

# Perspectives on the 1939 white paper during world war ii

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In 1939, the British government published a White Paper severely restricting Jewish immigration and planning for an independent Palestinian state within ten years. On the part of the British, this was an effort to secure crucial Arab cooperation in case of war. But neither the Jews nor the Arabs were pleased with the White Paper. The Jews took direct action against it, arguing that it violated earlier promises that had been made to them. The Arabs, on the other hand, argued that the restrictions were too weak.

Still, the Arabs recognized the White Paper as a move in the right direction and although they went on record as opposed to it, they did not openly fight it. While the Jews forcefully rejected the White Paper, most of the Zionist leadership postponed the fight against the British in order to support them in the war. Some Jewish terrorist organizations, however, did spring up to target Britain. Throughout World War II, the White Paper allowed the British the support they had been seeking from the Arabs, while drawing opposition from the Jews.

In the period leading up to the issue of the White Paper, Britain's attempts to resolve the crisis in Palestine "occurred against a backdrop of developing tensions in Europe and the Mediterranean that ultimately had a major impact on Britain's Palestine policy" (Smith 139). To the British, the Arab Revolt that had taken place from 1936 to 1939 "signified a rebellion that had to be crushed, not simply to preserve Britain's own position in Palestine as the mandatory power, but to consolidate that position by appealing for Arab support both within and outside Palestine once the revolt had ended" (Smith 139).

This position was adopted as the threat of war began to loom closer. German and Italian propaganda was aimed toward the Arabs, encouraging them to revolt against the British. The British knew that they could not afford to send large numbers of troops to quash a rebellion when their forces would be necessary in Europe. They also recognized the strategic importance of Palestine, and British military planners “ now began to view Palestine in light of envisaged wartime needs” (Smith 139).

Any troops currently in Palestine would have to be transferred to Egypt and the Suez Canal at the outbreak of war, and eventually reinforcements from India would have to travel through Palestine. Peace in Palestine was now considered “ essential to British military security” (Smith 139). But more was necessary to guarantee British security in the region. In addition to control over Palestine, the British needed “ assurance of the tacit, if not open, support of the neighboring Arab countries” (Smith 140).

The Palestine situation was crucial to gaining this support, as Arab leaders had become increasingly involved in the conflict during the revolt. Creating a solution that was favorable to the Arabs would promise Britain the support of the Arab world during the war. In January 1939, British strategists advised that ““ immediately on the outbreak of war, the necessary measures would be taken...in order to bring about a complete appeasement of Arab opinion in Palestine and in neighboring countries”” (Smith 140) The British also recognized that maintaining their mandatory power in Palestine was necessary if they hoped to use it as a strategic base.

But the Partition Plan had already been proposed by the Peel Commission in 1937. This “ raised questions in the Foreign Office: if the Jews were recognized as having national status in part of Palestine, what further justification would there be for Britain’s staying there as mandatory authority? ” (Smith 140). Nevertheless, the Cabinet approved the Partition Plan. Expecting the Zionists to do the same, they were “ startled by the force of Zionist opposition to the plan” (Smith 140). As a result, the Woodhead Commission was formed to investigate the possibilities for partition.

The Foreign Office, which strongly opposed partition, used this opportunity to have the committee “ reopen the question of the practicability of partition, not just its scope” (Smith 140). Fearing a hostile Arab reaction to British policy, the Foreign Office argued that ““ the European implications of a hostile Middle East aligned with Britain’s enemies must override the arguments in favour of partition”” (Smith 140). The Woodhead commission submitted its report in November 1938, after a period of severe Arab revolt had “ temporarily paralyzed much of Palestine” (Smith 141).

The Commission concluded that “ there were no feasible boundaries for ‘ self-supporting Arab and Jewish states’” (Smith 141). Still, the commissioners recommended three different partition plans. One plan reduced the Jewish portion to approximately 400 square miles along the coast, while the other two made the state even smaller. The Zionists rejected all of the proposals, which paved the way for the British government to issue a White Paper on November 9, 1938, which “ discarded the entire notion of partition as ‘ impracticable’” (Smith 141).

This abandonment of partition allowed the British to take control of all of Palestine, securing their mandatory power and their strategic bases. Although they had succeeded in maintaining control, the British still needed to resolve the conflict between the Arabs and the Jews. The White Paper therefore called for a conference in which the two groups would discuss “future policy, including the question of immigration into Palestine” (Smith 141). It also warned that if the two parties could not agree, the British would “take their own decision in the light of their examination of the problem” (Smith 141).

