
THE STATE DEPARTMENT'S 'ANTI-ZIONIST STAND': A REEVALUATION

Lawrence Davidson

The standard historical interpretation of State Department policy and behavior toward Jewish aspirations in Palestine between the years 1917 and 1948 is one of unrelenting anti-Zionism. However, a thorough and close reading of the available State Department documents reveals a much more complex picture. This picture suggests that the State Department's interpretation of U.S. national interests in the Middle East rested on the traditional pillars of economic and philanthropic pursuits. As American Zionists began to adamantly demand U.S. government support for a Jewish Palestine, the State Department grew concerned about the impact such support might have on these traditional interests. Therefore, throughout much of this period the State Department argued for a position of neutrality as regards Zionism.

I

Among the American historians dealing with United States relations with Palestine from 1917 to 1945 there is near consensus on the attitudes and actions of the State Department. That consensus is that the personnel in the Department's Division of Near Eastern Affairs (hereafter NEA) were aggressively anti-Zionist. The word "aggressively" is used here deliberately. When one reads most of the histories touching on this subject one does not find phrases like "NEA had reservations," or "questions about," or misgivings in reference to Zionism. Such wording is much too qualified in its meaning for many of the historians. As we will see, their judgment is that NEA personnel were stubbornly, unreasonably, and prejudiciously opposed to Zionism. Because this is the opinion of the majority, I will refer to it as the "standard model" interpretation, and those who hold it as the "standard model" historians.

The notion that the State Department and NEA was anti-Zionist was originally suggested by the Zionist leadership itself. For instance, Chaim Weizmann, long time President of the World Zionist Organization, wrote in his memoirs,

Lawrence Davidson, Department of History, West Chester University

... our difficulties [in the U.S.] were not connected with the first rank statesmen. These ... had always understood our aspirations. ... It was always behind the scenes and on the lower levels, that we encountered an obstinate, devious and secretive opposition which set at nought the public declarations of American statesmen.¹

Weizmann thus concludes that those working in the “Eastern Division of the State Department” (he refers here to NEA) were “hostile” and unreasonable² This judgment, shared by American Zionist leaders³ has subsequently been used as a starting point for standard model historical studies.

The first, and perhaps most influential, standard model historian was Frank E. Manuel. In 1949 he published *The Realities of American-Palestine Relations* in which the State Department, including NEA, was characterized as follows,

The permanent officials of the Department resented what they considered the unwarranted intervention of American Zionists in the conduct of foreign policy. This feeling was expressed with a vehemence of language hardly defensible... State Department officials were writing with extravagant hostility and distorting an historical record of American interest in Palestine in glaring fashion⁴

He goes on to tell us that NEA considered “Zionist delegations seeking interviews” as a “nuisance;”⁵ that “in bulk the dispatches [from the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem] were colored by a rather constant antipathy towards the Jewish colonists;”⁶ and that American consular officials, almost all of whom, at one point or another, did in fact question the wisdom of Zionist goals, were “more often than not mediocre men” who “wrote what they thought the Department officials in Washington wanted to hear.”⁷ All this, Manuel concludes, is “not a pleasant story. At more than one period the vulgar smell of anti-Semitism obtrudes.”⁸

This is a sweeping condemnation. How well are Manuel’s assertions documented or supported? Although he lists extensive sources at the back of his text, he uses no footnotes. Sometimes Manuel makes use of a limited number of State Department documents in the series dealing with Zionism and Palestine (867n.000 and 867n.01). It should be kept in mind, however, that he did not have access to all of these documents because many were only declassified and published in the 1970s. Also, setting a precedent for the historians who come after him, Manuel does not give serious consideration to the arguments put forth by State Department personnel for not supporting the Zionists. Instead, he simply characterizes them negatively.

For instance, Manuel explains that, in 1917, Secretary of State Robert Lansing repeatedly advised President Wilson to “go very slowly” when it

came to policy formulation in support of Zionism because, among other reasons, “we are not at war with Turkey and should avoid any appearance of favoring taking territory from that Empire by force.”⁹ Manuel does not examine this argument or tell us why we should consider this bad advice. He simply concludes that this, and other arguments put forth by Lansing, are examples of “Lansing’s persistent negation of Zionist projects.”¹⁰

In sum, Manuel does not look at all of the evidence, does not evaluate arguments made by NEA, and fails to sufficiently support his allegations of “extravagant hostility” and “distorting” of the “historical record” on the part of the State Department. However, the approach he takes does have the effect of negating the contemporaneous context of these agencies. That is, there is no consideration of the fact that those working at NEA did so in a world that had more to it than Zionist ideals and ends. As we will see, but Manuel and his successors do not, those at NEA had to deal with traditional parameters for policy in the Middle East, contemporaneous conditions that presented serious counterweights to Zionist demands, and future considerations among which the Zionist plan for Palestine was only one among many.

However, if one accepts the standard model premises, Manuel’s well written book can be persuasive. The work has even been used as a primary source, frequently cited as evidence by those who have picked up Manuel’s line of argument. In fact, Manuel’s work stood as the standard model study of American governmental attitudes in general, and State Department attitudes in particular, until the 1970s and 1980s.

In the 1970s a series of new studies began to appear. However, with a very small number of exceptions, these were not original reexaminations, but rather reworkings of Manuel’s themes. For instance, Phillip J. Baram in his 1978 work, *The Department of State in the Middle East, 1919-1945* describes the attitude toward Zionism at the State Department in general and NEA in particular as clouded by a “subjective animus”¹¹ which resulted in “the view that the less the Department had to do with Zionist leaders the better.”¹² By the 1930s this “anti-Zionism became more intense”¹³ until by the time of World War II the Department of State as a whole becomes, in Baram’s view, “the lesser of the world’s anti-Jewish evils.”¹⁴

One of Baram’s principle explanations for this state of affairs was the department’s “consistent disdain” for American Zionist achievements.

