

BILTMORE AND THE AMERICAN STRUGGLE FOR A JEWISH STATE

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The Biltmore Conference resolution, adopted by Zionist leaders in New York City in May 1942, differed from previous Zionist proclamations in two important respects.

First, it stated in unambiguous language that Jewish statehood was the goal of the Zionist movement. This represented a break from the longstanding tactic of refraining from using the term Jewish state, which World Zionist Organization president Chaim Weizmann euphemistically called the *Shem Hameforash* (the unutterable name of God, according to religious tradition). Until Biltmore, Zionist spokesmen typically defined their political goal along the lines of the vague term coined by the 1917 Balfour Declaration, “Jewish national home.” That phrase was open to a range of interpretations, from full Jewish sovereignty to Jewish autonomy within a majority-Arab Palestine.

Not so the Biltmore resolution. It asserted unequivocally that the goal of Zionism was “a Jewish commonwealth.” The word “commonwealth” was not meant to suggest something less than a sovereign state; Zionist leaders envisioned that Jewish Palestine would have a status similar to Australia or Canada—fully sovereign in practice, while technically associated with the British Empire.

The second important innovation of the Biltmore resolution was that it for the first time indicated what the Jewish state’s borders would be. Its phrase “that Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth”—the key word being “as”—suggested all of Palestine, by contrast with the Balfour Declaration’s formula that the Jewish national home would be established “in” Palestine, meaning somewhere in the country but not necessarily all of it. Later, in response to changed circumstances, the Zionist movement would accept the concept of partition; but from 1942 until the United

Nations proposed partition in 1947, the movement's position, codified at Biltmore, was that all of Palestine should become the Jewish state.

Biltmore's new formulation gave pro-Zionist organizations in the United States a clear platform around which to rally, and a unified message to convey to policymakers in Washington. But did the the Biltmore resolution have any practical impact, or was it just sloganeering? Did it facilitate efforts by American Zionists to influence U.S. policy, as they hoped? At the end of the day, did Biltmore really make any difference?

THE SHIFT FROM LONDON TO WASHINGTON

Zionist diplomacy in the early years of World War II revolved around a shift of the movement's attention from London to Washington. This fact is crucial to understanding what happened in Biltmore, and beyond.

Interwar Zionist lobbying concentrated on trying to persuade British officials to fulfill the Balfour Declaration. But the onset of World War II introduced new political realities. England's determination to keep the Arab countries on its side during the war meant that the harsh immigration limits imposed by the 1939 White Paper would be rigidly enforced, no matter how desperately European Jewish refugees needed a haven. At the same time, London's urgent need for U.S. military assistance meant that British policy in Palestine might be influenced by American pressure.

In the autumn of 1941, Weizmann, in London, wrote to his right hand man, Meyer Weisgal, in New York, to explain the new situation. Anti-Zionists in the British cabinet believed that since President Franklin D. Roosevelt had not interfered with the imposition of the White Paper in 1939, he must be "indifferent to the question of Zionism," Weizmann wrote; therefore they seemed to think that they "need not take America into consideration, and can pursue [their] policy of placating the Arabs." Weizmann emphasized that it was "vital that something should be done" in the United States to prove the British anti-Zionists wrong.¹

American Zionist leaders heard similar assessments from David Ben-Gurion, the visiting leader of Palestine Jewry, at meetings of the Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs—forerunner of the American Zionist

¹ Meyer Weisgal, *...So Far: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp.172-173.

Movement—in New York City in November and December 1941. Ben-Gurion said “nothing could be done in England” to persuade the Churchill administration to suspend the White Paper, and therefore

it is essential to win over American opinion....There is no doubt that England will be influenced by what America says....[American] public opinion must be convinced that Palestine is the only solution to the Jewish problem. If the Jews here were won over to have faith in our cause, then I have not the slightest doubt that we could win over the [U.S.] government.²