The St. James Conference, held in London in February 1939, swiftly reached an impasse. Jamal al-Husayni, the cousin of the mufti, “demanded the creation of an independent Arab state and the dismantling of the Jewish National Home,” while Chaim Weizmann argued for “a continuation of the mandate and British sponsorship of unlimited immigration” (Smith 141). With the threat of war looming ever closer, “Arab opinion in the Middle East now seemed more important to British interests than was Jewish opinion in Palestine or Jewish political influence in London” (Smith 143).

The British government decided to act. They “finally agreed to the Arab state overtures” (Smith 142) and published the White Paper on May 17, 1939. The 1939 White Paper illustrated a “stunning reversal of policy” (Smith 139) and was “interpreted by contemporaries as marking the end of the alliance between the Jews and Great Britain” (Shapira 276). It restricted Jewish immigration into Palestine to 10,000 per year for five years with an additional 25,000 refugees permitted.

After five years, no further Jewish immigration would be allowed ““ unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it”” (Shapira 469). Land transfers to Jews were also restricted to certain areas. The White Paper declared that ““ His Majesty’s Government believe that the framers of the Mandate in which the Balfour Declaration was embodied could not have intended that Palestine should be converted into a Jewish state against the will of the Arab population of the country”” (Smith 142). The new policy planned for Palestine to be an independent Arab state within ten years, when Jews would make up no more than one-third of the population. Zionist reaction to the 1939 White Paper was abrupt. Declaring that the Jews would resist its implementation, the Jewish Agency argued that the plan was ““ contrary to international law and a violation of the promises made to the Jews in and since the Balfour Declaration”” (Smith 142). On the day after its publication, the Grand Rabbi tore up a copy of the White Paper before the assembled congregation in the principal synagogue of Jerusalem.

Street demonstrations in the same city resulted in the death of a British constable from a Jewish revolver shot. Mass meetings of Jews throughout the country took an oath to observe a proclamation which contained the following passages: ‘ Whereas the British Government has announced a new policy in Palestine...Now therefore the Jewish population proclaims before the world that this treacherous policy will not be tolerated. The Jewish population will fight it to the uttermost, and will spare no sacrifice to frustrate and defeat it’ (Khalidi 473).

Jews in Palestine also announced policies of civil disobedience and non-cooperation with the British, but these plans soon ceased as “ Jewish leaders knew that if the Government were to cease its active support of the National Home the latter’s entire structure would be imperiled” (Khalidi 473). In general, “ the Zionist leadership abandoned the fight against Britain and dedicated itself to promoting maximum participation of the Jewish community in the war effort” (Shapira 280). The Jewish community argued over whether they should fight the White Paper or support the British in the hope that their post-war policy would change.

Moderates felt that the White Paper had been issued only because the war required Arab support. Arthur Ruppin wrote in his diary in May 1939 that “ This White Paper emanates from a certain political constellation (Arab united front, Britain’s fear of the Arabs) and will be equally short-lived” (Shapira 290). Moderates “ demanded that tension with the British be reduced; Jews should be unconditionally loyal until the end of the war, assuming that the British government would ultimately change its policy” (Shapira 290).

Even Vladimir Jabotinsky, “ despite all this criticism of the mandate government and all his attempts to exert pressure on it by threatening to replace it with another power, was not prepared to give Britain a bill of divorce. Until his dying day, he supported a pro-British orientation” (Shapira 246). Immigration, though, remained a strong point of contention. Before the publication of the White Paper, Zionist leaders had decided to increase illegal immigration of Jews into Palestine. Of the 27, 561 Jews who arrived in Palestine in 1939, 11, 156 were unauthorized (Smith 165).

With the beginning of war, these plans intensified as thousands of refugees attempted to flee Europe. David Ben-Gurion warned that while Jews would “ help the British in their struggle as if there were no White Paper” they would also “ resist the White Paper as if there were no war” (Shapira 279). This situation “ brought Zionists and British officials into immediate conflict” (Smith 165). When the British decided to hold illegal immigrants in internment camps in Palestine, the Zionists reacted by flooding the country with immigrants in order to make the policy impossible.

The British then decided that refugees who reached Palestine would be transferred to the island of Mauritius. They simultaneously struggled to stop the flow of refugees from Europe by urging countries like Turkey to deny them transit. After the outbreak of war, the impossible refugee situation “ created ‘ almost...a war within a war’” as “ Jews became increasingly bitter at what they saw as British inhumanity” (Smith 165). This situation led to disaster. In November 1940, British naval patrols intercepted two ships and transferred over 1, 700 refugees to the SS Patria to be deported to Mauritius.

