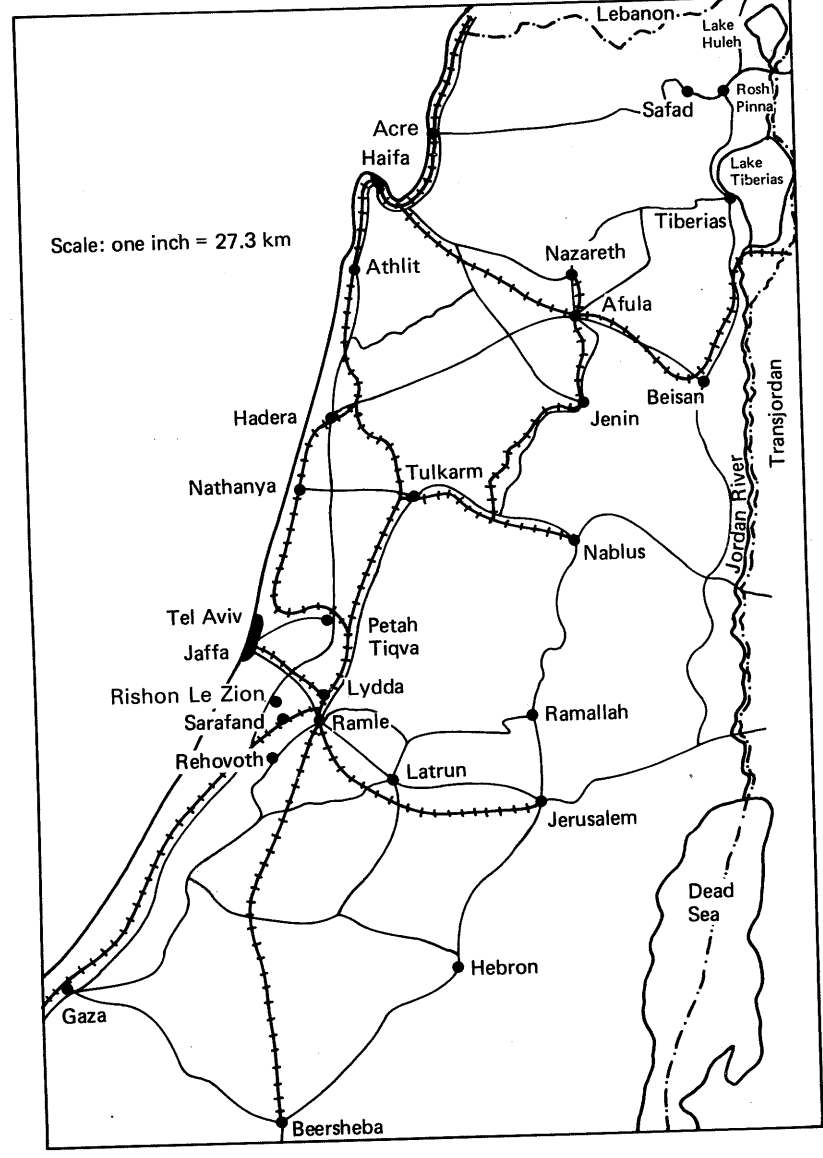

Palestine Operational Area, 1945–47

1 On Armies and Insurgency

> The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.[1]

Clausewitz's dictum, written in the early nineteenth century, retains its validity today and is particularly relevant to the problem of counter-insurgency. As a form of warfare it is manifestly different from that for which armies are normally organised and trained: conventional war between formed armies of national states. If they are to prevail in an insurgent war, armies must learn to adapt to that form of warfare; in order to adapt effectively, they must first understand the nature of the war. Hence, the continuing importance of Clausewitz's principle, which armies can ignore at their peril.

Adaptation to change is not a new problem for armies; they have been adapting to changes in tactics, technology, leadership and control since the dawn of time.[2] But professional armies, as Samuel Huntington has observed, are traditionally conservative in their strategic thinking,[3] often for perfectly sound reasons. War is a dangerous, high-risk undertaking; it makes sense to err on the side of caution, to plan on the basis of known quantities and proven principles and practices. This tends to make armies, as institutions, resistant to change. Moreover, some – the British army among them – have not been very good at developing the kind of 'institutional memory' that would facilitate learning from experience – both good and bad – and transmitting the appropriate 'lessons learned' to the next generation of soldiers.[4] This, too, hinders adaptation.

Maurice Tugwell identifies two types of adaptation. The first, he feels, is 'innovative adaptability', the product of military genius. The second and more common form is 'reactive' adaptation, which is required whenever new or unforseen events or conditions disrupt existing military doctrine.[5] It is in the nature both of professional armies and of insurgency that in such conflicts reactive adaptation is the rule, not the exception. The counter-insurgency campaigns of the twentieth century have not been remarkable for their demonstration of military genius.

So what is it in the nature of insurgencies that poses unique problems for a regular army? There is no commonly agreed definition of insurgency, and many tend towards the simplistic: 'some kind of uprising against an incumbent government . . . a form of armed insurrection',[6] or 'a localized armed conflict between the forces of a constituted government and other forces originating within the same national territory.'[7] Even a recent study of armies and counter-insurgency did not expand upon these definitions in a significant way. It described insurgency as 'a politico-military campaign waged by guerrillas with the object of overthrowing the government of a state'.[8] This author finds the definition offered by Bard E. O'Neill the most comprehensive and persuasive: 'a struggle between a non-ruling group and the ruling authorities in which the former consciously employs political resources (organizational skills, propaganda, and/or demonstrations) and instruments of violence to establish legitimacy for some aspect of the political system it considers illegitimate . . .,' in short, 'a political legitimacy crisis of some sort'.[9] Dennis C. Pirages notes that 'there is little agreement on what constitutes legitimacy or how to measure it',[10] but the very elusiveness of the concept, like that of insurgency itself, seems to enhance its significance. Legitimacy, Eqbal Ahmad argues, 'is not just a matter of beliefs and sentiments . . . . It refers to that crucial and ubiquitous factor in politics which invests power with authority'.[11] Timothy Lomperis goes on to assert that 'Every government or political regime lives on a grant of legitimacy from its populace.'[12] Ahmad notes that the erosion of legitimacy, and hence authority, 'generally marks the increasing shift of citizens from obeying authority to rebelling against it'.[13] Social scientists have identified numerous possible causes of the loss of legitimacy that need not be enumerated in detail here; suffice to say that regime performance – even where it is repressive, or fails to fulfil expectations – is not the only possible factor.[14] Indeed, as Harry Eckstein points out, internal wars – of

which insurgency is one form – may arise from a host of plausible sources of conflict.[15] The importance of this approach to understanding insurgency is that it shifts the focus of attention from the military to the 'political' dimension of the conflict. Classical strategic thought about conventional war places the 'centre of gravity' in the military forces of the opposing powers.[16] The soldiers on the battlefield – those units in direct contact with the enemy – need concern themselves only with the military objective: defeating the enemy's armed forces. The 'politics' of the war is left to the 'frocks' (the politicians) and the 'brass', the military high command. In insurgency, the 'centre of gravity' is political.[17] The insurgent transfers the locus of conflict to the political and social structure and concurrently to the realm of political ideas and agitation. It is the social/political order – its future shape and direction – rather than territory, that is the contested ground.[18] In this sense insurgency is both more than just a 'legitimacy crisis' or an armed struggle between opposing groups within the same state; it is, first and foremost, a *battle* for legitimacy, for political power and authority, between rebel and incumbent, insurgent and counter-insurgent.

Yet, this clearly is not the entire picture. Implicit in the notion of legitimacy is the idea of 'control'. If legitimacy represents the *right* to exercise authority, control represents the *ability* to do so. The link between the two is obvious. A government which lacks or loses legitimacy may be able to survive if it has the appropriate means of control at its disposal and is able to use them effectively against opposition. Often this means escalating the levels of coercion. But a government which either lacks the means of control that ensure stability and public security, or uses them in an ineffective or inappropriate manner, may very quickly lose whatever legitimacy it otherwise might have had. Moreover, if by contrast the insurgent is able to demonstrate a capability for effective operations and the ability to enforce his writ within the political/social structure, then the mantle of legitimacy is likely to shift in his direction.[19] So it is possible to advance the concept of insurgency – and counter-insurgency – as a 'two-front' war: a 'strategic' battle for legitimacy, and a 'tactical' battle for control.

To conduct this type of war, insurgents organise themselves to use both political techniques and violence, orchestrated to reinforce each other. The political resources are mobilised for the battle on the legitimacy front where, as O'Neill points out, 'organization is the critical dimension'.[20] He identifies two organisational models:

the elite conspiracy, and the 'mass' organisation in which a significant proportion of the population is mobilised in support of the insurgents' cause and struggle. The latter is particularly suited to a predominantly rural society, while the former is usually characteristic of an urban campaign.[21] But the distinction is not wholly clear-cut, since a 'conspiratorial' network may be instrumental in the villages and hamlets of a rural-based, mass campaign. Moreover, as the Palestine case will demonstrate, a conspiratorial elite movement may be sufficient in itself in situations where the key population component is already predisposed to the insurgents' cause, even if it does very little to support it with demonstrative mass actions. Merely protecting the elite may be sufficient.