Though there were some 9100 American nationals, chiefly Jewish, in Palestine by 1939, and though they represented 78% of all American nationals in the *entire* Middle East, these facts did not make the Department look upon the Jewish case with greater consideration. Nor did the fact that, of the total American dollar investment in Palestine in 1939 (\$49 million), \$41 million was from American Jews and was a sum larger than that invested in all the Arab countries combined (excluding Saudi Arabia).¹⁵

Like Manuel, Baram offers no analysis of why NEA allegedly took this position, concluding only that the State Department hid behind “numerous international exigencies” to avoid supporting Zionism.¹⁶ For instance, he ignores the fact that while the NEA staff was aware of the American Zionist presence and investment in Palestine they tended to see these figures against a larger backdrop. Thus, in a November 1938 memo signed by Assistant NEA Chief Paul Alling, we find the following economic facts,

In 1937 our [U.S.] exports to the Arab-speaking world of Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia amounted to \$26,821,567 and our imports from that area to \$30,094,675. Our exports to Palestine and Transjordan during the same period were \$3,240,000 and our imports were \$233,000.¹⁷

This trade data shifts the perspective and renders Palestine less central to American interests. Nonetheless, for Baram, NEA's alleged lack of interest in Jewish Palestine is completely inexplicable without resorting to the notion of “subjective animus.” NEA arguments for not wholeheartedly supporting the American Zionists (reasons which will be gone into in detail below), become no more than “excuses.” He contends that the real “root cause Departmental aloofness” was “a mindset of fixed anti-Zionism.”¹⁸ It follows then, according to Baram, that at those supposedly rare times when the State Department and NEA did respond positively to Zionist entreaties (examples also given below), they did so only in a “pro forma” fashion “for the record,”¹⁹ or, as a “strictly theoretical exercise done [again] for the record.”²⁰ For this judgment he offers no documentation at all.

Baram had access to a broader range of State Department documents than did Manuel, as well as more personal papers and memoirs. However, his use of the evidence is the same as Manuel's. He does not so much argue against the State Department and NEA position as much as dismiss it as motivated by an a priori anti-Zionism.

Also published in the 1970s was Melvin I. Urofsky's *American Zionism From Herzl to the Holocaust*. He too adopts the standard model interpretation, cites Manuel as a primary source, and relies heavily on Zionist sources for making judgments about State Department and NEA motivations. For instance, referring to the 1920s, he tells us that the State Department “consistently refused to meet with ZOA delegations at anything higher than a bureau level.” Why was this so? Urofsky asserts that Secretary of State Hughes “especially considered their [Zionist] constant importunements a nuisance.”²¹ What does he base this on? Urofsky points to the inability of Zionist representatives to get a “sympathetic response” from Hughes in their effort to “get an expression of favor in support of the Balfour Declaration.” His source here is an American Zionist report to the World Zionist Organization, and Manuel. If one goes back to the Manuel

passage on which Urofsky partly depends, we find that it itself is an undocumented conclusion.²² Urofsky cites no State Department documents to show that the Zionists were regarded as a “nuisance.”

Urofsky does not seek evidence for alternate explanations for the State Department’s behavior either in the documents or in the broader context of their actions. He just concludes that their actions were a product of resentment on the part of “foreign service careerists” who saw Zionist efforts as “an unwarranted intrusion of petty, ethnic politics into the rarified domain of foreign policy.”²³

As it turns out, this conclusion is not supported by the State Department records. To the contrary, in April 1922 Hughes was sympathetic enough to the Zionists to privately assist Henry Cabot Lodge in the wording of the 1922 Congressional Resolution supporting the Balfour Declaration.²⁴ However, his public position was less forthcoming. If Hughes was not possessed of an a priori anti-Zionism as Urofsky would have us believe, then what motivated him? Could there have been a politically based reason for his reluctance to make public statements on Palestine and the status of the Zionist movement there, or to receive Zionist delegations at this time (an act that was sure to be made public by the American Zionists)? Letters from the Secretary of State to the London embassy and Jerusalem consulate suggest that the uncertain legal status of the Palestine mandate in the absence of a peace treaty with Turkey was a possible source of his reluctance to respond to Zionist concerns. This uncertain legal status complicated the early stages of Department negotiations with Great Britain which sought to define U.S. rights in what was soon to be, but had not quite yet become, a British mandate territory.²⁵ Maintaining public silence, and thus neutrality, on a controversial topic such as the Balfour Declaration seemed reasonable during the negotiations.

Other standard model historians make the same assumptions as Manuel, Baram, and Urofsky. And, they therefore often sound the same themes. For instance, Selig Adler in his 1978 article “The Roosevelt Administration and Zionism: The Pre-War Years, 1933-1939” reworks Manuel’s “mediocre men” theme by asserting that those at the State Department who made decisions about the Middle East were “unimaginative men devoted to precedent.”²⁶ The only source cited for this judgement is an article on Cordell Hull’s time as Secretary of State which alleges that the U.S. foreign service at this time was “genteel, slow moving, and complacent—[and] also cherished the past.”²⁷ He goes on to accuse Wallace Murray, Chief of NEA, of doing “incalculable harm to the Zionist cause” by “relaying biased information” and “taking sides in controversial matters at issue in the department.”²⁸ As it turns out, the biased information was the reports from consular officials in the Middle East, whose “animosity... to a Jewish Palestine stemmed from a partiality to the exotic Moslems.”²⁹ The “taking sides” amounted to offering opinions the Zionists disapproved of. Naomi Cohen in her 1988 book *Ten Years After the Riots: American*

Responses to the Palestine Crisis of 1929-1930 uses Manuel, Baram, and Adler as sources to support her assertion that the State Department and NEA held Zionism in “disdain.”³⁰ As a result of this disdain, she tells us, citing Manuel, American consuls in the Middle East “side with the Arabs.”³¹ She claims (here citing Adler) that “the reaction of American officials to Zionism even before 1929 ... bore unmistakable traces of anti-Semitism.”³² But again, if we go back to her sources, we find the arguments weak at best.³³

