

Metropolitan Aspects of Zionist Organization

by Dan Freeman-Maloy



North American and European donors to the JNF's HaHamisha Park on the land of Qatanna and Abu Ghosh are prominently displayed at the park entrance

The Zionist project has, from its inception, been a cross-continental enterprise. Early Zionist settlement and proto-state formation, the seizure of Palestine in 1948 by the force of arms, and the consolidation of this conquest were all carried out with the crucial participation of important sectors in Europe and North America. This article reviews the historical development of two central Zionist para-state institutions – the Jewish Agency and, in accord with the focus of this volume, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) – within this broader context of metropolitan sponsorship of Zionist settler colonialism. It begins by outlining the emergence and initial development of these institutions during the periods of Ottoman and British Mandatory rule of Palestine. It then recalls their involvement in the violent transformation of Palestine during the late 1940s and the subsequent consolidation of Israeli statehood. Finally, it describes the evolving function of these para-state organizations into the era of Israeli statehood, particularly as regards the connection between Western constituencies and the Israeli state system.

From Ownership to Eviction

Both the JNF and the Jewish Agency emerged within the framework of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), established in 1897. The JNF, an early initiative of the WZO, was established in 1901 by decision of the fifth Zionist Congress. It was designed to operate as a landholding instrument geared towards the permanent acquisition of territory for Jewish use and settlement. It was among a number of WZO initiatives during this period oriented in significant part towards land acquisition in Palestine, others including the Jewish Colonial Trust, its subsidiary Anglo-Palestine Company (later to become Bank Leumi), and the Palestine Land Development Corporation.¹

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Palestine, under Ottoman jurisdiction until the First World War, had been marked since the mid-19th century by the gradual concentration of landholding (largely under the impact of the “modernizing” reforms implemented by cash-strapped Ottoman authorities). Under these circumstances, the landholding model pursued by the WZO, and by the JNF in particular, was immediately threatening. For the *fellahin* who comprised the bulk of the Palestinian population, the practical differences between status as peasant proprietors or as tenant farmers were often limited, and nominal changes in land ownership were in many cases accepted with relative indifference. But in contrast to most regional owners, the JNF sought not merely legal title of lands but the eviction of inhabitants to clear the way for Jewish settlement. This exclusionary approach exacted a significant toll well before 1948.²

Under Ottoman rule, neither the WZO nor the JNF had especially favored status. Their international fundraising efforts – carried out by Zionist federations in Europe and North America, through such JNF activities as “Blue Box” collections, by courting private investors, etc. – offered them some leverage, as did their relations with West European powers. But this leverage was relatively limited. As a result, it was not until after the first World War that the Zionist movement built appreciable strength in Palestine.

Britain’s “appropriate Jewish agency” and its American sponsors

Whatever the motivations of its planners, the British government’s decision to position itself as a key post-WWI sponsor of the Zionist movement owed little to the movement’s (quite meager) capacities. Yet it certainly had the effect of bolstering them. The Balfour declaration was issued in 1917 (British forces soon thereafter occupied Palestine), its terms were incorporated into the League of Nations Mandate (finalized in 1922), and a framework for British rule of Palestine was established that persisted until 1948. It was in this setting that the Jewish Agency emerged.

The WZO had been eager to leverage British imperial policy to strengthen its organizational system. In 1917, its leadership proposed that a British commitment to support “the establishment of a Jewish National Colonizing Corporation” be incorporated directly into foreign secretary Lord Balfour’s declaration on Palestine.³ Although no such phrase was included, the final text of the League of Nations Palestine Mandate included not only Balfour’s statement advocating “establishment in

The JNF contributes to efforts to bring Jewish youth from North America and elsewhere to mobilize these communities behind the Zionist project, Jaffa 2010 (photo: Badil)



Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,” but also recognition of a public instrument to carry out this task. Specifically, Article IV of the Mandate provided for the establishment of “[a]n appropriate Jewish agency,” and indicated that “[t]he Zionist organization, so long as its organization and constitution are in the opinion of the Mandatory appropriate, shall be recognized as such agency.”⁴ It was under this designation (as the Jewish Agency) that the WZO enjoyed formal juridical standing within the Mandatory regime. The JNF retained a distinct presence within the developing WZO/Jewish Agency structure.