The futility of trying to influence the British was further driven home to the ECZA leaders by what they heard from their colleague Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, chairman of the United Palestine Appeal, when he returned from a visit to London the following April. Silver described how he protested to the Colonial Minister, Lord Cranborne, about the recent British refusal to let the refugees aboard the S.S. *Struma* enter Palestine, leaving the ship stranded at sea where it was struck by a Soviet torpedo, killing all but one of the 782 passengers. Silver reported: “The Colonial Secretary replied that if they admitted this shipload and that shipload, the Nazis who are ever ready to embarrass us will dump thousands in this way.” As a result of such conversations, Silver, like Ben-Gurion, came to the conclusion that “If anything is to be done now, it is my judgment that it should be done in this country.” The Biltmore conference followed shortly afterwards. Its clarion call for Jewish statehood in an undivided Palestine was a demonstration of Zionist unity and an attempt to send a strong message to Washington policymakers.³

DISASTER AVERTED

Within the Jewish community, Biltmore proved to be a powerful galvanizing force. It jolted American Jewry “from the slough into which it had sunk during the pre-war era of cynical appeasement,” the editors of the popular Jewish magazine *The Reconstructionist* pointed out at the time, in

² Minutes of Meeting of the Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs, Friday, November 28, 1941, pp.3-4. The committee was at that time in the process of adding the word “American” to the beginning of its name; the documents cited herein used the original name, others the expanded version.

³ “Report of Dr. Silver - Apr. 14, 1942,” pp.3-4, in Minutes of Meeting of American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs, Tuesday, April 14, 1942.

an editorial titled “American Zionism Gathers Strength.” Biltmore created “an air of confidence” among American Zionists, providing the ammunition “to excite the people into sounding trumpets and waving flags,” as two notable chroniclers of those events put it.⁴

What about in the political and diplomatic realms? Did the Roosevelt administration respond as hoped to the new Zionist forthrightness on display at Biltmore? Hardly—in fact, based on what happened in Washington after the conference, it could be argued that Biltmore nearly backfired. In the days following Biltmore, senior State Department officials proposed to President Roosevelt that he issue a public statement to counter what they called “the harmful effects of Zionist agitation on the war effort.” They argued that thanks to the “continuous agitation by the Zionists of [sic] their ambitions in Palestine,” the Arab masses feared “that their fellow Moslems in Palestine will be overridden,” and thus might become pro-Axis if they perceived that the Allies supported Zionism. Therefore, the State Department officials proposed, FDR should publicly assure the Arabs that there would be “no territorial changes” in the Middle East “that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned.” In practical terms, that would mean that the Arab majority in Palestine could block the creation of a Jewish state.⁵

The discussions between the State Department and the White House resulted in a decision by the president, in October, to send a personal envoy, Lt. Col. Harold Hoskins, to the Middle East to assess Arab public opinion. After touring the region for three and a half months, Hoskins returned with a bleak conclusion: “If the issues of a Jewish political state and of a Jewish army continue to be pressed at this time,” the Arabs will instigate “a very bloody conflict” and drag the Allies into it, he warned. This would plant “the seeds of a possible third World War.” Based on Hoskins’s report, the State Department drafted a new, and even harsher, proclamation, which it intended to be issued jointly by the U.S. and British governments (rather than by the president alone). The statement not only

⁴ “American Zionism Gathers Strength” (editorial), *The Reconstructionist* VIII:14 (November 13, 1942), p.3; Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), p.429; Marlin Levin, *It Takes a Dream: The Story of Hadassah* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 1997), p.209.

⁵ Hackworth to Roosevelt (draft), May 29, 1942; Murray to Hull, June 2, 1942 with “Declaration or Statement,” Murray to Hull, July 14, 1942, and Murray to Hull, August 5, 1942, all in File 867N.01/1812, Records of the State Department, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

would promise to make no decision on Palestine “without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews,” but it would also assert that all “public discussions and activities of a political nature relating to Palestine” should “cease.” The administration had no legal means of enforcing such a speech ban, but the practical impact of such an announcement would be to tar all public expressions of Zionism as undermining the war effort.⁶