Why would the State Department and NEA “side with the Arabs”? One reason offered was the influence of pro-Arab missionaries who “were often tied politically or socially with officials in the State Department.”³⁴ What is the proof of this influence? Cohen cites Adler who in turn cites a book on Brandeis by the Zionist author de Haas, and a letter by the Protestant missionary Howard Bliss explaining his hopes for a greater Syria under American mandate.³⁵ Another reason was that NEA was “doubtless humiliated at having been bypassed by Wilson” when it came to a decision to support the Balfour Declaration. This time we are left without any references at all, and so cannot say why the assumption that the State Department felt humiliated is “doubtless.” Nonetheless, according to Cohen, from that moment on “the State Department set to work building up a case against Zionism.”³⁶

Peter Grose in his 1983 work, *Israel In the Mind of America*, reworks Baram's charge of indifference to the Zionist economic stake in Palestine when he tells us that “the State Department made only perfunctory attempts to learn the scope and nature of Jewish investment in Palestine.”³⁷ He offers no proof of this perfunctoriness except to cite Baram's economic and demographic figures quoted above, and tell us that the Jerusalem consulate only reported on them in 1939. Michael Cohen, in his 1990 study *Truman and Israel* repeats the charge when he tells us that “the State Department dismissed out of hand any commercial benefits that the Yishuv [the Jewish colony in Palestine] might yield.”³⁸ Cohen's proof? He cites Baram and Grose. This is not convincing documentation and, in fact, both Grose and Cohen are wrong. Detailed assessments of Zionist economic activity were part of the regular consular reports coming out of the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem. As we will see below, the reports show that by the 1930s American Jewish investment in Palestine was recognized by the Jerusalem consulate as a growing aspect of American interests in that territory.

In this story of the lasting power of the standard model interpretation of the State Department's attitude toward Zionism, there are a few notable exceptions. John A. DeNovo, in his 1963 study, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900-1939* tells us in reference to the era of Woodrow Wilson that

when Zionists tried to elicit some show of sympathy from the State Department, they encountered a stone wall of negativism explainable probably not so much by anti-Semitism, as Professor

Frank Manuel has suggested, but more by the feeling that the political overtones of the Zionist movement would conflict with the American policy of non-involvement.³⁹

After reading the documents one might feel that such characterizations as “stone wall of negativism” is once more too sweeping. But at least DeNovo suggests that NEA did not operate in a vacuum. He points to a standing policy of “non-involvement” that could not be set aside lightly. DeNovo does, therefore, attempt to contextualize the situation. Also of note is a series of revisionist style works published by the Institute of Palestine Studies that touch upon U.S. foreign policy and Palestine. Notable here are Michael E. Jansen’s *The United States and the Palestinian People* (1970), Richard Stevens, *American Zionism and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1942 – 1947* (1970), and the latest publication, Donald Neff, *Fallen Pillars – U.S. Policy Towards Palestine and Israel since 1945* (1995). These works are light on the use of primary documentation, particularly State Department papers. They do, however, make extensive use of memoirs, personal papers, records of the Zionist Organization of America, and secondary works. Jansen even considers Arab sources, an effort not characteristic of the standard model researchers.

What sets these revisionist authors apart from the standard model historians is that first, they do not condemn the Department or NEA for failing to take up the Zionist cause. And second, like DeNovo, they try to contextualize the actions of those making Middle East policy. However, none of the revisionist works critique the standard model historians’ arguments, or question the adequacy of their sources. This failure to address the standard model directly has probably contributed to the fact that these works have not been able to displace the standard model interpretation. The story as told by Manuel and his successors continues to be the one most widely accepted, and repeated, as historical fact.

II

A key weakness of the standard model interpretation is the oversimplistic assumption that the State Department’s Middle East policy makers were motivated by an a priori anti-Zionism, or worse, anti-Semitism. A corollary to this is the assertion that any arguments or reasons given by these men for their decisions on Zionism and Palestine were not substantive, but rather just “pro forma” excuses, given out “for the record.” In making this charge, Manuel and those who have followed his lead almost never analyze NEA’s arguments, nor do they examine the pressures NEA personnel worked under apart from those exercised by the American Zionists and their supporters. In other words, a large part of NEA’s contemporaneous context is simply ignored. It is to an examination of this missing context, real and compelling in its own right, that we now turn.

At the time of the Balfour Declaration United States government personnel had a tradition-based notion of what the country’s national

interests were in the Middle East. The particulars of these interests, and why Zionism was not one of them, was laid out by Allen Dulles who, in the early 1920s, was Chief of the State Department's Division of Near Eastern Affairs. Dulles wrote in an internal Division memo that American interests in this area entailed American missionary endeavors, trade, and maintaining the integrity of treaty rights ("capitulations") acquired during the Ottoman reign.⁴⁰

Zionism was not among these national interests because it was seen as a political movement of basically European origin, the primary interest of which was acquiring territory and status within a British imperial sphere of influence. In other words, Zionism was a British imperial affair. "From our point of view," Dulles writes, "the Balfour Declaration [is one of the] details of the Near Eastern settlement [of the Versailles Treaty]."⁴¹ And again, Zionism "primarily concern(s) the relationship between the mandatory power [for Palestine, that is Great Britain] and the natives of Palestine."⁴²

How then should the United States relate to American Jewish demands for active support of Zionism? The answer at this stage was dictated by tradition. Ever since Washington's Farewell Address it had been American policy to avoid entanglements with European political and imperial affairs. Thus Dulles concludes, "If our policy is to let alone the political and territorial phases of the [Versailles peace] settlement, I see no reason why we should become pro-Zionist."⁴³ And again, "NEA feels strongly that the Department should avoid any action which would indicate official support for any one of the various theses regarding Palestine, either Zionist, [American Jewish] anti-Zionist or the Arabs"⁴⁴ It should be noted here that Dulles is not arguing *against* Zionism as such. Rather he is arguing *for* a position of neutrality—neutrality that applies equally to all sides of the struggle for Palestine.