As its new official status was setting in, the WZO restructured its fundraising institutions to capitalize on this induced momentum. A new organization was established, the Keren Hayesod (Foundation Fund), to function – in the words of one guiding resolution – “as the central fund of the Zionist Organization under the control of the Zionist Congress.”⁵ In the United States, where fundraising would prove most significant, the Keren Hayesod operated as the anchor of a United Palestine Appeal (UPA) campaign. UPA funds were then channeled to the Jewish Agency, or to particular projects determined by its leadership, via the Keren Hayesod. In an effort to consolidate fundraising efforts, the UPA would also ultimately encompass such smaller Zionist funding-drives as those conducted by the women’s Zionist organization Hadassah, the religious Zionist movement “Mizrachi,” and the Histadrut. As for the JNF, a ceiling was placed on its traditional fundraising activities; these limits were imposed with the understanding that a portion (initially 20 per cent) of UPA revenue would be allocated for JNF use.⁶

Keren Hayesod loan agreements for settler enterprises included such specifications as “hire Jewish workmen only,” and the JNF – leasing land exclusively to Jews in accord with its Memorandum of Association – was likewise an automatic ally in the “conquest of labor” push which came to define Zionist politics in Palestine.⁷

From Marj Ibn ‘Amir (the Jezreel Valley) in the early 1920s to Wadi al-Hawarith (Emek Hefer) a decade later, the JNF acquired land from absentee owners and then evicted its Palestinian cultivators. The JNF worked to generate not only financial support, but also organized international political association with this “land redemption” process.

Yet, although consequential in their own right, policies of purchase, enclosure and settlement were insufficient means for expansive colonization. The following statement by Menachem Ussishkin, head of the JNF directorate for most of the interwar period, expresses JNF policy towards purchased land: “If there are other inhabitants there, they must be transferred to some other place. We must take over the land. We have a greater and nobler ideal than preserving several hundred thousands of *fellahin*.”⁸ But it also spoke to broader Zionist strategy. By the end of the Mandate, less than 7 per cent of land in Palestine was under any form of Jewish ownership, less than 4 per cent by the JNF.⁹ If Palestinians were to be “transferred” in the hundreds of thousands, a more sweeping form of coercive land acquisition would be required. As Zionist policy shifted in this direction, cross-continental Zionist organizations continued to play a central role.

Discarding “peace concepts”: from eviction to conquest

In early 1948, David Ben-Gurion, longtime chair of the Jewish Agency executive and founding leader of the Israeli state, bluntly summarized the aggressive model for land acquisition which the Zionist movement would pursue under his leadership: “The war will give us the land. The concepts of ‘ours’ and ‘not ours’ are peace concepts only, and in war they lose their whole meaning.”¹⁰ This notion was the culmination of a decade of detailed Zionist discussions regarding the prospect of expelling Palestinians beyond the borders of the envisaged Jewish state (a process chronicled by Nur Masalha).

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Masalha and Ilan Pappé have detailed the role of JNF officials (notably Yosef Weitz) in discussions and logistical preparations for the mass expropriation and ethnic cleansing of 1948, and JNF involvement in the ensuing erasure of Palestinian villages was also significant.¹¹ Suffice it here to recall that the Jewish Agency, the JNF and their close partners played a central role by helping coordinate Western participation in this campaign of conquest and ethnic cleansing.