While the ship was ported in Haifa, the Jewish defense force Hagana “ arranged for a bomb to be placed near the hull to disable the ship, thereby forcing British authorities to permit the Jews to stay. The plan miscarried, and the ship sank with over 200 casualties” (Smith 165). The Zionists were outraged. Faced with propaganda that accused them of responsibility for the deaths, the British cabinet allowed the survivors of the Patria to remain in Palestine.



Another disaster occurred in February 1942 when the British convinced the Turks to forbid the SS Struma passage into the Mediterranean. The ship full of Romanian Jews was turned back and sank with only one survivor. To the Zionists, “ this was proof of British perfidy” (Smith 165). While most Jewish leaders recognized that they could not declare war on Britain, Jewish terrorist groups did grow and aim their attacks at the British. The Jewish broadcasting station, Kol Israel, stated that “ The paralysing of the railways all over the country through cutting the lines in 242 places serves as a warning to the Government of the White Paper” (Khalidi 606). Such activists saw the White Paper “ as the result of a British assessment that the Jews had no choice but to resign themselves to an anti-Zionist policy, because they needed British protection against the Arabs” (Shapira 290). They set out to prove the British wrong. They argued that “ the only way to bring about a change in British policy was by ample demonstration of Jewish power and willingness to fight and suffer losses” (Shapira 290).

They also hoped to show the British government that enforcing the new restrictions “ would make it necessary for them to carry out acts of suppression on a large scale, and it was doubtful whether the British government would approve” (Shapira 290). Their actions were designed to send the British “ a clear message about what the absolute limits were, limits beyond which they were prepared to die and even to kill” (Shapira 290). The publication of the 1939 White Paper also led the Irgun, a Revisionist terrorist group, to shift its focus from the Arabs to the British.

Irgun began attacking British administrative buildings, assaulting British police personnel, and bombing gathering places. But once the war began, Jabotinsky urged his followers in the Revisionist party “ to support the British effort against the Nazis” (Smith 170). Most of the Irgun followed Jabotinsky’s orders. Those who did not were led by Abraham Stern. The Stern Gang, formed in 1940, was “ willing to rob Jewish concerns, such as a Histadrut bank, with Jewish loss of life as well as assault British officials” (Smith 170).

Stern simultaneously established relationships with German and Italian representatives, offering them “ his service to their cause for the duration of the war” (Smith 170). Ignoring the Nazis’ anti-Semitic platform, Stern allied himself with the Germans simply because they were fighting Britain. The Hagana and the Irgun both condemned the Stern Gang, offering the British police information that led to Stern’s murder in a February 1942 raid. For the next two years, there was little Zionist underground activity.

The leaders of the Stern Gang were either dead or in prison, and the Irgun had lost its leadership with Jabotinsky’s death. But Menachem Begin, who arrived in Palestine in 1942, “ saw himself as the heir to Jabotinsky’s Revisionist ideals” (Smith 170). At the end of 1943, both Irgun and the Stern Gang “ were again preparing for anti-British action, inspired by both the receding German threat in the Middle East and the ongoing tensions in Zionist-British relations, exacerbated particularly by the legacy of the refugee ships and the growing awareness of the Holocaust” (Smith 170).

This situation led to cooperation between Begin and the remaining members of the Stern Gang. Under the name LEHI, they resumed their actions against

Britain. The actions of LEHI resulted in the opposite of their intended effects. In July 1943, Winston Churchill instigated the creation of a cabinet committee on Palestine that would examine alternatives to the 1939 White Paper. The committee recommended partition, but the plan was never officially approved because on November 6, members of LEHI assassinated Lord Moyne, the deputy minister of state for Middle East Affairs in Cairo.

Since Moyne had been a close friend of Churchill, the Prime Minister “reacted by shelving the partition scheme he had seen through, against stiff opposition from his ministers” (Smith 170). He announced to the House of Commons that ““ if our dreams for Zionism are to end in the smoke of assassins’ pistols and our labours for its future to produce only a new set of gangsters worthy of Nazi Germany, many like myself will have to reconsider the position we have maintained so consistently in the past”” (Smith 170).

Partition was not discussed again during Churchill’s term. For the duration of the war, Churchill’s warning to the Jews worked: “ they stopped underground activities that seemed to threaten the likelihood of any cooperation with a British government after the war” (Smith 170). Arab views on the White Paper also varied, as “ The Arab community in Palestine was essentially leaderless, riven with more factions than ever before” (Smith 144). Although they recognized this as a step in the right direction, “ The Arab reaction was only partially favourable” (Khalidi 470).