Was Dulles taking this position because he is anti-Zionist or anti-Semitic? Was he, as Manuel would have us believe, trying to sabotage the Balfour Declaration?⁴⁵ This certainly would be consistent with the interpretation of the standard model historians. But why assume these motives when there is really no hard and fast evidence for them?⁴⁶ It is better to apply a variation on the maxim of Occam's Razor, and chose the simplest explanation consistent with the documented facts. Among those facts as they faced Dulles and NEA in 1922, were the following: 1. The U.S. had a set of traditional interests in the Middle East and, as we have seen, Zionism was not one of them. 2. Although the U.S. was then in the process of negotiating a series of bilateral treaties with Britain and France to establish its rights in Middle East mandate territories, there was little incentive at this point to break tradition and add a new interest which was fraught with controversy and threatened possible "entanglements" in what was, after all, a European sphere of influence. 3. The mood in the country after World War I was decidedly isolationist. 4. And finally, the Jewish position in Palestine, Zionist or non-Zionist, was not very imposing. As Dulles

notes in one of his memos “the cold fact is that the Jews in Palestine constitute 10% of the population and that the 90% majority bitterly opposes Zionism.”⁴⁷ One need not harbor a “subjective animus” to Zionism and Jews to hold the position Dulles and NEA held after World War I. Their position was, considering the historical context, a predictable one.

American Zionist activity in Palestine, both commercial and philanthropic, slowly grew through the 1920s and 1930s. Was this “reconstructive work,” as Woodrow Wilson once called it,⁴⁸ being ignored or “discounted in the State Department’s eyes, because it came from Jews ...” as Peter Grose tells us?⁴⁹ And, if so, was this part of what Manuel describes as a “constant antipathy” toward Zionism on the part of State Department personnel?⁵⁰ Once more, there is little reason to believe such animosity motivated the positions taken by those involved in Middle East policy. A complete reading of the documents from the 1920s and 1930s reveals that NEA received economic and political reports on Zionist activities in Palestine every year.⁵¹ Indeed, on average, more analysis of Zionist activities was done than that of the majority Arab population. The content of these reports were fact/statistic based and, most of the time, the tone was objective. The growing American Jewish population and investment in Palestine was not only noted, but was defined by consular officials as an expression of a new, evolving dimension to American interests in the area. A good example of this interpretation of the situation in Palestine is a letter written on September 16, 1936 to the Jewish philanthropist Nathan Straus by George Wadsworth, American Consul General at Jerusalem. In it Wadsworth refers to “Christendom’s inescapable interest not only in the land of its religious origins but also in the post war drama of the building in that Holy Land of a National Home for the Jewish people.” The Consul goes on,

Of the 400,000 who now form the Yishuv, some 10,000, my office estimates, are American citizens. Of the \$300,000,000 which I am informed the World Zionist Organization estimates as having been invested in Palestine or spent in the furtherance of the Zionist cause, my office estimates some \$33,000,000 as being today in the form of concrete American capital investment in Palestine. I need not assure you that these new and important American interests add much ... to the very real interest of the work of the Jerusalem Consulate General. ⁵²

These ‘facts on the ground’ meant that, of necessity, most of the Consulate’s activities as they pertained to the protection of American nationals and their property in Palestine involved simultaneously the protection of American Zionist interests. This fact is simply ignored by the standard model historians. Instead, the claim is that, to use Naomi Cohen’s words, American consular representatives in Palestine (and the rest of the

Middle East) "side with the Arabs." Selig Adler facetiously explains this as follows, "the attraction of these consuls to Arab civilization was not accidental since field officers were strongly encouraged to familiarize themselves with the local history and culture. This they did by mixing with the citizenry of their assigned posts, culling the native press, and listening to radio broadcasts."⁵³

Why such a one-sided reading? First, the standard model historians come to their subject with a strong pro-Zionist point of view which leads them to choose their evidence selectively. Evidence that contradicts their assumptions, such as the Wadsworth letter (and other examples will be given below), are overlooked or ignored. Second, working from this bias, they seem to have adopted the Zionist's own expectations of the State Department and consular officials. In most cases these expectations simply exceed what seemed possible or reasonable to American officials *working within their historical context*. For example, while acknowledging the increase in American nationals and investment in Palestine, a good number of the economic and political reports coming out of Jerusalem (though, as we will see, not all) question the ultimate achievability of Zionist goals. The most frequent reasons cited for these doubts were: 1. the growing and persistent strength of Arab resistance, 2. the dependence of Zionist colonies on outside subsidies (much of which came from the United States), 3. Palestine's assumed inability to absorb all the Jewish immigrants the Zionists wished to send there.

The standard model historians might not find these observations a credible basis for policy formation. But, in the 1920s and 1930s, they appeared to the State Department personnel to be based on good, factual evidence. For example, between 1926 and 1928 there was economic depression in the Jewish economy of Palestine resulting in greater emigration of Jews than immigration.⁵⁴ Then, in 1929 (and again in 1936-1938) there was a major and bloody rebellion of Palestinian Arabs.

