1944. That month, hearings were held on a House of Representatives resolution demanding U.S. intervention against British restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine. Both Malouf and Professor Philip Hitti of Princeton University appeared as witnesses demanding U.S. neutrality and democracy in Palestine, as well as a liberalization of the United States's own immigration laws to allow in more Jews and other persecuted people.<sup>52</sup> The Arab Americans were, once again, ignored. Nothing was heard from the State Department on these specific points, though as stated, General Marshall got the resolutions delayed by invoking military necessity.

Later, in November 1944, the Arab National League held a convention attended by 150 delegates representing chapters from across the country. The convention's public declaration stated that "any approval of a Jewish state . . . in Palestine against the will of its native Arab inhabitants . . . is irreconcilable with the principles of democracy,"<sup>53</sup> but to no avail. The Arab American organizations had long been outorganized and outspent by the Zionists and their allies. With Harry Truman's ascendancy to the presidency in 1945, the Zionists were on the verge of triumph.

In the years leading up to the founding of the State of Israel, the Arab Americans, despite overwhelming odds, strove to keep alive the debate over Palestine, continuing to issue public statements and to petition the State Department, the president, and Congress. They even participated in a number of third-party-sponsored debates with American Zionist leaders. Their message was consistent: self-determination, majority rule, and representative government in Palestine—in other words, democracy. In an open letter to President Truman (who had refused to receive an Arab American delegation), Malouf and Khalil Totah, as leaders of an organization now called the Institute for Arab American Affairs, observed that "Zionists are anxious to form a majority in Palestine. . . . It is then and only then that the Zionists will concede to let the principles of free election and majority rule operate in that country. The position of the Arabs, in accordance with the best tradition of American democracy, is that the rules of free election and legislation be given the right of way now, before it is too late."<sup>54</sup>

## ZIONIST “DEMOCRACY”

In fact, the Palestinian demand for self-determination and the “principles of free election and legislation” represented a mortal danger to the Zionists as long as they were so outnumbered. As noted, in 1918, Weizmann had characterized “the democratic principle” as nothing more than a tool to be manipulated by “the treacherous Arab.”

This attitude had remained consistent throughout the interwar years. On 22 April 1920, the American Zionist leader Rabbi Wise wrote to the philanthropist Straus that the British mandate had freed the Zionists from the prospect of rule under “Arab suzerainty, an indignity and dishonor which Jews could not have tolerated.”<sup>55</sup> In February 1936, Weizmann, Wise, and the rest of the Zionist establishment successfully derailed an effort by the British high commissioner in Palestine, Sir Arthur Wauchope, to establish a legislative council “designed to secure the advice and assistance of the people of Palestine in carrying on the government of the country.”<sup>56</sup> When the British proffered a legislative council scheme that did not draw such vehement Zionist opposition, representation was skewed against the majority population, who saw its acceptance as tantamount to acceptance of the Balfour Declaration. The Arabs rejected it and were accused by the Zionists of being undemocratic.

Indeed, when it came to the issue of democracy, American Zionists were particularly skilled at obfuscation and the application of double standards. For instance, in June 1937 Zionist supporter and senator Robert F. Wagner, addressing a ZOA convention in New York City, completely ignored the Zionists’ adamant stand against representative government and proclaimed that “in the far flung death struggle between democracy and autocracy . . . the Jewish people and their homeland are a symbol, and democracy must protect Palestine as an outpost of civilization.”<sup>57</sup>

In his aptly titled chapter “Delaying Democracy for the Sake of Zionism,” Rafael Medoff shows that insofar as American Zionists thought about the Arabs in Palestine at all prior to the 1929 uprising, it was as primitive nomads devoid of national consciousness and therefore undeserving of self-determination.<sup>58</sup> It is beside the point of this essay to address the ignorance on which such views were based, though one might comment on the problematic notion of using technological advancement as the measure to determine whether democracy is deserved—especially in light of the devastation wrought by the technologically advanced West in World War I. Medoff further points out, with regard to national rights, that neither the British nor the American Zionists saw Palestinians as “a distinct national group with national rights—largely because the Palestinian Arabs themselves did not claim the status of a specific national grouping.”<sup>59</sup> Leaving aside the patent self-interestedness of these colonialist views, it is true that most politically aware Palestinians of the day saw themselves as Arabs rather than “Palestinians” and that they saw their future as part of the larger national entity of Greater

Syria. Arab Americans, however, were presenting the Palestinian case in terms of democratic rights of a local majority, and no one ruled against self-determination in other parts of Greater Syria where the same views prevailed.