Regardless of the specific form of organisation, the insurgent is attempting to win and retain legitimacy through the creation of a viable rival centre of authority. Depending upon the strength and situation of the insurgents, this may take the form of a 'parallel hierarchy' or a 'rival state', which challenges the incumbent regime's legitimacy, authority and control by duplicating or even usurping the functions of government, and providing these to the insurgents' supporters. Simultaneously, the insurgents may penetrate and subvert the existing administrative structures, either to divert them to serving their cause, or at least to prevent them from working effectively for the government. Establishing a parallel hierarchy is often easier in a rural mass-based campaign, where the government's authority and means of control are usually weak. There the insurgents can develop a secure base within the population, and gradually extend their influence outwards in all directions. This process is not usually suitable for urban areas, where governments traditionally concentrate their administrative structures and security forces. A different form of organisation is called for – what might be described as a 'vertically-integrated conspiracy'. This type of organisation often combines an overt political 'front', whose task is to promote the insurgents' cause and legitimacy in an open, legal fashion, and thus to attract supporters to the movement, with a covert, clandestine secret society which directs the whole campaign, exercises authority, and conducts the armed violence that is necessary to enforce its writ while undermining the legitimacy and control of the government.[22]

The central aspect of insurgency as a legitimacy battle is the struggle to win and retain allegiances, and ultimately to integrate them into the rival structures discussed above. Psychological warfare, including the use of propaganda, plays a major role in this aspect

of insurgent conflicts. Insurgent organisations characteristically are politically and militarily small and weak, especially at the outset of their campaigns. It is essential, therefore, for them to develop, to portray and to reinforce an image of strength, legitimacy and authority beyond their numbers, as well as omnipotence, cleverness, threat to their enemies, magnanimity towards the common man and, most important, a manifest destiny to victory.[23] Propaganda alone would not normally be sufficient to persuade people to switch allegiances and support the insurgents' cause and struggle. The insurgents' propaganda themes must exhibit at least the appearance of being founded on verifiable empirical evidence, particularly on results that demonstrate the viability of the insurgency and some prospect of success. The insurgents' ability to organise as described above, and to sustain that organisation against counter-action, would be one measure of effectiveness. Another would be the ability either to inflict punishing attacks on the regime and its security forces, or at least to demonstrate that the actions of the regime are ineffective against the insurgency, incapable of arresting its march to inevitable triumph. Government repression, even if it has been provoked deliberately by insurgent actions, can be turned to the insurgents' advantage as a mobilising weapon. Intangible factors – such as charismatic leadership – also play a role in the psychological battle for legitimacy. The ultimate objective is to produce a cohesive insurgent movement that is united in purpose, effective in operation, able to attract and retain allegiance, and strong enough to survive government counter-measures with its capabilities, legitimacy and authority intact, if not enhanced.[24]

Given its objectives, organisation and relative weakness, an insurgent movement cannot hope to inflict a military defeat on the security forces, at least in the early stage, if ever. Insurgencies do not have the resources, either in manpower or firepower, to engage in conventional combat with the counter-insurgent. Rather, they tend to rely on a mix of unconventional methods, not necessarily constant: military tactics (raids and ambushes), paramilitary (bombing and sabotage), and criminal techniques (assassination, kidnapping, hijacking, hostage-taking and rioting). The range of targets might also extend well beyond the purely military to include politicians and administrators, police and intelligence services, rival ethnic or political factions, the business community, and the administrative and economic infrastructure and other vital, vulnerable points such as transportation and communications.[25]

These methods and targeting choices can serve a number of purposes. First, they often force the government to disperse the security forces on a wide variety of defensive duties, tying down large numbers of men at great cost, preventing them from being concentrated for effective, offensive operations. This denies the initiative to the security forces, making them look ineffective or helpless – unless they do a very good job of protecting all of the targets, which is not usually the case. Second, by relying on flexible, irregular tactics, mounted in secrecy with the advantage of speed and surprise, the insurgents are normally able to deny the security forces a viable target for conventional counter-measures. This also helps to make them appear ineffective because their superior training, technology and firepower is rendered irrelevant to the conflict. Third, selective attacks on the police and intelligence services facilitate the breakdown of public security, and hamper effective counter-measures by 'blinding' the security forces so they cannot locate the insurgents. They will appear to be losing control of the country while the insurgents appear to be omnipotent. Security forces thus frustrated might be further provoked into excessive overt repression, or illegal, covert vigilante actions, either of which might serve to alienate the population and shift legitimacy from the government to the insurgents. Attacks on politicians, particularly moderates, and rival ethnic or political factions may serve to polarise the conflict and force individuals to choose sides for fear of being caught in the middle or on the losing side. Terrorism may be particularly effective in producing an atmosphere of anxiety and distrust. Finally, attacks on the administrative and economic structure might bring about a combined disruption of public services and economic crisis that heralds a 'climate of collapse' – the apparent loss of control by a government which seems unable to administer effectively or to enforce its policies. If, by contrast, the insurgents can demonstrate a capacity for competent 'counter-organisation', administration and enforcement of authority, they may fairly be said to have won the two-front war.[26] Of course, it must be emphasised that insurgencies only rarely achieve that goal; the successful insurgency, such as occurred in Ireland, Palestine and Algeria, is the exception, not the rule.

The implications for the army as counter-insurgent are clear. First, the political dimension dominates all military considerations and activities down to the lowest level. The symbiotic relationship of political and military facts means that even relatively minor military

actions could have significant political impact – either positive or negative – even if only locally. This means that the officers, NCOs and the other ranks must be made aware of the political dimension of their actions and the potential consequences of ill-advised or excessive applications of force. It usually translates as well into strict – if rarely consistent – political control of operations, necessitating a close, and not always comfortable, working relationship with the civil power, and the application of political constraints on the use of violence: the weapons and tactics that may be used, and the circumstances in which their use would be considered appropriate.[27]

Second, operations need to be directed towards breaking up the insurgents' organisational structure and limiting their freedom of action, in order to reduce their capacity to function as a rival source of effective power and legitimacy. This places a premium on accurate and timely intelligence activities since, without intelligence, security force operations against the insurgent forces and their political infrastructure will be futile, even counter-productive. The ability to collect, assess correctly and exploit intelligence usually marks the difference between victory and defeat; as Frank Kitson has observed, the task of defeating the insurgent 'consists very largely of finding him'.[28] Army operations thus normally take on a 'policing' character. The capture or arrest of insurgents, the collection of evidence, and bringing the insurgents to trial becomes more important than killing them which, in any case, may be politically unacceptable. Political and legal constraints often leave the initiative in the hands of the insurgent, who may strike at will, while the army must wait until the 'crime' has been committed before being permitted to act. This surrender of the initiative to the enemy violates a fundamental principle of war and is an anathema to the professional soldier. Taken together with the fact that the final outcome is likely to be determined by political and other intangible factors and not by military action alone, it understandably produces frustration for the soldiers and a degree of friction between them and the civil authorities.[29]

That said, insurgency remains a form of warfare, and its military aspects can be ignored only at the peril of the counter-insurgency forces. Indeed, it is the 'low intensity', irregular features of insurgency that mark its third distinctive characteristic. Insurgent organisation and tactics and the political constraints normally applied to the amount of violence the security forces may apply means that the number of troops engaged in 'combat' at any one time is usually

measured in dozens or less, and only rarely in scores or hundreds. 'Pitched battles' involving battalion-size or larger forces occur infrequently. Counter-insurgency campaigns have been described aptly as 'platoon commander's wars'.[30] On the other hand, they tend to require large contingents of troops. This apparent paradox is neatly summarised by Kitson's rule-of-thumb that 'the number of troops required to control a given situation goes up as the amount of force which it is politically acceptable for them to use goes down'.[31] These unorthodox situations demand some adjustment in the thinking of army officers normally oriented to preparing for conventional war. With all the resources at their disposal, they may find it difficult to resist the temptation to mount large-scale multiple unit conventional operations. In his account of the Malayan Emergency, Richard Clutterbuck observed caustically that 'the predilection of some army officers for major operations seems incurable'.[32] At the same time, they should not become so oriented to 'policing' that they abandon entirely basic, small-unit tactical skills. Moreover, there is an important place in counter-insurgency campaigns for small-scale, discriminate, offensive, unconventional operations that allow army units to engage the insurgent on equal terms on his own ground.[33]

Several implications flow from these observations. First, the need for the soldier to be able to adapt, during the course of a campaign, from mounting a traditional ambush in circumstances where he could 'shoot to kill', to acting as a 'peace-officer' enforcing the law in other circumstances, puts a premium on the professionalism and discipline that can come only from proper training to a high standard. In this regard Major-General Anthony Deane-Drummond makes a telling point:

> The change in role from conventional military operations to internal security and para-military duties is neither rapid nor easy. Intense – and time-consuming – periods of training are required to prepare troops tactically and psychologically for a role which although less lethal in terms of overall casualties than conventional war is equally demanding and stressful.[34]

The nature of such combat as there is and the manpower requirements that arise from the 'policing' aspects shape these campaigns primarily as infantry operations, with a relatively small contribution (sometimes in an infantry role) from the other two principal combat arms.[35] The Vietnam War aside, air power generally has been used sparingly.

This and Deane-Drummond's observation on the reduced lethality of low-intensity operations point to one positive aspect: both insurgent and counter-insurgent casualties tend to be light in comparison with those incurred in protracted, conventional high-intensity wars.[36] Unfortunately, as the Vietnam and Lebanon conflicts demonstrate graphically, this good fortune is not always shared with the civilian population caught in the middle of the conflict.

Finally, the importance that the political/propaganda dimension of insurgency gives to 'appearances' places the onus on the counter-insurgents (government and security forces) to respond to the insurgents at the psychological warfare level, since the battle lost here – over the central issue of legitimacy – may render victories on the other front irrelevant. Not surprisingly, this is one of the most difficult and controversial aspects of counter-insurgency. Outside total war situations or sophisticated dictatorships, few governments are comfortable with or equipped to conduct the kind of psychological warfare that insurgency demands. Even where governments make extensive efforts at 'public relations', the existence of multiple channels of information communication and a mixture of public apathy, dissent or ignorance, usually precludes the kind of unified, purposeful effort on the part of the government that so characterises the insurgent's campaign.[37] Moreover, it is usually easier for the insurgent to exploit for political/propaganda purposes the real and perceived grievances that give rise to rebellion than it is for governments to solve them. A government which is weak, poorly directed and administered, corrupt or under-financed and under stress, starts the counter-insurgency campaign with most of the cards in the psychological/legitimacy battle dealt against it. It is on the defensive from the outset and regaining and retaining popular allegiance sufficient to go over to the offensive may take more resources, patience and time than the government has at its disposal. In some campaigns – and Palestine was one of these – the counter-insurgents never gain the upper hand, and the psychological battle for legitimacy is lost almost by default.