The August 1929 Arab rebellion, which began as a dispute between Muslims and Jews over access to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, rapidly spread into a nationwide uprising. The U.S. government response to these events provides another example of its fairly consistent adherence to a policy of neutrality on Palestine. At the time of the rebellion, the State Department was urged to action by three different constituencies. First, and most energetically, were the American Zionists and their allies. The rebellion was a bloody affair killing over 500 people. A small number of these were American Jews. In the face of what was considered a mortal threat to the whole Zionist enterprise, the American Zionist Organization mounted a major lobbying campaign in the press, with Congress, and with the State Department to move the American government to direct action in support of the Jewish community in Palestine. They urged the dispatch of U.S. warships to the Palestine coast, and greater pressure on Great Britain to immediately suppress the Arab violence.⁵⁵ A number of Zionist

and non-Zionist Jewish delegations visited Secretary of State Stimson and President Hoover, as well as the personnel of NEA.

A second source of pressure came from Arab-Americans, who at this time had formed an organization named the Palestine National League (later renamed the Arab National League). They sought to give the Arab perspective both to the press and the government, but were not able to make the same impact as their Zionist rivals. They too came knocking at the door of the State Department. The Arab-Americans urged the U.S. government to pressure Great Britain to abandon the Balfour Declaration.⁵⁶

Finally, a third source of pressure on the Department and NEA came from its own Consul General in Jerusalem, at this time Paul Knabenshue. Knabenshue, having extensive first-hand experience in Palestine, clearly understood that some sort of compromise solution had to be found. This solution, he felt, had to allow for some Jewish refugee access to Palestine, while lessening the prevailing feeling of insecurity that Zionism caused the Arabs. So, in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, Knabenshue began urging his superiors to support a redefinition of the Palestine mandate document, then being reviewed by a British royal commission. Knabenshue argued that, on the one hand, a new mandate should immediately create a legislative assembly in Palestine allowing the majority (that is the Arabs) a significant role in government. This would include some say in regulating immigration. on the other hand, Palestine should have a constitution which would give the Jews “equal rights with the rest of the population” and make it plain that they were in Palestine “as of right and not sufferance.” The British would stay as the supervising mandate power with a veto to prevent either group from persecuting the other.⁵⁷ As Knabenshue explained some years later, despite his doubts about Zionism’s long term prospects in Palestine, he had put forth his plan in order to provide a path by which the Jews could,

... peacefully gain control of at least what is now Palestine in from 50 to 100 years. With the slowly increasing Jewish population absorbing the economic life of Palestine, the Arabs would be painlessly squeezed out. The error of the Jews has been that they have attempted to accomplish in one generation what should have been spread over a period of one hundred years.⁵⁸

Whatever one might think of the fairness and workability of such a scheme, it does not come from the pen of a diplomat who Manuel has characterized as among the “mediocre men in the field” who “wrote what they thought the Department officials in Washington wanted to hear.”⁵⁹ Indeed NEA was not at all pleased with Knabenshue’s ideas for the reform of the Palestine mandate.

By 1929 Allen Dulles’s earlier urging of neutrality had become the State Department’s official position on Zionism and Palestine. Therefore,

President Hoover, Secretary of State Stimson, and the men of NEA resisted all three sources of pressure: Zionists, Arab-Americans, and Paul Knabenshue.⁶⁰ As for the Consul General in Jerusalem, he was instructed by NEA to “avoid being drawn into any discussions of the situation and scrupulously refrain from expressing an opinion to anyone whomsoever as to the possible position which this government might take” on any reinterpretation of the mandate.⁶¹

That the State Department rebuffed all three lobbies, including its own expert in the field, speaks to the steadfastness (at least as of 1929) of the policy of neutrality and its corollary of non-entanglement. The standard model historians such as Naomi Cohen insist that anti-Zionism was “coupled with the principle of noninvolvement.”⁶² However, there seems no necessary reason to draw this conclusion. As we have seen, there is evidence that the consular officials in Jerusalem displayed at least occasional sympathy toward Zionism, but the decision was taken by NEA not to respond with the level of support that the Zionists desired. A broad reading of the documents reveals policy reasons for this position, rather than the overt ethnic and religious prejudice suggested by the standard model historians.

The situation became more complicated in the 1930s. The official position of neutrality on Palestine and Zionism was now buffeted from two directions. On the one hand, American Zionists, faced with vicious anti-Semitic persecution in Europe, redoubled their efforts to get the U.S. government to push the British to open Palestine to greater Jewish immigration. For instance, in 1938 with Great Britain considering reducing immigration in the face of renewed Arab unrest, the American Zionist Organization was able to generate in a matter of months some 65,000 telegrams and letters to the President, Congress, and State Department urging the government to pressure the British not to adopt such a policy.⁶³ On the other hand, the growth of militaristic Fascism gave the State Department grave concern over Britain's overall capacity to face the threat of impending war. There was a particular fear that events in Palestine might push the Arab states to side with the Fascist powers, or provoke an untimely rebellion of Muslim subjects throughout the British Empire. One thing that was felt likely to increase such possibilities was ever greater Jewish immigration into Palestine.⁶⁴ The prolonged and bloody Arab uprising of 1936-1938, followed by the Mufti of Jerusalem's collaboration with the Nazis, seem to give credence to these fears. Under the circumstances, NEA did not want to pressure the British to adopt a policy that might weaken its position in the Middle East. As Wallace Murray, Chief of NEA, wrote in a memo to Secretary of State Hull in February 1939 that touched on the question of open immigration into Palestine,

It is apparent that the British cannot arrive at a decision [on Palestine] which would make lasting enemies of the Arab states bordering Palestine. All our evidence indicates that these states

have no love for the [Fascist] dictator governments, but if the Arabs are pressed too hard by the British it is quite within the bounds of possibility that they would decide to cast their lot with Germany and Italy.... In the light of the foregoing, and bearing in mind the European situation since Munich, it seems altogether undesirable for us to take any action which would further weaken the British position⁶⁵