In the last analysis, most American Zionists liked to think of their behavior in Palestine as demonstrating a paternalistic notion of “noblesse oblige, the concept of the fortunate generously assisting the down-trodden.”<sup>60</sup> Since many Americans, Zionist or otherwise, were ignorant of the particulars of Zionist practices in Palestine,<sup>61</sup> when the Palestinians rose up in resistance they were able to see the Zionists’ increasingly aggressive colonialist behavior as a defense of democracy and other progressive Western ideals. Palestinian resistance to imperialist invasion became a form of unwarranted offense against civilization. The Israelis, and their American supporters, still think this way.

### **DOUBLE STANDARDS TRIUMPHANT: HARRY TRUMAN GOES ZIONIST**

With the ascendancy of Harry Truman to the presidency, State Department and NEA preferences for neutrality were ignored or overridden. Truman, who knew his Old Testament and had read a lot of Christian and Jewish sources on Palestine, felt he knew all that he needed to know about the Holy Land. When the State Department suggested that he might want their experts to give him a briefing on the situation in Palestine, he became annoyed. As he told Rabbi Wise in an interview on 20 April 1945, he was “skeptical . . . about some of the attitudes assumed by the ‘striped pants boys’ in the State Department.”<sup>62</sup> He did not trust them, in part because “they thought I really didn’t understand what was going on over there.”<sup>63</sup> For Truman, as for so many Americans, the “real” Palestine was the ancient land of the Jews and of Jesus, not the land of contemporary Arabs. Certainly, Truman was also influenced by political considerations, and his (inaccurate) statement to journalists in October 1945—“I’m sorry gentlemen, but 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>64</sup>—remains infamous.

For whatever combination of reasons, the United States backed Zionist ambitions at the UN, in London, and in Palestine. The double standards that allowed Americans, in Orwellian “doublethink,” to see democracy as applicable to the minority Jewish population but not to the majority Arabs in Palestine, now drove official American policy as formulated by the Congress and the White House. Three years into Truman’s presidency, however, with the expulsion of some 750,000 Palestinians, the Jews had become a majority, and “democracy” could finally be applied.

Thus, because of racism, colonist sentiments, and biblically rooted religious mythology, the United States betrayed its democratic principles. Arab

Americans, asserting the democratic rights of a majority to self-determination, majority rule, and representative government, were ignored. American Zionists, claiming the same rights for a minuscule minority, and doing everything they could to delay and undermine democracy in Palestine until the day Zionism could control and manipulate the governmental process, were embraced as the civilized purveyors of American principles. As it was then, so it is now—the past as prelude.