President Roosevelt approved the draft in May 1943 and it proceeded to wind its way through various government channels in both Washington and London. The lengthy bureaucratic process created opportunities for leaks, and as word of the planned statement spread, a number of the president’s Jewish advisers voiced objections, for a variety of reasons. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. called the statement an attempt “to deprive U.S. citizens of their constitutional liberties.” Bernard Baruch warned it would provoke antisemitism. According to Isaiah Berlin of the British Embassy, even FDR’s senior speechwriter, Samuel Rosenman, a Jewish anti-Zionist, opposed the declaration, because he feared “the Zionists would inevitably issue a shriek, a public controversy involving Senators, etc., would follow, which would ultimately give the Jews, whether Zionists or not, dangerous publicity as playing politics in a time of crisis.” In the face of this rising tide of criticism, Roosevelt decided the proposal was more trouble than it was worth, and discarded it. Disaster was narrowly averted.⁷

AN UNDIVIDED PALESTINE

American Zionist activists set out from Biltmore on a nationwide campaign to secure popular and political support for the newly-defined Zionist agenda. Outreach by the renamed American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC) and its Christian Zionist affiliates sought endorsements of the Biltmore goals of unrestricted Jewish immigration and the reconstitution of Palestine *as* a Jewish commonwealth. These efforts were phenomenally successful. By early 1944, resolutions to that effect had been adopted by more than 3,000 individual churches, unions, YMCAs, Rotary clubs, and other civic organizations. Similar resolutions were adopted by hundreds of local municipalities and 41 state legislatures. An AZEC

⁶ Monty N. Penkower, “The 1943 Joint Anglo-American Statement on Palestine,” in Melvin I. Urofsky, ed. *Herzl Year Book - Volume VIII: Essays in American Zionism* (New York: Herzl Press, 1978), pp.212-241.

⁷ *Ibid.*

campaign targeting the academic community yielded the signatures of 1800 faculty members from 250 universities and colleges on a petition to the president calling for free immigration and a Jewish state in all of Palestine. AZEC activists secured statements endorsing or reiterating the Biltmore language from 411 of the 535 members of Congress.⁸

With good reason, AZEC lobbyist Leon Feuer informed Rabbi Silver in early 1944 that he expected an “overwhelming” majority in favor of an AZEC-drafted Senate resolution calling on the Roosevelt administration “to use its good offices and take appropriate measures to the end that the doors of Palestine shall be opened for free entry of Jews into that country and that there shall be full opportunity for colonization so that the Jewish people may ultimately reconstitute Palestine as a free and democratic Jewish Commonwealth.” The chief sponsors of the resolution were Sen. Robert Wagner, Democrat of New York, with whom Rabbi Wise had close ties, and Sen. Robert Taft, Republican of Ohio, with whom Rabbi Silver, a fellow Ohioan (and now co-chair of the AZEC along with Rabbi Stephen S. Wise), enjoyed a longstanding relationship. At President Roosevelt’s insistence, the War Department blocked the resolution by warning Congress that its adoption would endanger American troops in the Middle East.⁹

Their congressional efforts stymied, American Zionist leaders turned to the major political parties for support of the Biltmore formula in advance of the 1944 presidential election. Until 1944, neither party had ever included in its platform a plank referring to Palestine, Zionism, or Jewish refugees. In the weeks preceding the June 1944 Republican convention, Rabbi Silver and Benzion Netanyahu—head of the U.S. wing of the Revisionist Zionist movement (and father of Israel’s future prime minister)—separately used their contacts with Republican members of Congress, party officials, and former president Herbert Hoover to bring about the adoption of a pro-Zionist plank that followed the Biltmore approach.

⁸ Doreen Bierbreer, “The American Zionist Emergency Council: An Analysis of a Pressure Group,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 60:1 (September 1970), pp.90-91; Samuel Halperin, *The Political World of American Zionism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961), pp.185-186.

⁹ Feuer to Silver, March 24, 1944, AZEC Papers, F39/24, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem [hereafter CZA]; 91; “American Jewish Conference Urges Support of Senate Resolution on Palestine,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* [hereafter JTA], February 3, 1944.

The Biltmore formulation, “that Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth,” was echoed in the GOP’s implicit reference to Palestine as an undivided Jewish state:

In order to give refuge to millions of distressed Jewish men, women and children driven from their homes by tyranny, we call for the opening of Palestine to their unrestricted immigration and land ownership, so that in accordance with the full intent and purpose of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the Resolution of a Republican Congress in 1922, Palestine may be constituted as a free and democratic Commonwealth. We condemn the failure of the President to insist that the mandatory of Palestine carry out the provision of the Balfour Declaration and of the mandate while he pretends to support them.