At this point it would be well to make a distinction, often lost on the standard model historians, between the attitudes and positions taken at NEA and those held by the State Department's Visa bureau headed by Breckenridge Long. Long's policies of preventing as much Jewish (and all other) refugee immigration into the United States in these years was probably motivated by anti-Semitism and a general, reprehensible, xenophobia. There is no evidence, however, that NEA personnel acted on similar grounds when refusing to pressure Britain on the question of immigration into Palestine. In fact NEA was generally supportive of President Roosevelt's efforts to find places of refuge outside of Palestine for persecuted Jews. That most of these efforts came to naught does not, as writers like Urofsky imply, necessarily place NEA personnel among the "career officers in the service, many of them blatantly anti-Semitic, [who] tried to reduce or even block further immigration."⁶⁶

Nonetheless, during the 1930s Zionist pressure would momentarily move the State Department and NEA discretely away from its position of neutrality. This move occurred, at Wallace Murray's suggestion, in late 1936 and 1937.⁶⁷ It took the form of repeated, informal and formal representations of the American Zionist point of view on Palestine to the British government by U.S. diplomats. The American Zionist point of view was represented to the British by the State Department as the point of view held by the American people as a whole.⁶⁸ One can see this as a sort of halfway position, an attempt to accommodate a politically powerful domestic lobby in a way that would not, in the view of the State Department, overly risk foreign entanglements or be too harmful to a friendly foreign power already under stress. This effort was detailed in a letter of July 14, 1937 written by Secretary of State Hull to Senator Robert Wagner,

For your confidential information I may say that for the past several months we have taken a constant interest in the Palestine problem.... on several occasions we have brought the matter informally to the attention of the appropriate British authorities. Thus last winter I asked our Ambassador in London to explain orally to the British Foreign Secretary the concern of a large section of our people in the Palestine problem. Again, on April 27 our Ambassador at London, at my direction, sought an interview with the Foreign Secretary and orally and informally advised him

that Jewish groups in the United States were perturbed over rumors that the Royal Commission of Inquiry would recommend a cessation of Jewish immigration into Palestine or a system of Jewish and Arab cantons Furthermore, late in May and early in June an official of the Department conversant with Palestine ... at my direction took up orally and informally with officials of the British Foreign Office the interests of groups of our citizens in the Palestine question. All of these conversations were, as I have explained, kept on an informal plane However, within the past few days I instructed our Ambassador at London to hand the British Foreign Secretary a written memorandum setting forth at some length the sympathy with which all our recent Presidents ... have had in the idea of a Jewish National Home The memorandum likewise referred to the important American colonization and investments in Palestine and concluded with the statement that it seemed fitting and proper again to bring to the attention of the British Government, at a time when it was considering the Palestine question, the interest and concern of many of our people in that problem.⁶⁹

These actions on the part of the State Department and NEA are dismissed by the standard model historians like Baram as a “pro forma habit of informing the [British] Foreign Office ‘for the record’ that American Jews were keenly interested in Palestine.”⁷⁰ But there was nothing habitual about this. These acts were, in fact, a break from standing policy of neutrality. Nor were they “pro forma.” They were accompanied by other actions such as facilitating meetings between American Zionist leaders and high British officials.⁷¹

This effort by the State Department might not impress the standard model historians but, along with the claims of American government support put out by the Zionists at the time, it certainly impressed the British and the Arabs. By 1938 British diplomats were going about complaining to the Arab governments that “the British government was forced to take a pro-Jewish policy [by which was meant not shutting down immigration into Palestine] as a result of pressure brought by the United States government.”⁷² And the Arabs believed them. By December 1938 reports were arriving at NEA of “the Arab conviction that we are using the 10,000 American Jews in Palestine as an excuse to interfere in favor of a Jewish state there.”⁷³ And then again, in January 1939, of “the widespread impression which exists among Arabs that the U.S. has exerted pressure on Great Britain to support the Zionist cause in Palestine. This impression has resulted in what is described as a ‘wave of anti-Americanism’ among Arabs which, though not yet serious, seems worthy of further note.”⁷⁴

With the outbreak of World War II further State Department representations of the American Zionist position ceased. The British issued the White Paper of 1939 which greatly reduced Jewish immigration into

Palestine and promised the Arabs majority self-government within ten years. This infuriated the Zionists who, in America, would continue their efforts to win the Government as an ally in the struggle for a Jewish state in Palestine. In that effort the State Department (and the War Department as well) would prove a major obstacle.⁷⁵ However, the men at NEA would not act as such because, as Peter Grose would have us believe, “the fate of world Jewry was of no particular interest” to them.⁷⁶ Rather, Wallace Murray and those under him would resist Zionism, at least in part, because the fate of world Jewry was, in their eyes, tied not to Palestine as such, but to the larger issue of World War II. Thus, the NEA looked at the situation at this time and concluded that any strategy to win the war must include keeping the Arab world pacified—that is preventing the Arabs from “casting their lot with Germany and Italy.” Murray noted further that “a British collapse in the Near East would undoubtedly mean the massacre of all the Jews now in Palestine. Arab feelings are running high on the question and Arab leaders would have little hesitancy in attacking the Jews in the event the restraining hand of the British was withdrawn.”⁷⁷

American Zionists looked at the same situation and, while they of course desired that the Allies prevail, concluded that, given that outcome, what was necessary was a strategy to win Palestine.⁷⁸ There is no evidence that the leaders of the American Jewish Community, be they Zionists or not, seriously addressed NEA’s worry that Jewish immigration into Palestine might cause the Arab states to side with the Fascists. And, because the Zionists did not take this concern seriously, neither it seems do the standard model historians.