Generally speaking, such efforts as are made tend to be mounted, appropriately, by the civil authorities. They are not always notable for great skill, enthusiasm, or results. In some campaigns, the armed forces do become involved directly in 'offensive' psychological warfare operations.[38] More often than not, however, an army's principal concern in this field is learning to cope with constant and

usually critical scrutiny by the domestic and foreign news media. Its every action, its every mistake, failure, or disproportionate measure will provide ammunition to the critics and to the insurgents' propagandists. Under the circumstances the army's options are limited. It may provide the media with such access to the operational arena as is consistent with safety and security. It can endeavour to provide rapid, accurate, factual information about its operations and those of the insurgents, through regular briefings and both on- and off-the-record interviews with responsible officers. A further option is to develop a capability to analyse, anticipate, and pre-empt insurgent propaganda techniques and themes.[39] But perhaps the most effective weapon in the arsenal of the professional army can be its ability to perform its operations competently, with discrimination and absence of malice. This brings the discussion back to the first principle: making the soldiers aware of the political ramifications of their actions. With this in mind it may be fair to suggest that for the counter-insurgent, and especially for the security forces, there is more than a grain of truth to the adage that 'winning is mostly a matter of not screwing up'.[40]

The foregoing analysis shows clearly how much insurgency differs from conventional war, and places in perspective the nature of the challenge confronting the British army and its political masters in Palestine. With the benefit of hindsight, it is tempting to assume that all of this should have been obvious to those decision-makers. It must be borne in mind, however, that these characteristics and implications have been identified in retrospect, from a series of campaigns, the study of which has allowed principles, mistakes, 'turning points', and 'lessons' to emerge more clearly from the historical landscape. They were not necessarily apparent in 1945. This is an essential corrective to both the exaggerated claims of the counter-insurgency 'enthusiasts' and the equally misleading observations of some of their critics.

Writing in 1965, Lieutenant-General Sir Kenneth Darling stated: 'We do not want to allow ourselves to be persuaded by upstarts such as Mao Tse-tung that he has produced some original thought in this field. In fact, we British in some degree or another have been promoting insurgency all around the world for centuries.'[41] Richard Clutterbuck echoed these sentiments the following year, when he drew a comparative analogy between comments about the Malayan Emergency and those regarding the American Revolution with a view to showing that 'the British have been learning the same

lessons about counter-insurgency for nearly 200 years'.[42] Both men were correct – up to a point. The problem with such broad-brush statements is that they do not explain the failures, such as Palestine. The critics of the British experience are more pointed, less flattering, and equally guilty of ahistorical analysis. Anthony Verrier, writing at about the same time as Clutterbuck and Darling, criticised the army for failing to develop a 'strategic doctrine' for counter-insurgency.[43] To the extent that it ignores the fundamentally non-doctrinaire nature of the British army and the very real progress that had been made by that time in studying insurgent campaigns and extracting useful 'lessons' for counter-insurgency,[44] this criticism appears both unjust and surprisingly ill-informed. J. Bowyer Bell went further. He suggested that the British response to the Palestine insurgency established a consistent pattern for the post-war period, wherein the British invariably were taken by surprise, failed to understand the nature of the conflict, and thus applied counter-insurgency methods that merely aggravated the situation and did little to resolve it.[45] Again, even a cursory survey of Britain's post-war campaigns demonstrates the inadequacy of this generalisation.

In so far as the British experience in Palestine is concerned, the truth lies somewhere between these extremes. What should emerge from the following chapters is a picture of policy-makers and military leaders grappling with an unfamiliar strategic problem the implications of which they understood but imperfectly, and ultimately failing. Yet it is also a 'textbook' example of reactive adaptation. The British army entered the Palestine campaign ill-prepared intellectually, organisationally, and with little experience of dealing with insurgency. But it adjusted its thinking and procedures during the campaign, in so far as political and operational constraints permitted, and not without some success. The 'why' and the 'how' of this process involves the unravelling of an intricately woven fabric of politics, personalities, procedures and problems that both reinforced and contradicted each other. That the British did not ultimately prevail in Palestine can be attributed to many factors, the military among them. This study should go some way to show how much weight and significance ought to be ascribed to the latter, by clarifying the extent to which the British army took Clausewitz's dictum to heart and acted accordingly.

2 The Political Setting

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On 26 September 1947, British Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech-Jones, informed the United Nations General Assembly: 'I have been instructed by His Majesty's Government to announce . . . that in the absence of a settlement they must plan for an early withdrawal of British forces and of the British administration from Palestine.'[1] This decision had not been taken lightly. Barely two years earlier the idea that Palestine represented an important strategic asset in the Middle East had commanded widespread support within the British government.[2] What could account for this dramatic turnaround? Clearly, the major factors included Britain's economic crisis, and the frustration of being unable to reconcile British strategic interests and the contradictory Arab and Jewish claims to Palestine within a single solution acceptable to all. Yet, there is also a general consensus that the deterioration of the security situation within Palestine persuaded the British government that its interests would be served best by abandoning the Palestine Mandate.[3] In spite of the presence and operations of British security forces, which at their peak numbered some 100 000, a handful of Jewish insurgents had within two years transformed Palestine from the status of strategic asset to political liability.

This was hardly the outcome anticipated by the British politicians who had drafted the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and who had accepted a League of Nations Mandate to administer Palestine in 1920. In order to place in perspective the 1945–47 period, it is essential to understand the evolution of the Palestine situation to that point. Britain acquired control of Palestine through military conquest during the First World War, but before the conquest was complete the British government made three separate and conflicting commitments with regard to the future of the Middle East and of Palestine in particular.

First, in 1915 Sir Henry McMahon, High Commissioner for Egypt, promised Sharif Hussein of Mecca that, in return for Arab assistance in the war against the Turks, the British would recognise his claims to an Arab empire at the end of the war. Although the pledge probably gave Palestinian Arabs the impression that Palestine was to be included in the promised area of Arab independence, the British government apparently had no intention of ceding control of it once the conquest was complete. Instead, in 1916 the British entered into a secret treaty with France and Russia which would partition the Middle East into British and French protectorates and an independent Arab state. Finally, in 1917 the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, committed the British government to the establishment in Palestine of a 'national home' for the Jewish people.[4]

Elizabeth Monroe has since concluded that, solely in terms of British interests, the Balfour Declaration was 'one of the greatest mistakes in our imperial history'.[5] In the context of the agreements and understandings undertaken before 1917, she is undoubtedly correct. The terms of the original mandate for Palestine were framed to emphasise the mission of creating the Jewish national home. The British government accepted responsibility for generating the social, political and economic conditions conducive to establishment of the national home and for facilitating Jewish immigration and settlement in Palestine. At the same time Britain was to safeguard the civil and religious rights of the indigenous population, and to ensure that Jewish immigration and settlement did not prejudice 'the rights and position of other sections of the population'.[6] The mandate thus implied a dual obligation open to conflicting interpretation. It was challenged virtually from its inception.

The problem was that, quite apart from the special circumstances surrounding Palestine, the creation of mandates accorded neither with the wishes of the indigenous populations nor the wartime promises of independence to the Arabs; this discrepancy contributed directly to the outburst of violence in the area in 1920, and tends to lend weight to the view that Britain had ignored or underestimated the strength of Arab nationalism.[7] Between 1921 and 1923, however, the British government responded to the disorder by belatedly honouring its obligations to the Arabs. Feisal was installed as King of Iraq, and Trans-Jordan became an independent entity within the Mandate, under the rule of Amir Abdullah. Of greater significance for this study, in June 1922, Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill

issued a White Paper on Palestine policy which modified the final terms of the Palestine Mandate in such a way as to de-emphasise the idea of the Jewish national home as a 'state-in-the-making' and to reassure the indigenous Arabs that they would not be assimilated by a large influx of Jews. The Arabs were informed that they would not be subordinated to the Jews, whose rate of immigration would be limited by the economic absorptive capacity of the country.[8] However slight, the semantic changes in the language defining the terms of the Mandate were significant; they convinced the Arabs that they had a British guarantee that Palestine would not become a Jewish state.

Arab fears were thus assuaged and while Jewish immigration slowed to a trickle in the 1920s, communal conflict subsided. This was a satisfactory state of affairs for the British who, D. E. Knox argues, had never been motivated by purely altruistic concern for the Jews or the indigenous Arabs. Rather, a pacified Palestine served strategic interests; it secured the lines of communication to the Eastern Empire by denying an exposed flank to any other power.[9]

Hostility flared again in 1929, however, over the question of religious rights in old Jerusalem. Although the Royal Commission sent to investigate concluded that the violence was the product of frustrated nationalism and revived fears of assimilation,[10] British policy began to waver. First, in 1930 the government issued a new White Paper which stated that Britain's dual obligations were of equal weight but not irreconcilable, yet also recommended restrictions of Jewish immigration and land purchases. At the same time the British government advised the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations that communal conflict made Palestinian self-government based on cooperation between Arabs and Jews impossible. Then, under pressure from the pro-Zionist lobby, the government reversed in 1931 its policy of the previous year and renounced any restriction on Jewish immigration or land acquisitions. The policy remained uncertain because the government did not withdraw or replace the 1930 White Paper.[11]

In the next five years, particularly after the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, Jewish immigration increased substantially, exceeding 60 000 in 1935 alone. Once again Arab fears surfaced and manifested themselves in violence; this time the resistance was organised and included a general strike. The Arabs set out to stop Jewish immigration and settlement completely, and to establish an independent Arab state. The British responded with a ponderous, though ultimately successful, counter-insurgency campaign and another Royal Commission. The commission recommended, in 1937, partition as a permanent solution to the Palestine problem, and the government concurred. An intense debate ensued and a second commission was sent to Palestine to examine the practical and technical aspects of partition. The Jews cautiously accepted partition while the Arabs rejected it out of hand and continued their armed revolt. The debate, the intractability of the problem, the Arab resistance and the developing crisis in Europe combined to produce yet another change in British policy. In November 1938 the government rejected partition.[12] Instead, it convened, in February 1939, a conference in London attended by representatives of all parties to the dispute. The British government advised all concerned that if the conference failed to resolve the issue, the government would impose its own solution; in the event, that is what occurred. In May 1939 the British government proclaimed a new Palestine policy, in what became known as the White Paper. Its two main clauses provided for: evolution towards an independent Palestinian state within ten years; and restrictions on Jewish immigration – 75 000 over the subsequent five years – and on land purchases.[13]

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the White Paper represented yet another exercise in appeasement, a practice so characteristic of British foreign policy in the pre-war period.[14] That it was also a genuine attempt to resolve the contradictions of Britain's First World War diplomacy cannot be denied. In that sense at least, its roots were longer and of a substance different from those of appeasement. Moreover, as Elizabeth Monroe has observed, the White Paper policy was a success; it secured that flank of the empire for the duration of the war.[15] The Arab revolt subsided, its political objectives very nearly achieved, and Britain was able to turn its attention to the crisis in Europe, secure in the knowledge that the lines of communication to the empire, particularly the Suez Canal, were safe – at least from internal threats. But this security was purchased at a price, and appeasement by any other name is still appeasement.