Fearing that the Republican resolution might attract Jewish voters to the GOP presidential nominee in November, Rabbi Wise attended the Democratic convention to press for adoption of a comparable pro-Zionist plank. The draft he submitted to party officials followed the Biltmore text, calling for “its [Palestine’s] establishment as a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth.” But at the request of Roosevelt administration officials, the resolutions committee modified that phrase to read “the establishment there of a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth”—indicating that the Jewish state should be created in part of Palestine but not necessarily in all of it. The White House wanted to satisfy potential Jewish critics and counter the Republicans, but without committing the president to any particular policy.¹⁰

FDR AND ZIONISM

Rabbi Wise next tried to get President Roosevelt himself to embrace the language of Biltmore. In October, Wise heard rumors that the Republican nominee, New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, intended to issue a pro-Zionist statement shortly before the election. Wise asked Samuel Rosenman to arrange a meeting for him with the president to

¹⁰ Rafael Medoff, *The Jews Should Keep Quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia and Lincoln, NE: The Jewish Publication Society and University of Nebraska Press, 2019), pp.244-248.

discuss issuing a statement that would pre-empt Dewey. “I would not press this as I do if I did not have reason to fear that fullest advantage might be taken of the Chief’s failure to speak on this at an early date,” Wise wrote Rosenman. In private conversations, Wise told White House aides he feared that the Republican nominee might be able to attract a substantial portion of the Jewish vote, especially in the key electoral state of New York. Senator Wagner feared that both he and the president would lose Jewish votes in the Empire State unless FDR said something about Palestine. He volunteered to read aloud a statement by Roosevelt at an upcoming Zionist convention.¹¹

Wise and Wagner collaborated on a draft for the president that was consistent with the Biltmore formulation of a Jewish state in all of Palestine. Their text would have had the president endorse “the establishment of an undivided Palestine as a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth.” It also had FDR pledging to “do all in [his] power” to ensure that the Jewish state would be created “as soon as practicable.”

The draft ran into two significant obstacles. The first was that FDR had never been especially interested in Zionism. His foreign policy in the 1930s prioritized friendly relations with Great Britain and keeping the United States out of overseas conflicts; in the 1940s, fear of angering Arab opinion concerned him more than justice for the Jews or opening a haven to refugees. Typically the most American Zionist leaders could obtain from the White House were boiler-plate expressions of sympathy with Jewish development initiatives in Palestine. Even the inclusion of the word “homeland” in a draft of one such statement, in 1935, was considered too controversial; the administration watered that down to “home.”¹² Roosevelt repeatedly told Zionist representatives that he thought Palestine could

¹¹ S.I.R. to the President, September 16, 1944, and F.D.R. to S.I.R., September 16, 1944, File: Palestine, Samuel Rosenman Papers [hereafter SRP], Franklin D. Roosevelt Library [hereafter FDRL]; Wise to Rosenman, September 26, 1944, File: Wise, Stephen S. Wise, Box 4, SRP; Silver to Roosevelt, September 26, 1944, Office File 700; FDRL; Wagner to Roosevelt, September 29, 1944, Office File 700, FDRL.

¹² “Palestine Aim Gets Praise of Roosevelt,” JTA, January 20, 1935; Monty N. Penkower, *Palestine in Turmoil: The Struggle For Sovereignty, 1933-1939* (New York: Touro College Press, 2014), pp.214-33. There was one notable exception to President Roosevelt’s otherwise lukewarm policy regarding Zionism. In the autumn of 1936, Rabbi Wise alerted FDR that the British were poised to severely restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine, and he pleaded with the president to intervene. Roosevelt’s pressure persuaded the British government to postpone the planned restrictions. Such a gesture to Jewish voters, on the eve of a presidential election, carried little political risk. (See Wise to Brandeis, September 1, 1936, Box 106, Stephen S. Wise Papers, American Jewish Historical Society; Roosevelt to Wise, January 23, 1937, Stephen S. Wise Papers, A243/83, CZA [hereafter SSW-CZA].)