III

From 1917 onward, American Zionists and the men of NEA operated, as far as Palestine was concerned, in different worlds that entailed different sets of priorities. The world defining reference points for the Zionists were Europe’s persecuted Jews and Palestine as the only acceptable haven. The world defining reference points for NEA were, first, their understanding of traditional U.S. national interests in the Middle East and how they applied to Palestine. Later, these expanded to include keeping the Arabs from “casting their lot” with the Fascists. By the 1930s, pressure on the State Department from the Jewish community and its allies in local and state governments, and especially in Congress, forced NEA to take Zionism under consideration as a possible additional national interest. But in the end it presented too many contradictions with other standing and evolving interests to be accepted in the whole-hearted way American Zionists demanded. For this failure to respond to Zionism as the Zionists themselves expected, the standard model historians have chosen to denigrate those in the State Department responsible for Middle East policy at this time. They impugn the character of these men with charges of mediocrity, a priori anti-Zionism, and anti-Semitism.

These charges seem reasonable to the standard model historians only because they pay scant attention to the whole historical context within which NEA worked, and assume that the only relevant pressures, precedents, and possibilities that existed for NEA were those that should have pointed inexorably to the fulfillment of Zionist demands. Thus, the reasoning and arguments NEA personnel use for their policies are dismissed as mere excuses for inaction.

Such an approach is simply bad history writing, though one might conclude that it has, in this case, produced a rather effective set of polemics. As historians we are not obligated to like or agree with the actions or motives of the subjects of our studies. What we are obligated to do, however, is to explicate as completely as possible the historical context within which our subjects lived and worked. To take some notice of the way they saw things even if we disagree with their views. Of necessity that requires presenting the evidence fully and honestly, as well as considering the full range of possible explanations for behavior supported by the evidence. The standard model historians with their selective use of evidence, don't do this. In the end, what the evidence does show is that, in most cases, the State Department's Division of Near Eastern Affairs did not support the Zionist cause between the years 1917 and 1945. Instead, for most of that time, they maintained a policy of neutrality and non-entanglement on the issues of Zionism and its activities in Palestine. When, in the late 1930s, the State Department and NEA briefly diverged from this policy, they did so in favor of Zionism. The evidence also supports the argument that they were led to this policy by the prevailing traditions of American foreign policy and, later, by a series of events that caused the pursuit of Zionist goals to appear a serious threat to the integrity of the British empire in the Middle East at a time of rising Fascist power. To go beyond these conclusions into a realm characterized by charges of ethnic and religious prejudice, as do the interpretations of Frank Manuel, Phillip Baram, Naomi Cohen, Peter Grose, Melvin Urofsky, Selig Adler, and Michael Cohen, is to leave behind evidence based history for a more emotionally driven and certainly one-sided story.

NOTES

¹ Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error* (N.Y: Harper, 1949), pp. 431-432.

² Loc. cit.

³ American Zionist leaders held the same opinion. For instance, Rabbi Stephen Wise once wrote to Felix Frankfurter, "I really am inclined to [believe] ... that there is a cabal in the State Department deliberately and, I am afraid, effectively working against those Palestine interests, which are precious to some of us." Carl Hemann Voss, ed., *Stephen S. Wise. Servant of The People: Selected Letters* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1970), P. 252- See also Melvin Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 408.

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- ⁴ Frank E. Manuel, *The Realities of American-Palestine Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1949), p. 305.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 292.
- ⁷ *Loc. cit.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- ¹¹ Phillip J. Baram, *The Department of State in the Middle East, 1919-1945* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), p. 53.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 254.
- ¹⁵ *Loc. cit.* Emphasis in original.
- ¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*
- ¹⁷ Records of the Department of State (hereafter RDS) 867n.01/1287, p. 12. Internal NEA memo dated 4/1/38.
- ¹⁸ Phillip J. Baram, "A Tradition of Anti-Zionism: The Department of State's Middle Managers," in Melvin Urofsky, ed., *Essays- in American Zionism, 1917-1948* (N.Y.: Herzl Press, 1978), p. 192.
- ¹⁹ Baram, *The State Department in the Middle East*, *ibid.*, p. 250.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 267.
- ²¹ Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust*, *ibid.*, pp. 307-308.
- ²² Manuel, *ibid.*, pp. 275-276.
- ²³ Urofsky, *ibid.*, pp. 308-309.
- ²⁴ RDS 867n.01/199, dated 4/10/22.
- ²⁵ See RDS 867n.01/266, Hughes to Balfour, dated 1/27/22; 867n.01/236, Hughes to London embassy, dated 5/10/22; and 867n.01/226, Hughes to Jerusalem consulate, dated 5/17/22.
- ²⁶ Selig Adler, "The Roosevelt Administration and Zionism: The Pre-War Years, 1933-1939,11 in M. Urofsky, ed., *Essays in American Zionism*, *ibid.*, p. 137.
- ²⁷ The piece Adler cites is Donald F. Drummond, "Cordell Hull," in, Norman Graebner, ed., *An Uncertain Tradition, American Secretaries of State in the Twentieth Century* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1961). The quote used here is on page 188.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 142.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 143.
- ³⁰ Naomi Cohen, *The Year After the Riots: American Responses to the Palestine Crisis of 1929-1930* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1988), p. 17.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20. Here Cohen cites Manuel, *ibid.*, pp. 290-299. When one goes back to Manuel one finds that he does not give proof that the State Department "sided with the Arabs," but rather reads such a preference into the evidence.

³² Ibid., p. 21.

³³ Cohen cites Selig Adler, "The Palestine Question in the Wilson Era," *Jewish Social Studies* 10 (Oct. 1948), pp. 317-318 and 321. Here Adler asserts that Wilson's adviser, Colonel House, was anti-Semitic. While this may or may not be so, Adler offers no convincing evidence of it here. He also points to Secretary of State Robert Lansing's note to Wilson calling attention to the fact that many gentiles believed that the Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. For pointing out that there were anti-Semites in the world, poor Lansing has ever after been accused of being himself an anti-Semite by Zionists such as Adler and Cohen. Adler, and thus Cohen too, also uses the King-Crane Commission and American Consuls who alerted the State Department to a "Zionist-Bolshevik equation" as supposed instances of anti-Semitism.