For U.S. Zionism (the financial mainstay of the drive towards Israeli statehood), legally “charitable” fundraising continued to center on the United Palestine Appeal (UPA) through the 1930s and 40s. In its pursuit of funds, the UPA was rivaled by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), focused on aiding Jews in Europe. The federations – the main fundraising system in the organized US Jewish community, then represented by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds (CJFWF) – had limited patience for competing campaigns. The UPA and JDC were thus partnered within a United Jewish Appeal (UJA) campaign, with UJA revenue divided between these two constituents.¹² The JNF and the Keren Hayesod remained the two principal UPA beneficiaries.

In the actual seizure of Palestine, the JNF provided not only planning support but also some resources for military use (e.g. in the Negev), while the Jewish Agency, through its paramilitary arm (the Hagana), carried out the systematic expulsion of Palestinians and expropriation of their lands.¹³ The JNF continued to draw resources from independent fundraising as well as the UPA. The Jewish Agency, unable to meet its military needs by legal means alone, also initiated a quasi-clandestine system in the West to fundraise for the Hagana, smuggle equipment, and recruit skilled combatants.¹⁴ This was managed by a variety of Jewish Agency, Hagana, UPA/UJA, and allied personnel.

In the aftermath of the devastating burst of coercive expropriations which they helped to organize, the JNF and Jewish Agency both joined emerging Israeli state agencies in consolidating the conquest. The JNF moved to “purchase” a range of expropriated Palestinian land from the state, thus ensuring the exclusion of former Palestinian residents (including those who were becoming internally displaced citizens of Israel). Even more importantly, the JNF effectively promoted its exclusivist landholding model – providing long-term leases to Jews only – as a policy for all “state lands.” The Jewish Agency, meanwhile, was restructured as an instrument of settlement and conduit of “charitable” Western funds. “When the full story of the Jewish Agency is told,” the leading Zionist thinker Daniel Elazar wrote in 1985, “the record of the Rural Settlement Department will reflect great achievement in settling the country. . . . when these settlements were established, they were part of an overall strategy to establish a Jewish presence throughout the territory of the state.” Elazar adds: “A fair amount of this kind of uneconomic but statistically [read: demographically] important settlement continues today.”¹⁵ The WZO/Jewish Agency Law of Status (1952) and the JNF Law (1953) bestowed quasi-state standing upon these organizations without actually absorbing them into the Israeli state apparatus.¹⁶

In sum, the JNF and the Jewish Agency worked as active partners to impose the institutionalized guarantees for Jewish access to resources in Palestine (especially land) and coercive exclusion of Palestinians which together form the cornerstone of Zionist settler colonialism.¹⁷

Dimona and Caesaria

Within much of the West – certainly in England and North America – the prospect of mass Jewish emigration to settle in Palestine, as advocated by conventional Zionist doctrine, has not been a realistic prospect. Though calls for such emigration have persisted, the Israeli leadership reconciled itself early on to approaching Jewish constituencies in the West not only as prospective settlers, but more plausibly as objects in its continued push

for strategic alignment with Western power (and especially with the United States). In his study on the North American case (1990), the Canada-Israel Committee's (CIC) David Goldberg argues that after 1948, Israel stably redefined its relationship with prominent Western Jewish organizations "to rest on two pillars": fundraising and political advocacy.¹⁸ As this relationship developed, the JNF and Jewish Agency remained important instruments of Zionist activity.

Several years into Ben-Gurion's early campaign "to take control of American Jewry" (as he described his aim in 1938), the Jewish Agency executive described the strategic logic underlying its pursuit of organized Jewish support in the West: "The vehicles for Zionist public political education in the Anglo-Saxon countries are the Jewries of England, America, and the British Dominions."¹⁹ Here fundraising and political action were understood to be intertwined. The JNF, for its part, operated according to the logic (identified early on by a sympathetic analyst) that "there should be no separation between 'practical' action and 'propaganda.' One depends upon the other."²⁰ Ben Gurion, writes Ariel Feldestein (2006), was similarly determined "to use UPA funds for Zionist propaganda."²¹

Granted, publicity for especially contentious fundraising projects was avoided. In the late 1950s, for instance, elements of the North American system responsible for supporting Hagana conquests in the 1940s