The White Paper policy produced grave consequences for Anglo-Jewish relations. At a time when developments in Europe threatened Jews in particular and Palestine possessed a thriving Jewish community apparently beyond the reach of the Nazis, the White Paper not only rejected the idea of a Jewish state; the immigration

restrictions denied to European Jews fleeing persecution a relatively safe refuge. The Holocaust, of course, lay in the future and for the time being the Jews had little choice but to ally themselves with Britain against the Nazis. But the lesson of the Arab rebellion was not lost upon certain extreme elements of the Palestinian Jewish community: Britain had capitulated to coercion and the Arabs had achieved their objectives; if the Arabs could succeed by using violence, the Jews could as well. Some of these Jews were sufficiently frustrated by the White Paper to consider armed revolt. Once the Holocaust began the White Paper's immigration restrictions would be regarded by the Jewish extremists as connivance and complicity in genocide. Ultimately, they came to conclude that British rule in Palestine would have to be destroyed.

The White Paper notwithstanding, the Jews still had many allies in the British government, not the least of them the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. But as Michael Cohen points out, once involved in directing the war, Churchill did not feel free to impose his views on the ministers directly involved with Palestine policy, or to oppose the opinions of civil and military authorities in the Middle East who warned almost unanimously of the dangers inherent in diverging from the White Paper policy.[16] Churchill, nonetheless, made his own views very clear in notes to Cabinet in April 1943:

> I cannot agree that the White Paper is 'the firmly established policy' of His Majesty's Government. I have always regarded it as a gross breach of faith . . . in respect of obligations to which I was personally a party . . . It runs until it is superseded.[17]

He felt he could not contemplate any absolute cessation of immigration into Palestine at the discretion of an Arab majority whose demands had been met by the British in 1939, but who had been of no use during the war and thus had created no new claims upon the allies.[18] Against a background of a receding German threat to the Middle East and increasing Zionist agitation in Palestine, Britain and the United States in opposition to the existing policy, the Cabinet appointed in July 1943 a sub-committee to consider and report to Cabinet on a new long-term policy for Palestine. Taking the 1937 Royal Commission report as a starting point, the committee recommended in December 1943 that the British government adopt partition as the solution to the problem. While granting that the Arabs might oppose the scheme, the committee recommended that the government accept the risks involved and implement partition

whatever the opposition. The committee felt their scheme met to the utmost practical extent the conflicting claims of Arabs and Jews.[19]

The Cabinet endorsed the report in January 1944, but the committee did not commence work on a final scheme until August. In the interim all the British representatives in the Middle East, with the exception of the High Commissioner of Palestine, advised against partition in view of the likely effect on Anglo-Arab relations. Once again the government began to vacillate. In June, Churchill, influenced perhaps by his advisers and the knowledge that an American election was shortly to occur, agreed that the Cabinet should postpone a decision on Palestine policy. When Jewish terrorists assassinated Lord Moyne, Minister Resident in the Middle East, in November 1944, Churchill directed that the committee's second report, concerning the technical details of partition, be held over to a more appropriate moment.[20]

In February 1945, the Colonial Secretary, aware that the White Paper immigration quota would be exhausted before the end of the year, urged the Cabinet either to approve partition or to produce a better option. But the balance of opinion now opposed partition, the new High Commissioner and Lord Moyne's replacement adding their voices to the opposition. Sir Edward Grigg, the new Minister Resident, took up Colonel Stanley's challenge and presented a proposal for an international trust scheme in which Arabs and Jews would share power in governing a unitary Palestine, while an international body representing the major powers and the Arabs and Jews would decide immigration policy. The Foreign Office, moreover, would take responsibility for Palestine.[21]

Whatever their merits or faults, neither plan was adopted by the government for, in July 1945, Churchill was defeated in a general election. The Labour party formed the new government and commenced to examine the Palestine policy afresh.

THE BRITISH POLICY ENVIRONMENT

During the Second World War the Labour Party had consistently supported the Zionist cause; in May 1945 the party conference endorsed resolutions calling for abrogation of the White Paper policy and favouring unlimited Jewish immigration into Palestine. Ninety members of parliament, of whom only 26 were Jewish, went on

record supporting the Zionist movement. Once in power, however, the Labour Party ascertained very quickly, as John Marlowe has observed, that 'the future of Palestine was no longer a matter in which H.M.G. was a free agent'.[22] The new government, as Matthew Fitzsimons notes, had fallen heir to a complex series of arrangements which could not be scrutinised all at once; each commitment involved others.[23]

The Labour government had come to power in July 1945 united on three principles: full employment, public ownership of the main sectors of the economy and the establishment of a welfare state.[24] Opposition to colonialism and imperialism was also a common thread. Alan Bullock has noted the cruel irony that at the very moment when Labour had at last been given the opportunity to govern, with a clear mandate to carry out their programmes, and with the expectations of their supporters at their highest, they were forced to expend so much effort fending off economic collapse, and devoting a much higher than anticipated proportion of Britain's limited resources to foreign policy and defence. For the first time in its history, Britain was insolvent.[25] The war had cost Britain about half of its foreign investments (more than one billion pounds) and a third of its earnings, and its foreign debt had risen to over three billion pounds. Altogether, Britain had lost about 25 per cent of its national wealth.[26]

Prospects worsened almost immediately, with the American cancellation of 'Lend Lease' deliveries on 21 August 1945. Without American economic aid, Britons would face a living standard of even greater austerity than during the war. Negotiations for a loan were opened in Washington in September. The circumstances were inauspicious and the negotiations proved difficult. The American public was demanding a return to normalcy and prosperity. The Truman administration, moreover, favoured free trade and was opposed to protectionism, while the British government was committed to retaining its wartime system of controls in order to ward off economic collapse. American negotiators clearly recognised the weakness of Britain's bargaining position, and used the opportunity to force Britain to accept the American approach to international economics. Agreement was reached on 6 December 1945. Britain received a $3.75 billion loan, but at the price of agreeing to American conditions.[27]

The loan staved off immediate disaster, but recovery remained sluggish. In 1946 both industrial and economic production remained below the 1938 level, and world commodity prices rose to levels that severely reduced the purchasing power of the American loan. Consequently the loan was expended at a much faster rate than had been anticipated. A premature export drive at the end of 1946 was poorly received by the Americans; losses were estimated at £200 million. The harsh winter of 1947 dealt yet another blow; fuel and food stocks dwindled, and rationing was more stringent than during the war. Major industries were forced to shut down. Unemployment rose briefly to two million. Finally, in July 1947, the government made sterling 'convertible', in accordance with the conditions of the American loan. But the weakened economy and currency could not absorb the pressure that ensued, and convertibility was suspended barely a month later, with British economic policy in tatters.[28]

These inescapable economic facts cast a pall of gloom over all British policy-making efforts, domestic and foreign. They set strict limits on what Britain could do in managing its imperial commitments, not least those in the Middle East and Palestine. In respect of the latter, Britain's economic weakness and dependence upon American goodwill, together with the sheer intractibility of the Palestine problem, reduced British room for manoeuvre to almost nil. The Labour government, which had come to power deeply committed to a pro-Zionist policy, simply found that for largely domestic reasons it could not afford to give force to its professed ideals.

At the heart of the problem lay a clash of requirements and perspectives. On the one hand, the need for domestic economic recovery was vital. Prime Minister Clement Attlee favoured the rapid reduction of Britain's overseas commitments, both to reduce costs and to release men and women for work in the domestic economy. In this he was consistently supported by Hugh Dalton, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade.[29] The dimensions of the probelm were significant indeed; in 1945, while peacetime British industry was starved for workers, more than five million men and women were deployed on military duty around the world. In Britain, nearly four million more were working in defence-related industries.[30] On the other hand, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, ably supported by the Chiefs of Staff, argued forcefully that for reasons both of economic and military security, Britain could not afford to liquidate its imperial commitments with undue haste.[31] While much of this debate focused on the British position in Europe, *vis-à-vis* the emerging 'cold war',[32] it unavoidably extended to the Middle East as well. There, the

debate over defence versus reconstruction became entangled in the Palestine question, itself part of a larger debate over the place of the Middle East in post-war imperial defence.

Traditionally, the Indian Empire had provided the focus of Britain's eastern policy and strategy. In this respect Phillip Darby has observed that:

> Although at times the protection of the routes of communication, the defence of the Far Eastern territories, or the maintenance of Britain's position in the Middle East became the focus of attention it was generally understood that the security of India was Britain's overriding concern. In this sense the protection of India was part of an ingrained pattern of thought. It was above politics: it went beyond the issue of the moment. It was the touchstone to which policy must return: the ultimate justification for a defensive system which spanned half the world.[33]

The centerpiece of Britain's imperial role, a commercial and strategic asset, India had been seen as valuable in and of itself. Defence of the lines of communication to India had become second only to defence of the United Kingdom in Britain's strategic priorities. It was the perceived need to secure those routes to India that had involved Britain in the Middle East in the first place, Palestine being a case in point.[34]

By the war's end, however, the Middle East had acquired a strategic significance of its own in the eyes of Bevin and the Chiefs of Staff. Two factors dominated their thinking: oil and the Soviet Union. Bevin was convinced that the region was vital to Britain's economic recovery. In April 1946, he told the Cabinet Defence Committee that 'without the Middle East and its oil . . . I see no hope of our being able to achieve the standard of living at which we are aiming in Great Britain'.[35] In fact, he was prepared to go further and argue that the Middle East was important for maintaining Britain's status as a 'Great Power'.[36] To the extent that the Soviet Union was perceived to be the principal threat to Britain's position in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, Bevin shared common ground with the Chiefs of Staff. They agreed that it was essential for British security that Russia be denied access to the region.[37] Where they differed was on the best means to secure the British position. The Chiefs buttressed their traditional notions about the importance of bases to protect the imperial lines of communication with the argument that such bases could be used in a future war to

strike by air at the Russian heartland.[38] Bevin, with one eye on the need to go some way to meet the nation's domestic manpower requirements, and the other on the risks of becoming dependent for bases upon reactionary 'pashas', sought alternatives to the existing arrangements of treaties and bases. To pre-empt political disorder, he wanted to reduce the number of British troops in the region. He had a vision of what he called an 'informal empire' based on an economic partnership with the Arabs. In return for promoting economic development, which would raise the living standards of the people of the area, Britain's strategic position would be enhanced by the creation of a regional defence system. Such bases as Britain did have would rest on the consent of the governed, rather than on the goodwill of corrupt rulers who might be swept away by popular revolution.[39] It was a notion both idealistic and perceptive, but was beyond Britain's capabilities to put into effect. In any case it was totally at odds with British attempts to achieve a just and humane solution to the Palestine problem.