³⁴ Naomi Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁵ Adler, "The Palestine Question in the Wilson Era," *ibid.*, p. 317. On this question of the State Department and the missionary influence Cohen also cites Baram, *ibid.*, pp. 68, 73-75. But here Baram only offers a series of brief biographies of various State Department personnel. Except for the case of Harold Hoskins there is nothing to indicate a tangible influence on the part of the missionaries.

³⁶ Naomi Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁷ Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1983), p. 100.

³⁸ Michael Cohen, *Truman and Israel*. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), p. 88.

³⁹ John DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East, 1900-1939* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 50.

⁴⁰ RDS 867n.01/227, Dulles to Harrison, dated 5/26/22.

⁴¹ RDS 867n.01/214, Dulles to Bliss and Harrison, 5/2/22.

⁴² RDS 867n.01/227.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 867n.01/214.

⁴⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁵ Manuel, *ibid.*, pp. 277-279.

⁴⁶ In his memo of 5/2/22 (867n.01/214) Dulles does refer to American Zionists as an "influential and noisy group," but this is hardly proof of deep seated-animosity.

⁴⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁸ RDS 867n.01/758, Wilson, August, 1918.

⁴⁹ Grose, *ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁰ Manuel, *ibid.*, p. 292.

⁵¹ For just a sampling, see the following: Report from the Jerusalem consulate on the "Future of Zionism," 867n.01/396, 12/31/33; "The Palestine Near-East Exhibition and Fair, 867n.01/607a/3, 11/11/25; "Agriculturalists and the Palestine Government," 867n.61/2, 4/29/24; "Present Difficulties Confronting the Jewish National Home," 867n.01/467, 10/27/26; "The Dairy Industry as a Basis for Colonisation

in Palestine” 867n.6223, 10/26/28; Documents concerning the construction of Haifa harbor, 867n.156, 7/28 through 2/29; Report questioning the feasibility of a Jewish state in Palestine, 867n.00/93, 9/12/30; “Development Scheme for Palestine,” 867n.01/621, 3/11/32; and “Present Status of the Zionist Movement in Palestine,” 867n.01/663, 3/1/33.

⁵² RDS 867n.01/728, Wadsworth to Straus, 9/16/36.

⁵³ Adler, *ibid.*, p. 143.

⁵⁴ See American consular reports on the economic situation in Palestine, RDS 867n.01/467.5, 9/27/26 and 11/5/26.

⁵⁵ RDS 867n.404WW/3 through 165.

⁵⁶ See New York Times, 8/29/29, p. 2.

⁵⁷ RDS 867n.404WW/273.

⁵⁸ RDS 867n.01/747.5, 8/4/37.

⁵⁹ Manuel, *ibid.*, P. 292. Naomi Cohen describes Knabenshue as someone who “freely shared his anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic views with the State Department in the months following the [1929] riots.” *Ibid.*, p. 28. She gives no blatant examples of these views, but rather insinuates such an attitude from various reports Knabenshue submitted, some of which put forth evidence that Revisionist Zionist actions might have helped provoke the 1929 Arab rebellion. For this, and other failures to support the Zionists as wholeheartedly as Cohen would have liked, the American Consul General is condemned for the “intensity” of his “prejudice.” See also pp. 27-28.

⁶⁰ For the State Department’s standard reply to all domestic entreaties during the 1929 rebellion see RDS 867n.404WW/52.

⁶¹ RDS 867n.01/543, 11/5/30.

⁶² Naomi Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶³ RDS 867n.01/1’A.80, 10/15/38.

⁶⁴ Such fears began to surface at NEA during the 1929 Arab rebellion. For instance, see RDS 867n.404WW/189, 9/6/29; 867n.404WW/139, 9/1/29; and 867n.404WW/275, 11/30/29.

⁶⁵ RDS 867n.01/1431.5, Murray to Hull and Sumner Wells, 2/9/39.

⁶⁶ Urofsky, *Zionism in America*, *ibid.*, p. 408.

⁶⁷ 867n.00/334, Murray to Hull, 7/25/36.

⁶⁸ It is interesting to note that NEA did not bother to represent to the British government the views of Arab-Americans, who were organized and also presenting their position to the State Department. Two such vocal groups were the Arab National League and the Syrian-Lebanese Federation. See RDS 867n.00/403 and 867n.00/427.

⁶⁹ RDS 867n.01/769, Hull to Wagner, 7/14/37.

⁷⁰ Baram, *The State Department in the Middle East*, *ibid.*, p. 250.

⁷¹ See the State Department telegram to the American embassy in London, RDS 867n.01/7851, 8/5/37. The telegram speaks of the effort to facilitate a meeting between Stephen Wise and the British Foreign Secretary.

⁷² See RDS 867n.01/1256, 11/1/38 and 867n.01/1431.5, 2/9/39.

⁷³ RDS 867n.01/1346, 12/20/38.

⁷⁴ RDS 867n.01/1426, 1/27/39.

⁷⁵ For instance, both the State and War Departments would act to obstruct repeated war time attempts by American Zionists to pass Congressional resolutions favoring a Jewish state in Palestine.

⁷⁶ Grose, *ibid.*, P. 135.

⁷⁷ RDS 867n.01/1431.5, 2/9/39.

⁷⁸ The Zionists were focused on Palestine for reasons that predated the horrors of Nazi anti-Semitism, but that focus was greatly intensified by the resulting persecution. And, if we are to believe David Brody's study of "American Jewry, the Refugees and Immigration Restriction (1932-1942)" in Abraham Karp, ed., *The Jewish Experience in America*, Vol. V (N.Y.: American Jewish Historical Society, 1969), pp. 320-348, their focus was intensified by the fact that American Jews generally found it more comfortable to fight for immigration into Palestine, than fight for liberalized immigration into the United States.

⁷⁹ This reaction on the part of the standard model historians suggests that they are too emotionally, and perhaps ideologically, committed to the subject of their study (Zionism) to judge it objectively.