(notably the "Sonneborn Institute") were quietly revived to provide financial and logistical support for Israel's nuclear program.²² But the JNF and Jewish Agency remained public political entities. The JNF openly cultivated Western association with the exclusion of Palestinians through "tree-planting" campaigns and the establishment of parks dedicated to various fundraisers, helping to effect – and dignify – the erasure of Palestinian villages. Through the UPA (duly renamed the United Israel Appeal, UIA), the Jewish Agency retained a significant public presence while facilitating the influx of much-needed foreign currency.²³ (Incidentally, soon after 1948, the JNF was downgraded within the restructured UIA/UJA, but continued to raise funds independently, under a set ceiling, through donations for trees, stamps, and flag days, as well as through Blue Box collections.)²⁴

In 1950, a "partnership and coordination" committee was established comprising four Israeli government ministers, four representatives from the Jewish Agency, and one representative from the JNF to help navigate Israel's relationship with supporters in the West.²⁵ And, as mentioned above, legislation was soon after passed according special status to the Jewish Agency and the JNF, traditional pillars of international Zionist organization. At the same time, prime minister Ben-Gurion expended significant energy to shift the center of fundraising and advocacy away from the conventional

Plaques acknowledging contributors to the JNF are scattered throughout the JNF's parks and forests. al-Qabu (Menachem Begin Park), April 2010 (photo: Badli)



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Zionist leadership (affiliated, in the US, with the Israeli opposition) and towards larger and more influential Jewish organizations.

The success of this effort owed much to what Walid Khalidi has insightfully identified as “a triangular flow between the gentile great power sponsor, the Zionist metropolitan establishment and the metropolitan Jewish community.”²⁶ In any event, organizationally, the barriers between Zionist and mainstream Jewish communal groupings in much of the West gradually eroded.

This development has been symbolized in the evolution of the Jewish Agency. In 1965, Detroit industrialist Max Fisher informed the annual meeting of the North American Council of Jewish Federations (CJF, successor of the CJFWF) in Montreal of ongoing negotiations with the Jewish Agency.²⁷ In the next few years, a formula was established for the direct participation of the CJF (and their European Keren Hayesod counterparts) in the core governing bodies of the Jewish Agency. The upbeat 10-year review of this process, showcasing the broadened Western Zionist base, took place in the first area of Palestine subject to proactive ethnic cleansing in 1948: Caesarea.²⁸ The progress review then bore this region’s name.

Conclusion

The JNF and the Jewish Agency were both central instruments of Zionist colonization and state formation in Palestine; in 1948, both were active participants in the mass expropriations and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians which characterized Israel’s establishment. Since, their role has declined in relation to the Israeli state. However, their quasi-state status persists, as do their activities linking Western constituencies to the colonization process (and its enforcement).

This function as interlocutor between the state and its supporters in the West is organizationally broadest in the case of the Jewish Agency. In 1998, the Council of Jewish Federations formally merged with the United Israel Appeal and United Jewish Appeal to form what is now known as the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA; known from 1998-2009 as the United Jewish Communities, UJC). This federation system is at once a leading constituent of the Jewish Agency – a quasi-state body under Israeli law – and a core institution of North American Jewish communal affairs. Its orientation towards Israel is practically manifest in the interlinked realms of fundraising and advocacy. In 2006, for example, what is now the JFNA directed \$320 million to Israel via the Jewish Agency to defray the costs of the invasion of Lebanon.²⁹ During the more recent assault on Gaza, the body that coordinated Israeli wartime diplomacy, the National Information Directorate (NID), directly included the Jewish Agency, and thereby (at least in part) the JFNA.³⁰ The JNF, though organizationally less prominent in Western Israel advocacy systems, retains the key function of fostering proud international association with the exclusion of Palestinians and the erasure of their villages.

The official Western classification of such prominent participants in the colonization of Palestine as “charitable” is a matter of profound political consequence. The question of which of their fundraising and advocacy activities provide the strongest grounds to challenge this tax-deductible status demands our attention in the coming period.