Attlee, on the other hand, was more inclined to accept a diminished role for Britain on the world stage, and was sceptical of the idea that Britain needed to retain a significant presence in the Middle East. Early in 1946, Attlee had persuaded the Defence Committee to accept a military manpower ceiling of 1.1 million by the end of the calendar year. Bevin concurred in this, if somewhat reluctantly. The Prime Minister had fended off the Chiefs of Staff's objections by convincing the committee to accept his assumptions that there was no risk of war during the next two to three years, no possibility of war with the United States, and there was no fleet capable of presenting a threat during the same period. He also called for a re-examination of the assumption that it was vital to keep open the Mediterranean in wartime. Then in March, Attlee presented to the committee a paper which argued that Britain should cease to think of itself as strategically linked and bound to the Eastern empire, and thus should abandon attempts to defend those links in the Mediterranean and Middle East. The Mediterranean, he felt, was too vulnerable to air power to make it militarily vital or useful in wartime. Instead, Britain should withdraw from the Middle East and pull back to a 'line' running across Central Africa. In this he had Dalton's support, as well as that of some prominent critics of British Middle East policy outside of government.[40]

In their April appreciation, however, the Chiefs of Staff argued that it was essential for Britain to maintain a presence in the

Mediterranean in order to preserve access to Middle Eastern oil, to ensure political influence in southern Europe, and to protect Britain's main support area in southern Africa. They believed that new developments in warfare (such as nuclear weapons) would not alter radically the fundamental principles of British strategy as they applied to the region. These arguments won over Bevin, who was otherwise attracted to the idea of an African base, and a number of his key advisers: Permanent Under-Secretary Sir Orme Sargent and Assistant Under-Secretary Gladwynn Jebb. The latter skilfully played the 'Russian card', suggesting that the Prime Minister's strategy would result in the accession to power of pro-Soviet governments in the Middle East and southern Europe.[41] Out-manoeuvred and out-voted in the Defence Committee, Attlee lost that round.

Nevertheless, it was clear to all concerned that something had to be done about the existing Middle East base in Egypt. The 1936 Treaty had run its course, and the Egyptian government was agitating for total removal of the British military presence, even though the existing treaty permitted Britain to maintain a reduced garrison in the Canal Zone.[42] The wartime British base area was a vast enclave, stretching from the Nile Valley to the Suez Canal, and from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. During the war its installations and transportation facilities had supported the equivalent of 41 divisions and 65 air squadrons. At the close of the war some 200 000 British troops were based there, making it the largest concentration of British military strength outside India. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty permitted only 10 000.[43] The British government was slow to respond to initial Egyptian demands for withdrawal, for several reasons. Not the least of these was complacency; British politicians and soldiers alike had misread or underestimated the depth and intensity of Egyptian nationalist feeling, for which the bases provided a convenient focus.[44] Bureaucratic inertia was yet another factor. The sheer scale of effort required to move British installations out of Egypt proper and into the Canal Zone, combined with a shortage of building materials and what Attlee described as 'the military capacity for delay',[45] postponed the evacuation. Attlee's frustration at being unable to get results from his commanders there found an echo in the observations of an unidentified observer who had visited the base area in mid-1946. He described GHQ Middle East under General Sir Bernard Paget as 'a madhouse of muddle. The Marx Brothers in old school ties'.[46]

Finally, there was the matter of finding a viable alternative location. The British and Egyptians entered into negotiations in the spring of 1946, but as Elizabeth Monroe points out, Bevin was handicapped by the weakness of the British position. Britain needed concessions without being able to offer money or goods in return; all that Britain could offer was a revision of the old arrangements.[47] In the event, the negotiators reached agreement on a draft treaty in October 1946. Under its terms the British would have withdrawn from Cairo, Alexandria and the Nile Delta by 31 March 1947, and from the rest of Egypt by 1 September 1949, while retaining the right to reoccupy their Suez bases in time of war. Influenced by nationalist sentiment, however, the Egyptian parliament rejected the proposed treaty. In January 1947, the Egyptian government broke off negotiations, and in July took its case to the United Nations. There the Egyptian gambit failed; the UN Security Council rejected Egypt's claim that post-war circumstances had nullified the existing (1936) treaty. So the British were able to retain their military presence in the Canal Zone.[48] In the meantime, British attention had been focused on Palestine as an alternative or complement to the Egyptian military bases. This brought Britain face to face with the Zionist question and the Arab–Jewish impasse, which together scuttled Britain's evolving Middle East policy.

Palestine was one of several alternatives considered by the Chiefs of Staff. Among the others were Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), Cyprus, the Sudan and Kenya. For a variety of reasons relating to location and facilities, the others were rejected. This is not to suggest that Palestine was the perfect solution to the problem. Although its climate was conducive to garrison life, and it had other important attributes: Haifa port, Lydda airfield and relatively easy transportation links to the Canal Zone, Palestine was in many respects underdeveloped as a base area in its own right. It lacked sufficient permanent accommodation for a large garrison, its internal lines of communication were poor, and even the ports could not handle the required volume of activity. By May 1946, the Chiefs of Staff had concluded that Palestine was not the required viable alternative to Egypt, at least not by itself, especially for war reserves. But their arguments in favour of Palestine the previous July had already carried the day. At that time, the apparent freedom of action Britain enjoyed under the Mandate made Palestine very appealing as an alternative to Egypt. A Joint Planning Staff Paper emphasised that 'Palestine is the only territory between Malta and Aden in which

we can confidently expect to have facilities for the stationing of troops or the establishment of installations'.[49] In September 1945 the 6th Airborne Division was sent to Palestine to form the core of the proposed Imperial Strategic Reserve.[50]

Elizabeth Monroe argues that when in the spring of 1946 Bevin offered to pull troops unilaterally out of Cairo and Alexandria even before negotiations with Egypt began, it was because the British were confident that alternative bases were already available in Palestine and Kenya.[51] Yet, given the limitations of Palestine noted above, and its uncertain political future in the spring of 1946, it is hardly surprising that Bevin's offer caused British military leaders some consternation.[52] By this time, however, Palestine had acquired a strategic significance which, even if undeserved, the Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff felt obliged to defend. Consequently, from the summer of 1945 until the eve of the British decision to withdraw, it was an article of faith among the British Middle East policy-makers that nothing should be done with respect to Palestine that would disrupt British–Arab relations or otherwise undermine Britain's position in the Middle East.[53] Britain had never been in Palestine out of conviction; as a Mandate it had never exerted the emotional pull of a major colony such as India or Malaya. Neither had Palestine conferred significant direct material benefits upon Britain. So little, in fact, that shortly before leaving office in July 1945 Prime Minister Churchill, one of the architects of the Mandate, felt moved to observe: 'I am not aware of the slightest advantage which has ever accrued to Great Britain from this painful and thankless task'.[54] Nor, in 1945, was Britain committed to Palestine from a position of strength. Rather, it was from a position of weakness, uncertainty and an absence of alternatives. Thus it was that a circumlocuitous logic of perceived economic and strategic necessity ensnared Britain in a Middle East policy which Palestine could do little to enhance and everything to disrupt. It was hardly an auspicious position for a confrontation with the Zionist movement.

ZIONIST POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

So long as British policy and the Palestine administration had supported the efforts to create the Jewish national home, the Jewish community inside and outside Palestine had cooperated with the British and Palestine governments. The changes in British policy

from 1930 onwards, however, gradually had pushed the Jews into opposition. The 1939 White Paper was the breaking point: they felt they had been betrayed. David Ben-Gurion, leader of the Labour-Zionists, vowed that while the Jews would cooperate in the war against Hitler, they would 'fight the White Paper as if there were no war'.[55] He advocated a policy of applying combined political, economic and military pressure upon the British government in order to dissuade it from adhering to the White Paper policy. Ben-Gurion's programme involved, first, non-cooperation with the Palestine authorities and violation of laws relating to the White Paper policy and, secondly, the creation of a 'state within a state' – a Jewish administration in Palestine with its own military forces – to take power in Palestine if Britain did not change its policy. While this programme formed the basis for Zionist policy after 1939, Yehuda Bauer has observed that, in reality, it was difficult to put it into effect in Palestine at that time. Political energies were directed instead toward the creation of Jewish military units to serve in the war.[56]

The political struggle against the White Paper continued mainly in the United States, producing in 1942 a political programme which would become the Zionist Movement's principal political weapon once the war was over. The 'Biltmore Program' called for: abrogation of the White Paper; the creation of an independent Jewish army fighting under its own flag and command; vesting the Jewish Agency (the movement's executive arm in Palestine) with control of immigration and development of Palestine; and the establishment of Palestine as a Jewish commonwealth; in short, an independent state.[57]

With the exception of the demand for a Jewish army, the Agency presented this programme to the British government in May 1945, coupled with a demand for an international loan and other assistance to transfer the first million Jewish refugees to Palestine. Churchill replied that the Palestine question would have to be dealt with at the peace conference, but shortly thereafter the Labour Party came to power. By this time, the scale of the Holocaust was widely known, and it had added a sense of desperate urgency to the Zionist demands. Alan Bullock suggests that the failure of the British and Palestine governments to comprehend the impact of the Holocaust and thus to admit more Jews to Palestine than the White Paper allowed made the British appear to be accomplices – *ex post facto* – in the 'Final Solution'. This, Bullock goes on to say, had two

consequences: first, a growing conviction amongst the world Jewish community that the only way to save the Jewish people was to establish a Jewish state in Palestine; and second, Zionist determination to defy the British limits on Jewish immigration into Palestine. These two factors, he feels, virtually ruled out the possibility of a peaceful solution to the Palestine problem. When it became apparent that despite its pro-Zionist pronouncements the new government was not going to implement the Biltmore Program, the Jewish Agency decided to authorise its paramilitary arm, the Haganah, to use a limited degree of force to pressure the British government into meeting Zionist demands, particularly those regarding immigration.[58] Ben-Gurion's programme of combined political and military pressure had been revived. Thenceforward, Zionist strategy would consist of diplomacy and resistance. This would present the British with the classic strategic dilemma: a 'two front war'. This conflict also had a dual geographic dimension. The Holocaust had left two principal centres of active Zionism in the world: Palestine and the United States.[59] The armed struggle would be carried on in the former, the political battle in the latter. The Zionists recognised that British dependence upon American goodwill left Britain vulnerable to American pressure, and they sought to exploit that 'weak link'. Through the skilful exercise of influence on American politics and policy-making, the Zionists effectively sabotaged Anglo-American efforts to devise policies for Palestine that could reconcile Jewish and Arab aspirations and preserve British strategic interests in the Middle East.