## NOTES

1. *Washington Post*, 24 December 1917, p. 4.
2. See Lawrence Davidson, *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), for a review of newspaper reporting on Palestine from 1917 to 1948 that documents the perceptions described here.
3. Quoted in Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983), pp. 55 and 56.
4. Lawrence Davidson, "Zionism, Socialism and United States Support for the Jewish Colonization of Palestine in the 1920s," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1996), p. 4. See also Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America*, p. 56.
5. Cited in David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), p. 258.
6. *Ibid.*, 259.
7. See Wilson's 1914 exchange with William Monroe Trotter, an African American leader, on the topic of segregation in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 31:300–308.
8. Frank E. Manuel, *The Realities of American-Palestine Relations* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1949), p. 223.
9. See Joseph Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East, 1776–1927* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp. 89ff.
10. The commission was originally conceived as a tripartite Anglo-French-American commission, but Wilson was left with the American component—H. C. King and C. R. Crane—after the French and British pulled out.
11. Zaha Bustami, "American Foreign Policy and the Question of Palestine, 1856–1939" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1989), p. 200.
12. William R. Polk, *The United States and the Arab World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 120.
13. Stephen Wise, *Challenging Years* (New York: Putnam, 1949), pp. 186–87.
14. Melvin Urofsky, *American Zionism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 230.
15. *Establishment of a National Home in Palestine*, 67th Cong., 2nd sess., H.R. 52, (18–21 April 1922): 161.
16. *New York Times*, 11 June 1922, p. 7.
17. *Ibid.*, 9 January 1923, p. 23.
18. Cindy Lydon, "American Images of the Arabs," *Mid East* 9, no. 3 (May–June 1969), p. 156.
19. *Washington Post*, 11 February 1921, p. 6.
20. See Lawrence Davidson, "Historical Ignorance and Popular Perceptions of Palestine," *Middle East Policy* 3, no. 2 (1994), pp. 125–47.
21. *New York Times*, 25 June 1917, p. 20.
22. *Establishment of a National Home in Palestine*, 161.
23. Weizmann to Balfour, 30 May 1918, cited in Doreen Ingrams, *The Palestine Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1973), p. 32.
24. *Chicago Tribune*, 24 November 1917, p. 1.
25. Cited in Davidson, *America's Palestine*, p. 102.
26. Records of the Department of State (hereafter RDS), Record Group 59, 867n.01/2-744.
27. *New York Times*, 22 March 1944, p. 5.
28. RDS 867n.01/2300 (27 March 1944).
29. RDS 867n.01/227 (26 May 1922).
30. RDS 867n.01/214 (22 May 1922).

31. *New York Times*, 28 August 1929, p. 1.
32. For an in-depth review of Knabenshue's critique see Davidson, *America's Palestine*, pp. 97–100.
33. RDS 867n.01/543 (5 November 1930).
34. RDS 867n.00/334 (25 July 1936).
35. RDS 867n.01/143.5; 1603; and 1602.5.
36. RDS 867n.01/1496 (27 July 1938).
37. See, for example, RDS 867n.01/709 (16 May 1936).
38. RDS 867n.00/334 (25 July 1936).
39. Lawrence Davidson, "Debating Palestine: Arab American Challenges to Zionism," in *Arabs in America*, ed. Michael Suleiman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), pp. 227ff.
40. See Davidson, *America's Palestine*, pp. 145ff.
41. RDS 867.01/860.
42. RDS 867n.01/728 (16 September 1936).
43. Habib Katibah, *The Case Against Zionism* (New York: Syrian-American Press, 1921). A copy of this work is to be found in the New York Public Library.
44. *Establishment of a National Home in Palestine*, 161.
45. See, for instance, *New York Times*, 28 August 1929, p. 24; *Chicago Tribune*, 31 August 1929; *Los Angeles Times*, 4 September 1929; and *Washington Post*, 28 August 1929.
46. See *New York Times*, 29 August 1929, p. 2.
47. *Ibid.*, 7 September 1929, p. 3.
48. RDS 867n.00/403 (16 October 1936).
49. RDS 867n.00/811.
50. RDS 867n.01/1740 (10 April 1941).
51. *Ibid.*
52. *New York Times*, 16 February 1944, p. 10.
53. RDS 867n.01/11-2744 (27 November 1944).
54. *New York Times*, 23 August 1945, p. 10.
55. *Ibid.*
56. RDS 867n.00/329, p. 1. See also *New York Times*, 22 December 1935, p. 24.
57. *New York Times*, 30 June 1937, p. 17.
58. Rafael Medoff, *Zionism and the Arabs: An American Jewish Dilemma, 1898–1948* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), pp. 21ff.
59. *Ibid.*, 23.
60. *Ibid.*, 28.
61. See Davidson, "Zionism, Socialism, and the United States."
62. Harry Truman, *Year of Decisions* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 69.
63. Cited in Bruce J. Evensen, *Truman, Palestine, and the Press* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 115.
64. Cited in William A. Eddy, *FDR Meets Ibn Saud* (New York: American Friends of the Middle East, 1954), p. 37.