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Endnotes: See online version at <http://www.badil.org/al-majdal>*

Endnotes

1. Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *The Global Political Economy of Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 91-92; Salman Abu-Sitta, *Atlas of Palestine, 1948* (London: Palestine Land Society, 2004), p. 28.
2. See Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Mahmoud Yazbak, "From Poverty to Revolt: economic factors in the outbreak of the 1936 rebellion in Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 36. No. 3. (2000).
3. Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), p. 203.
4. J.V.W. Shaw, *A Survey of Palestine: prepared in December 1945 and January 1946 for the information of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry* (Palestine: Government Printer, 1946), pp. 5.
5. Ernest Stock, *Partners and Pursestrings: A History of the United Israel Appeal* (New York: University Press of America in association with the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1987), p. 27
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 38.
7. Sir John Hope Simpson, "On the Employment of Arab Labour," in Walid Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest: readings in Zionism and the Palestine problem until 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2005), pp. 304; and Walter Lehn in association with Uri Davis, *The Jewish National Fund* (London : Kegan Paul International, 1988), p. 59.
8. Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: the concept of 'transfer' in Zionist political thought, 1882-1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), p. 27.
9. Lehn, *Jewish National Fund*, p. 74.
10. Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians*, p. 180.
11. See *ibid.*; Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications Ltd., 2006).
12. See Menahem Kaufman, *An Ambiguous Partnership: Non-Zionists and Zionists in America, 1939-1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).
13. Lehn, *Jewish National Fund*, p. 81.
14. See Leonard Slater, *The Pledge* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1970); Ricky-Dale Calhoun, "Arming David: The Haganah's Illegal Arms Procurement Network in the United States, 1945-1949," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36, no. 4 (summer 2007).
15. Alysa Dortort and Daniel Elazar, *Understanding the Jewish Agency: A Handbook* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1985), p. 71.
16. For detailed analysis of this process, see Dortort and Elazar, *ibid.*, and Uri Davis, *Apartheid Israel: possibilities for the struggle within* (London: Zed Books, 2003).
17. Of course, under the guise of collectivist nationalism, Zionist institutions allocating expropriated lands and apportioning funds from abroad have given rise to fairly narrow concentrations of wealth and power; see Nitzan and Bichler, *Global Political Economy of Israel*.
18. David Goldberg, *Foreign Policy and Ethnic Interest Groups: American and Canadian Jews Lobby for Israel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 1.
19. Allon Gal, *David Ben-Gurion and the American Alignment for a Jewish State* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 40 and 187.
20. Emmanuel Haroussi, quoted in Yoram Bar-Gal, *Propaganda and Zionist Education: The Jewish National Fund, 1924-1947* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), p.10.
21. Ariel L. Feldestein, *Ben-Gurion, Zionism and American Jewry, 1948-1963* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.
22. This according to Michael Karpin, *The Bomb in the Basement: How Israel went nuclear and what that means for the world* (New York: Simon and Shuster,), p. 136.
23. Introducing a study on the UIA, Daniel Elazar writes that "prior to the establishment of the state, donations constituted almost the sum total of the Zionist fisc and for a decade after 1948, the principal source of Israel's foreign currency 'earnings.'" *Partners and Pursestrings*, p. xi.
24. Stock, *ibid.*, pp. 147, 152.
25. Feldestein, *Ben-Gurion*, p. 31.
26. Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest*, p. xviii.
27. Stock, *Partners and Pursestrings*, p. 183.
28. This process is the overarching subject of Dortort and Elazar, *Understanding the Jewish Agency*. On the ethnic cleansing of this area in 1948, see Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, p. 75.
29. Jason Taitz, "Agency members see fruits of their labors," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 25, 2006.
30. Anshel Pfeffer, "Jerusalem & Babylon / the true meaning of hasbara," *Ha'aretz*, January 11, 2009.