THE WILD CARD: THE UNITED STATES AND THE PALESTINE QUESTION

Harry S. Truman, President of the United States, was as new to his job as Attlee and Bevin were to theirs. Yet he was even less well-prepared for the responsibilities of his office. He was a 'provincial' politician, completely inexperienced in the field of foreign affairs. During his vice-presidency, he had been excluded from Roosevelt's diplomacy which, in respect of Palestine, had navigated a tortuous course between support for Zionism and countervailing assurances to the Arabs. Truman himself was inclined to support the Zionist cause. His advisers, however, upon whom he depended greatly, were divided on the Palestine question. The State Department, particularly the Office of Near Eastern Affairs under Loy Henderson, put American interests in the Middle East before everything else, and this inevitably put them on the side of the Arabs and in opposition to Zionism. This position was ably defended by Under-Secretary Dean Acheson who, in the often prolonged absence of the Secretary of State James Byrnes, became the department's 'point man' on the Palestine question. The Joint Chiefs of Staff also favoured an American posture which would not alienate the Arabs.[60]

Truman's relations with the department, however, were poor. Dependent as he was upon their expertise – or perhaps because of his dependence – he resented the professional diplomats, and the sentiment was returned. Instead, the President relied on his White House advisers. Michael Cohen argues that the most influential of these were Clark Clifford, Special Counsel to the President, and David Niles, an administrative assistant with responsibility for minority affairs. Both were pro-Zionist, and neither shrank from exploiting domestic politics to further the Zionist cause and *vice versa*. Truman was an unpopular, unelected president, and thus was sensitive to his political fortunes. This left him vulnerable to manipulation by his aides, who frequently warned of the damaging political consequences of antagonising the 'Jewish vote'.[61] Alan Bullock says that Bevin was indignant that the President would let such partisan considerations influence his policy on Palestine, and that Bevin was naive in this respect; politicians, after all, have to win elections, and in the United States Jews, not Arabs, provided the votes.[62] This is not the place to debate whether or not the 'Jewish vote' was, in fact, politically significant. What matters is that some of Truman's key aides, prominent politicians and representatives of the American Jewish community were prepared to argue that it was important, and the President was influenced by their arguments.

By 1945, the American Jewish community was well organised to lobby on behalf of the Zionist cause. Between 1945 and 1947 it became the dominant force in Zionism and was remarkable for its militancy. In October 1939, at the instigation of Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion, the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs had been formed, with the specific objective of 'politicising' American Zionists. It consisted of American members of the Jewish Agency and representatives of the four major Zionist parties: the Zionist Organisation of America (ZOA), the men's organisation; Hadassah, the women's group; Mizrachi, the religious

Zionist movement; and the socialist Labour-Zionist parties. The ZOA and Hadassah claimed a combined total of 280 000 members in 1945; by 1948, the four groups together accounted for more than 700 000 people. Reorganised in 1943 under the banner of the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC) and led by firebrand Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, these groups represented the mainstream of American Zionism. In Palestine they were associated with the Jewish 'shadow government' – the Jewish Agency – and its paramilitary arm, the Haganah.[63] Their lobbying strategy in the US between 1945 and 1947 was direct, militant and partisan; Silver and other AZEC representatives applied their pressure and influence directly on the Oval Office, in person and through Congress.

Surprisingly, however, it was a much smaller group, using a more indirect strategy, that forced the pace of American Zionist militancy. The minority Revisionist Zionist movement, often referred to as the 'right wing' of Zionism, chose to act independently of the Zionist establishment. Led by Hillel Kook (Peter Bergson), who was closely associated with the dissident underground movement Irgun Zvai Leumi (IZL) in Palestine, the Revisionists compensated for their smaller numbers with a higher visibility. They used full-page newspaper advertisements, plays, rallies and a string of 'front' organisations to whip up mass support. Unlike the establishment Zionists, who excluded Christians from their organisations, the Revisionist approach was non-sectarian and bi-partisan, winning over many American Jews and attracting a large following in Congress. Zvi Ganin argues that the main contribution of the Bergson faction was to force the AZEC leadership into a progressively more militant stance for fear of losing their constituency.[64] Together, the American Zionist organisations fulfilled two functions. First, as will be discussed shortly, they exerted influence on the Anglo-American policy-making process with respect to Palestine. Second, they provided moral, political, propaganda and financial support to the insurgents in Palestine.[65]

During the subsequent two years, Truman came to resent the Zionists for the pressure they placed on him. He was especially irritated by their crude and blatant exploitation of partisan politics to further their cause.[66] Yet, he allowed himself to be persuaded by his advisers that the Zionists' political influence was a factor to be reckoned with. Thus buffeted from all sides by contradictory advice, Truman's approach to the Palestine question was erratic, consisting of – in Michael Cohen's words – 'crude, direct intervention, alternating with awkward vacillation, or total withdrawal'.[67] To the British – Bevin especially – unaccumstomed to Truman's political inconsistencies, the President's ill-timed decisions in respect of Palestine seemed calculated deliberately to sabotage any reasonable effort to reach a compromise. Up to a point, the British were correct; what they never fully understood was that in respect of the timing and content of his decisions, Truman was not entirely a free agent. To the extent that he was hostage to the American political process, so were Anglo-American efforts to fashion a workable Palestine policy.

ODYSSEY TO FRUSTRATION: THE POLICY-MAKING PROCESS

'I will stake my political future on solving the problem', Bevin told the House of Commons in November 1945.[68] However unwise in respect of Palestine, Bevin's self-confidence was characteristic of the man. Barely four months into the job as Foreign Secretary, he clearly had not yet grasped the full extent of the forces conspiring against him: Britain's economic weakness, strategic overcommitment and assumed dependence on the Middle East; Zionist militancy and Arab intransigence; and the domestic political context of American foreign policy. Because of these factors, the Palestine problem would come to frustrate Ernest Bevin as no other issue did during his tenure as Foreign Secretary.

Although the Colonial Office, through the Palestine government, exercised day-to-day responsibility for the administration of Palestine, in matters of policy, the Foreign Office took the lead during the 1945–47 period. The two departments often disagreed, the former favouring partition as the lesser evil of several options. The Foregin Office, its Middle East section most particularly, was strongly pro-Arab,[69] and for the reasons noted earlier they quickly brought Bevin around to their way of seeing British interests in the Middle East. Bevin had entered the job, Alan Bullock says, determined to retain his prerogative in decision-making and highly suspicious of the aristocratic stature of the senior Foreign Office officials. But he soon came to appreciate their advice. It was a natural development, since 'short of a revolution . . . every minister has to come to terms with his department'.[70] Harold Beeley, one of his principal advisers, described the change thus:

> . . . a process took place which can be called the 'absorption' of a minister by his department. He read our material and within the first few weeks he came to the conclusion, . . . that the traditional Labour Party policy was wrong. It's not true that Bevin was 'got grip of' by the Foreign Office. But it was only by becoming a minister in charge of a department that he could become fully informed of the issues.[71]

Beeley himself may have been one of the most influential; Sir John Martin, then a Colonial Office official, remarked in an interview, 'One wondered how much of the thinking was Bevin and how much was Harold Beeley'.[72]

Be that as it may, Bevin's opinions carried considerable weight in Cabinet, on Palestine as on other foreign policy issues. He was, in his biographer's estimate, second in influence only to the Prime Minister in the important Defence Committee of Cabinet. He sought and usually received Attlee's support, and his position was often strengthened by his ability to produce bi-partisan support on foreign policy. 'Bevin himself,' writes William Roger Louis, 'was the architect of Britain's Palestine policy'.[73]

As Bevin took up the position of Foreign Secretary, pressures were mounting for a British policy initiative on Palestine. The Zionists were one source of this pressure; the Colonial Office was another. The latter took the view that a solution should be produced as soon as possible in order to prevent or contain the violence it regarded as almost inevitable. To this end the Colonial Office favoured partition of Palestine, although not to the exclusion of any other promising suggestion.[74] The third source of pressure was the United States. In July 1945, during the Potsdam conference, Truman had asked Churchill to lift the restrictions on Jewish immigration into Palestine. The succeeding Labour government fended off Truman's request pending the opportunity to consider the Palestine problem. Upon his return to the United States, the President told a press conference that he had asked the British to admit to Palestine as many Jews as possible. Shortly thereafter, he received a report on displaced persons (DP) in Europe prepared by Earl G. Harrison, who had visited the DP camps at Truman's request. Harrison recommended that the British grant an additional 100 000 immigration certificates for displaced Jews to enter Palestine. At the end of August, Truman forwarded the Harrison report to London with his endorsement and a personal plea for a rapid transfer of European

Jews who so wished to Palestine. Michael Cohen notes that although there were only about 50 000 Jewish DPs in Europe, 'The 100 000 was now adopted by Truman, for whom it was to serve as a ready palliative in lieu of a comprehensive solution to the Palestine problem'.[75]

In retrospect, Alan Bullock has suggested that British agreement to admit the 100 000 in 1945 on a 'once-and-for-all' basis might have been the wiser course.[76] It would have satisfied Truman, who could show his political constituency that his efforts had achieved results. It would have relieved the British of pressure from that quarter. What the Arab reaction would have been, and whether such a British initiative merely would have emboldened the Zionists to try again, Bullock does not address in any detail.[77] Whatever hopes Truman might have had in persuading the British on this point were probably dashed at the end of September when the President's appeal to Attlee was leaked to the American press. In violation of private undertakings between the two men, and without prior warning to London, the White House then issued a press release which covered the substance of the Truman letter of 31 August and included portions of the Harrison report. The British government responded by publishing its own version of events and by quietly expressing their displeasure to the US government. Bevin was particularly piqued when Secretary of State Byrnes told him that the decision to make the matter public had been taken as a result of pressure from Democratic Party leaders eager to influence the forthcoming mayoral election in New York.[78]