absorb only another 100,000-150,000 Jews, and therefore they should look for other places of settlement. Privately, FDR expressed dissatisfaction with the 1939 White Paper, but he was unwilling to put any substantive pressure on the British over the issue. Ben-Gurion concluded that for all practical purposes, FDR was “an anti-Zionist.” History has shown that a president need not have warm personal feelings about Zionism in order to enact policies favorable to the Zionist cause; but it certainly does not help when a president is “cold and indifferent” to Jewish concerns, as Palestine’s Chief Rabbi, Isaac HaLevi Herzog, described FDR following their meeting in April 1941.¹³

The second problem Rabbi Wise and Senator Wagner faced was that Roosevelt did not want to be pinned down. He was unwilling to commit to doing what he could to help the Zionists, unwilling to commit to doing anything for them soon, and unwilling to commit to supporting the establishment of a Jewish state in all of Palestine. So the president made four changes to water down the Wise-Wagner text. The original draft’s explicit pledge to support creation of a Jewish commonwealth was changed to a vague promise that unspecified “efforts” would be undertaken to determine the “appropriate ways and means” to bring about a commonwealth. The promise that a Jewish homeland would be established “as soon as practicable” was deleted. The word “undivided” was removed from the reference to “an undivided Palestine”; Roosevelt did not want to rule out the possibility that the Jews would be given only a portion of Palestine. And the proposed pledge “I shall do all in my power” (to facilitate a Jewish homeland) was reduced to just “I shall help to bring about.”¹⁴

THE LEGACY OF BILTMORE

¹³ Wise to Brandeis, April 28, 1937, A243/83, SSW-CZA; “Report of Meeting of S.S.W. with F.D.R., Saturday morning, Jan. 22, 1938,” pp.1–2, A243/83, SSW-CZA; Brandeis to Roosevelt, May 4, 1939, Office File 700, FDRL; Roosevelt’s notations on memo of Isadore Breslau telephone message, May 18, 1939, Office File 700, FDRL; Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust*, p.414; Wise to Goldman, May 23, 1939, A243/125, SSW-CZA; Penkower, *Palestine in Turmoil*, p.504; Monty N. Penkower, *Decision on Palestine Deferred: America, Britain and Wartime Diplomacy, 1939-1945* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p.75.

¹⁴ S.I.R. to the President, October 12, 1944, File: Wise, Stephen S., Box 4, SRP; “Draft of Letter to Senator Wagner,” Z5/388, CZA; “Draft of Letter to Senator Wagner”; Wagner to Roosevelt (telegram), October 13, 1944, Roosevelt to Wagner, October 13, 1944, and Roosevelt to Wagner, October 14, 1944, all in President’s Personal File 601, FDRL. Of the four changes cited herein, the latter two were first documented in Penkower, *Decision on Palestine Deferred*, pp.314–315.

The organizers of the Biltmore conference aimed high. They hoped to inspire American Jews to greater activism, and arguably they succeeded in doing so. They sought to unify the various factions of the American Zionist movement around a clear and forceful principle, and they achieved that as well. They strove to mobilize public and congressional support for the goals proclaimed at Biltmore, and they accomplished that, too. Their fourth and most ambitious goal, to influence the Roosevelt administration to endorse and facilitate Jewish statehood, ran into obstacles that were difficult to overcome. By going around the White House to the two political parties, Zionist lobbyists found a way to make their presence felt even in the face of an often-unsympathetic president.

Party platforms typically have only a limited impact on voters, and levels of U.S. support for Israel have varied from administration to administration. Nevertheless, the endorsement of Jewish statehood by both parties helped enshrine bipartisan support for the principle of Zionism—and, later, the State of Israel—as a fixture in American political culture. “With the plank in both platforms the thing is lifted above partisanship,” Rabbi Wise said afterwards.¹⁵ That significant achievement was not a direct outcome of Biltmore, but it did emerge from the same crucible of increased Zionist activism that Biltmore inspired.

¹⁵ Wise to Rosenblatt, July 26, 1944, A243/33, CZA.