Angry as he was at this American breach of etiquette, Bevin was enough of a realist to recognise that the US government was going to continue to be a factor in the Palestine question. His solution to the problem this posed was to involve the Americans further, to force them to bear some of the responsibility for resolving the issue. On 4 October, he proposed to Cabinet that the Americans be invited to participate in a joint committee to study the problem of DPs in Europe and immigration into Palestine. The proposal was referred to the Palestine Committee for discussion, and approved in revised form by Cabinet a week later.[79] The terms of reference of the proposed committee were: to examine the position of Jews in British and American occupied Europe; to estimate the number who could not be resettled in their countries of origin; to examine the possibility of relieving the situation in Europe by immigration into countries outside Europe; and to consider other means of

dealing with the situation.[80] Given his public pronouncements on the Palestine issue, Truman could hardly refuse the British proposal. But the Americans did demand concessions. They insisted, and the British accepted reluctantly, that the second item be considerably expanded and include a commitment to make estimates of those who wished or would be forced by circumstances to migrate to Palestine. The British also acceded to US demands that commission deliberations be limited to 120 days, and that announcement of the commission be delayed until after the New York election. On 13 November the two governments announced the establishment of the Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry, which would consult all concerned parties and make its recommendations to the two governments and ultimately to the United Nations. Bevin stated that the British government would abide by the recommendations of a unanimous report.[81]

Through the winter of 1945–46 the commission of six British and six American representatives held hearings and received evidence in Washington, London, Europe, Palestine, Cairo and elsewhere in the Middle East. American Zionist groups, the Jewish Agency, the Arab League, British officials in the area, the Palestine government and other interested parties testified before the commission. The British government extended the Jewish immigration quota by 1500 per month following expiry of the White Paper limit, but illegal immigration and terrorism continued. The main recommendations of the commission's unanimous report, released on 30 April 1946, were: first, that 100 000 Jewish refugees be allowed to immigrate into Palestine as soon as possible; second, that the mandate be converted into a United Nations trusteeship which would prepare Palestine for independence as a unified binational state; and finally, that Jewish official institutions resume cooperation with the Palestine government in the suppression of terrorism and illegal immigration.[82] Reaction to the report was mixed and these responses played a significant role in the sequence of events which determined the outcome of this phase of policy-making.

The release of the report provided yet another instance of awkward relations between Britain and the United States. On 18 April, Bevin had asked the Americans not to publish the report until the two governments had consulted together on the matter. Truman agreed, but later reversed himself under pressure from American Zionists. On 30 April, without consulting the British, he publicly endorsed the immigration recommendation, urging that the transfer of the

100 000 Jewish refugees be carried out 'with the greatest dispatch'.[83] Moreover, at the instigation of David Niles and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he explicitly avoided committing the United States in respect of any other aspect of the report.[84]

Truman's duplicity outraged the British, Bevin particularly. A British interdepartmental committee had studied the report and had concluded that its implementation would have 'disastrous effects' on the British position in the Middle East and might destabilise the Indian sub-continent. The ensuing disorder in Palestine would necessitate military reinforcements, of which Britain had none to spare. Influenced perhaps by the report's details on the Jewish underground, and by the news of the murder of seven British soldiers by Jewish insurgents in Tel Aviv on 25 April, the committee's deliberations placed singular emphasis on the security aspects of the report. Field-Marshal Viscount Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), probably summarised accurately the prevailing attitude when he described the report as 'a futile document, which puts us in a more difficult position than ever. If they had made any further immigration dependent upon their surrender of arms and abolition of the Jewish army there might have been some sense in their recommendations.'[85] The committee urged the British government to reject the recommendations of the Anglo-American Commission.

Attlee too was pessimistic about the course of action proposed by the commission. But Bevin, determined to keep the Americans involved, rallied the Cabinet behind him. He told the State Department's Director of the Office of European Affairs that he was prepared to admit the 100 000 Jewish immigrants provided, first, that the entire number were not admitted immediately and, second, that the United States was prepared to share the financial and military burden.[86] Truman's selective endorsement of the report on 30 April, unaccompanied by any offer to assist in its implementation, stopped this initiative cold. Under the circumstances, Bevin's anger and frustration were understandable.

On the following day, 1 May, Prime Minister Attlee told the House of Commons that the government could not implement the commission's recommendations, particularly those regarding large-scale Jewish immigration into Palestine, until the 'illegal armies' were disbanded. Truman's apparent foreclosure on the matter notwithstanding, Attlee made it clear that the British government intended to continue efforts to secure American assistance in carrying

out the recommendations.[87] Predictably, the British announcement pleased neither the Arabs nor the Jews. Further large-scale immigration was unacceptable to the Arabs and they rejected that proposal out of hand. Jewish reaction ranged from outright denunciation by the extreme Zionist factions because the recommendations did not include the creation of a Jewish state, to cautious acceptance by moderate Zionists who were pleased by the immigration recommendation. They took exception, however, to the British government's insistence on disbandment of the insurgent organisations; despite assurances from the Foreign Office that this did not mean Britain had rejected the commission's proposals, the insurgent organisations regarded it as proof of British duplicity – Britain was not abiding by its promise to implement a unanimous report. Consequently the insurgents refused to surrender their arms.[88]

Certainly, from a Zionist viewpoint, subsequent British actions could be interpreted as a betrayal of Bevin's earlier undertaking to abide by the recommendations of a unanimous report. On 15 May the Foreign Office announced that decisions on the commission's report would be deferred until Jewish and Arab leaders had made known their views on the report. Thereafter, a team of British and American 'experts' would study the implications of the report. The delay enraged the Jewish community in the United States, and drew criticism from the Labour Party membership at the annual party conference at Bournemouth in June. Bevin answered his critics by emphasising that because of the existence of the 'illegal armies' in Palestine, if the 100 000 refugees were to be admitted Britain would have to send another army division there, and he was not prepared to do so. His frustration with the United States manifested itself in the notorious observation that Americans were agitating for admission of the 100 000 'with the purest of motives. They did not want too many Jews in New York'.[89] In Palestine, the insurgents responded to the delay and to Bevin's speech with a series of attacks culminating in the kidnapping of five British officers. The British replied in turn with a large-scale internal security operation intended to break up the 'illegal armies'.[90] The situation was rapidly becoming polarised and militarised. The High Commissioner, General Sir Alan Cunningham, warned London in June of the deteriorating situation and the need for a quick political solution:

> The sands are running out. I am now definitely of the opinion that the only hope of getting a peaceful solution of the Palestine problem is to introduce a plan for partition. If this is not done *at once*, I can see no hope for a peaceful solution.[91]

Ritchie Ovendale argues that the situation 'on the ground' in Palestine persuaded the British government to search for an alternative to implementation of the commission's report.[92] They were not long alone in this. Truman's reassurances to American Zionists notwithstanding, the President was quickly retreating from further American commitment on the matter. The immigration issue was still 'on the table' when the British and American delegations met in London on 17 June. By the end of the month, however, both sides had agreed to defer a decision on that matter. The American negotiators, who in any case lacked experience on the Palestine issue, soon had their room for manoeuvre narrowed considerably. On the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Truman told his 'experts' that the United States would not use its troops to implement the commission's recommendations; nor would the US act as a trustee or co-trustee.[93] Thus, for different reasons, and by different routes, the two governments had reached the same conclusion: the commission's report was unworkable, and some other solution would have to be found.

Convinced that Britain could not afford – financially or politically – to give force to the Anglo-American Commission's recommendations, Colonial Secretary George Hall recommended to Cabinet on 8 July an alternative: 'Provincial Autonomy'. This plan envisaged a federal state under trusteeship with two provinces, one predominantly Arab, the other mainly Jewish, and a separate trusteeship over Jerusalem. There would be a central government responsible for all common services, as well as foreign affairs, defence and internal security. This central authority would consist of the High Commissioner and a small executive council. Each province would have its own legislature, and would be able to determine its own level of immigration. Ultimately, the state would evolve to independence as one state or two. The Chiefs of Staff 'emphatically' endorsed Hall's conclusions about the risks to the British position in the Middle East arising from implementation of the commission report, but they also had doubts about the feasibility of the 'Provincial Autonomy' plan. Bevin, too, had his doubts; his thinking was now directed towards some variant of partition. Nonetheless, on 11 July the Cabinet authorised Sir Norman Brook, Secretary to the Cabinet and head of the British negotiating team, to discuss Hall's plan with the Americans.[94]

British persuasion worked; on 19 July Henry Grady, the chief American delegate, recommended to Secretary of State Byrnes that the US agree to support the 'Provincial Autonomy' plan. Byrnes, in turn, forwarded this recommendation to the President with his endorsement. Truman was inclined to accept the proposal. But on 25 July the American press published details of the plan, and the Zionist lobby again began to put political pressure on the administration. They played the 'electoral card' blatantly, and Truman's political advisers succumbed. The President resisted Zionist pressure and remained committed to the plan until the cabinet meeting of 30 July, at which the final decision was to be made. There, according to Louis, a telegram from Byrnes reneging on his earlier endorsement because of the domestic political repercussions apparently swung the balance of cabinet opinion against Provincial Autonomy. The next day, when the British government presented the plan to the House of Commons, Truman announced the recall of the American delegation for further consultation. Finally, on 12 August, Truman informed Attlee that, owing to intense public opposition, he could not give formal support to the plan. So although it remained the centrepiece of British policy-making efforts for the next six months, as a joint Anglo-American venture Provincial Autonomy was stillborn.[95]

If the defeat of Provincial Autonomy represented a victory for the Zionist movement, it was nonetheless a somewhat hollow one. By mid-summer 1946 the Zionists had overplayed their hand. In Palestine, the armed struggle had resulted in many British casualties, but this had not produced the desired political results; if anything, incidents such as the bombing of Jerusalem's King David Hotel with massive loss of life had strengthened British resolve. The Zionists were no closer to achieving their objectives. Worse still, implicated in the insurgents' June offensive, the Jewish Agency had been occupied and searched by British forces and many of its leaders detained. Deeply embarrassed by the excesses of violence and the exposure of its collusion with the illegal underground, the Agency ordered the Haganah to suspend military operations, and to concentrate solely on illegal immigration.[96] In the United States, Cohen writes, there was a growing realisation among the Zionist movement that their combined tactics of 'agitprop' and partisan politics had engendered deep resentment on the part of the President, who was now inclined to wash his hands of the entire matter.[97] Moreover, having stymied every British policy-making initiative, the

Zionist movement had yet to come up with a viable alternative policy of their own. The Biltmore Program and even the demand for 100 000 immigrants had been overtaken by events. A new initiative was called for, and it materialised in August 1946. It had the appearance of capitulation to British *force majeure*, but it was more than that. It was the consequence of what Nahum Goldmann of the Jewish Agency believed was 'a military, moral and diplomatic crisis' of Zionism.[98]

As early as March 1946 the leading Zionist figures (Weizmann, Ben-Gurion and Moshe Shertock) had conceded to British Commissioner Richard Crossman, in confidence, that they were prepared to accept partition. But they were unwilling to follow through with official, public declarations to that effect; instead, the Zionist leadership had clung to the Biltmore Program and refused to reveal the 'irreducible minimum' they were prepared to accept. This dilemma led Goldmann to write to Ben-Gurion in June, suggesting a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive in order to resolve the problem. 'Here you see again how necessary it is for us to have a certain line of policy; otherwise we have no program and cannot discuss major policy intelligently and with any chance of success . . . .'[99] Shortly thereafter, events in Palestine reached a climax and the British struck at the Agency. Thus, it was a chastened 'rump' executive that met in Paris on 2 August 1946. Weizmann declined to attend on grounds of ill-health, although political considerations undoubtedly played a part in his decision. More than any other leading Zionist, Weizmann had been gravely embarrassed by the violent events culminating in the King David Hotel atrocity. At a meeting with Colonial Secretary George Hall on 7 August, Weizmann indicated that he was prepared to accept conditionally the provincial autonomy plan. At the Agency Executive meeting Goldmann too favoured the plan, and in sessions of 4 and 5 August he clashed with Ben-Gurion, who favoured partition. The result was a compromise partition proposal which, taking provincial autonomy as a starting point, envisaged 'the establishment of a viable Jewish State in an adequate area of Palestine'.[100] This represented a significant retreat from the Biltmore Program, but it was also a step in the direction of a negotiated settlement.

The next day Goldmann flew to Washington, where he quickly won support from the administration. In order to do so, he had actually overstepped his mandate in his discussion with Dean Acheson. Nonetheless, it was sufficient to convince Acheson,

Henderson, Truman, and even the British Ambassador to Washington, that at least there was a basis for realistic negotiation. Truman suggested to Attlee that the Jewish Agency proposal be included at the forthcoming conference on Palestine to be held in London.[101] Attlee replied that although provincial autonomy would be the centrepiece of the conference, the Arab and Jewish delegations would be able to suggest amendments or to offer counter-proposals. The London conference, however, was a failure. The Jews refused to attend unless their detained leaders were released and allowed to represent them at the conference table. The British government refused to permit this, so the conference opened on 9 September without Jewish representation, and the Agency's plan was never discussed. The Palestinian Arabs also boycotted the talks, for similar reasons. The delegates representing several Arab states and the Arab League rejected the provincial autonomy plan and presented their own proposals for an independent Arab state. The conference adjourned after one week, having accomplished nothing.[102]

The end of the conference brought this phase of policy-making virtually to a close. It remained only for President Truman to bury the joint Anglo-American initiative on 4 October with one more public statement on immigration and the Jewish Agency's partition plan. Attlee responded angrily, convinced that Truman's statement was little more than a cheap ploy to win votes at British expense.[103] According to Cohen, Truman's statement was the result of both pre-election political pressure and a possibly misinformed belief that Anglo-Zionist talks on the eventual participation of Jewish Agency leaders in the next round of the London conference had reached a deadlock, and thus could not be compromised by a presidential statement. In fact the talks had only just begun, and it was hoped that these would lead to an agreement concerning Agency cooperation in maintaining law and order in Palestine. This would permit the government to release the detained Agency leaders. Jewish delegates could then join the conference.[104] In the event, the talks continued, culminating in the release of the detainees at the beginning of November. This had no effect on the situation in Palestine, which continued to deteriorate. But policy-making efforts were effectively frozen in place. Bevin believed that in the event of a failure to reach a negotiated settlement, Britain had three unilateral options left: to impose a settlement acceptable to one of the two communities in Palestine; to surrender the mandate and withdraw from Palestine; or to propose a partition scheme in which Trans-

Jordan annexed the Arab portion of Palestine.[105] None of these was particularly palatable and, pending further talks with the Americans, the treaty negotiations with the Egyptians and the outcome of the Zionist Congress, the Palestine question was set aside for several months while the British Cabinet dealt with other matters.

In the interval the Zionist movement changed course dramatically. Largely as the result of internal political rivalries, particularly between Ben-Gurion and Silver, over the leadership of the Zionist movement, the moderate faction was defeated at the Zionist Congress in December. The price of unity had been to push the movement into a more activist frame of mind. Participation in the London conference was rejected, and a possible resumption of armed struggle endorsed.[106]

The London conference reconvened at the end of January 1947. The Zionist movement was not represented officially, but Arthur Creech-Jones, Colonial Secretary since October 1946 and sympathetic to Zionism, arranged for an unofficial delegation to be in London, available for consultations, during the conference. British proposals laid before the conference represented the government's improvised efforts to 'square the triangle' of its strategic interests, Arab demands and Zionist aspirations. Bevin had intended only to present a scheme which would merge the provincial autonomy and Arab plans of 1946, producing an independent Arab state with several Jewish cantons. Increased Jewish immigration would be permitted for a limited period. The Cabinet, however, revived partition which was also submitted to the conference. Not surprisingly, the Arabs rejected partition once again, and the Jews refused to agree to the cantonment plan. Bevin then redrafted a variation of the cantonment proposal: local autonomy for Jewish and Arab areas under British supervision and independence after five years; 100 000 Jewish immigrants during the first two years of trusteeship, after which immigration would depend upon Arab consent; and after independence, safeguards to protect the Jewish minority. Both sides rejected the plan and the conference ended shortly thereafter. On 18 February, Bevin announced that the British government intended to refer the Palestine problem to the United Nations.[107]

On 15 May 1947, the United Nations General Assembly, acting at British request, appointed an eleven-nation Special Committee on Palestine. UNSCOP travelled to Palestine, Lebanon, and Europe, where it received testimony from many of the same organisations and persons who had spoken to the Anglo-American Commission.

Trans-Jordan and the Arab Higher Committee – which represented the Palestinian Arabs – declined to appear. UNSCOP presented its report on 31 August 1947. The committee agreed on certain basic principles: that Palestine should become an independent state as soon as possible; that it should have a democratic political structure and should constitute a single economic entity. There was, however, considerable disagreement on the manner by which these principles should be implemented. The result was a majority report recommending partition, and a minority report favouring a federal state plan.[108] Unwilling to be saddled with the enforcement of a solution that might involve further cost in lives and money without gaining any advantage for Britain, the British government had refused to commit itself in advance to accepting or enforcing UNSCOP's recommendations. In view of Arab opposition to the majority recommendations, it was reluctant to so commit itself now. On 26 September 1947, therefore, the British government announced its intention to surrender the mandate and withdraw the administration and security forces from Palestine.[109]

With the February decision, concerted British efforts to formulate a solution which would accommodate British, Arab and Jewish aspirations within a single policy were effectively at an end. Bevin's biographer concurs with Abba Eban's assessment that the Foreign Secretary's announcement meant that the British government was prepared to surrender the mandate.[110] The manner and the timing of that surrender would be determined largely by factors over which Britain exerted only partial influence: diplomacy at the United Nations, and within Palestine, the interaction of the insurgents and the security forces. Handing the Palestine issue to the UN amounted to an abdication of responsibility, but Creech-Jones asserts that it was at least consistent with the government's assumptions about British interests in the region at the time.[111] Had the British government been able to consider the Palestine question in isolation, on moral grounds alone it would have come down clearly in favour of a Jewish state. But it was not free to do so. Instead, it was hostage to conflicting factors and pressures: economic weakness, imperial defence requirements, Zionist objectives and American partisan politics. The first two pushed British policy towards a pro-Arab stance, while the latter two pulled it in a Zionist direction. Once it became obvious that the two tendencies were irreconcilable, the British governmnent did what comes naturally to most governments: it put national self-interest first, abandoned the untenable middle ground, and chose the course of least resistance.

The British government's inability to forge a clear policy exerted a significant influence on the course of the conflict in Palestine. First, the British refusal to adopt a policy acceptable to the Jews – at the very least substantially increased immigration – undermined the moderates in the Zionist movement and allowed the extremists to predominate. It contributed directly, therefore, to the increase in violence in the 1945–47 period. Second, the absence of a policy forced the civil administration to rely almost solely on coercion to retain control of Palestine. It also denied the security forces a clear strategic objective in their counter-insurgency campaign, and left them to 'maintain order' in a hostile environment and a political vacuum. It was an untenable position. The Zionists knew it, and so did many leading British figures. Labour's electoral mandate in 1945 did not extend to the unbridled repression of the Jewish people, whose suffering was being laid bare daily before the conscience of the world. Neither the Labour Party, the British public, nor Britain's critics in America would tolerate it for long. Just as economic and strategic considerations narrowed Britain's policy options on Palestine, so Labour's commitment to social justice and opposition to colonialism set limits on the vigour of Britain's response to the Jewish insurgents. Sir Winston Churchill alluded to this problem in 1947 when he remarked that there was 'no country in the world . . . less fit for a conflict with terrorists than Great Britain . . . not because of her weakness or cowardice; it is because of her restraint and virtues'.[112] Eloquently put, as a broad generalisation, it was nonetheless a perceptive observation in respect of Palestine. Under the British mandate at that time Palestine was, as J. C. Hurewitz observed, 'a police state with a conscience'.[113] It could not be governed as such indefinitely. The insurgents recognised this and, as will be shown in the following chapter, designed their strategies and tactics to exploit this all-important factor.