They were pleased with the “ definite statement that there was no intention of setting up a Jewish state and the apparent determination to make Palestine an independent country in which the Jews formed not more than a

third of the total population" (Khalidi 470). But they still viewed the restrictions concerning land sales as "quite inadequate" because "they ignored the fact that the rights and position of the Arab population were also being prejudiced by land purchases made by Jews avowedly for 'political and strategical reasons' - i. . . , with a view to dominating the whole country" (Khalidi 470). Arabs also had trouble believing that the British would enforce these new immigration plans. From their point of view, "similar statements at intervals during the last twenty years had never yet been followed by a cessation of the illegal immigration, and the Arab delegates saw no reason to suppose that they would be on this occasion either" (Khalidi 470).

Precautionary statements in the White Paper such as "'should public opinion in Palestine hereafter show itself in favour of such a development' and 'provided that local conditions permit,' taken together with 'adequate provision for the special position in Palestine of the Jewish National Home'" suggested to the Arabs that "Jewish opposition would still be allowed to block constitutional development indefinitely" (Khalidi 471). Moderate Arabs and the leaders of the Arab governments saw the White Paper as hopeful.

Those who encouraged defiance optimistically "used the example of the Arab Revolt and its presumed success in forcing Britain to deal with the Arabs, whatever its military failure" (Smith 144). The Arab Higher Committee, on the other hand, "repudiated the White Paper because it did not promise them immediate independence with a halt to Jewish immigration" (Smith 142), maintaining its "consistent refusal to admit that any part of Palestine should be given to the Zionists" (Smith 144). As a result of their rejection of

the White Paper, “ A certain limited recrudescence of Arab violence even manifested itself in Palestine” (Khalidi 471).

The mufti, who had been officially banned from Palestine after his escape in October 1937, had a similar reaction. After the outbreak of war, British officials in Palestine sought the mufti’s support for the White Paper and his help in implementing it. They did so “ out of fear of his ability to arouse general Arab hostility toward the British position in the Middle East at that time” (Smith 171). The mufti “ rejected these requests and the White Paper itself” and instead “ aligned himself with the Iraqi rebellion against Great Britain in April 1941, and once it failed...he spent the rest of the war supporting the German war effort” (Smith 171).

In general, though, Arab reaction to the 1939 White Paper was not hostile. Agreeing not to engage in overt political activity, “ members of the Higher Committee accepted British offers of safe return to Palestine” (Smith 172). Other leaders including “ a number of leading members of the Istaqlal and the Palestine Arab party that represented the Husaynis, along with Husayn al-Khalidi of the Reform party, reestablished themselves in the country. In general they indicated their reserved acceptance of the 1939 White Paper and distanced themselves from the mufti” (Smith 172). Although fierce Axis propaganda (including the mufti urging rebellion) was focused on Palestine in 1941 and 1942, the Arabs in Palestine remained calm. Another revolt was recognized as “ out of the question, both for political and military reasons. It appeared that the British were coming closer to the Arab point of view. Although they were still quite far from meeting the Arab demands, the

process was proceeding in a positive direction from the Arab perspective” (Shapira 282).

In addition, the Arabs realized that any uprising would have been immediately put down by British forces stationed in Palestine. In general, “the Arab community in Palestine remained a passive element in the occurrences both during the war and afterward. The years 1939-1947 were apparently the longest continuous period of quiet and relative tranquility in Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine since the 1920s” (Shapira 282). The reaction of Palestinian Arabs was one of “general political quiescence” (Kimmerling 134). To many, the White Paper indicated that the British intended to grant Arab independence in Palestine.

Arabs saw the Zionist struggle against the policy as “a sign of anxiety and weakness” (Kimmerling 134). They were certain that “All they needed to do was bide their time” (Kimmerling 134). The British government’s strategic decision to publish the 1939 White Paper therefore proved fruitful. Although the Arabs were not entirely pleased with the decision and argued for stronger restrictions, they did offer the British their support during the war. The Jews, on the other hand, were divided in their reaction to the White Paper.

Some violently fought the restrictions while others recognized the importance of siding with Britain. The British recognized that the consequences of Jewish terrorism were far outweighed by the support they needed from the Arab world, and throughout World War II the 1939 White Paper succeeded in that respect. Both Arabs and Jews rejected the White

Paper, although to differing degrees. The Arabs argued that the restrictions were too weak, but they still offered Britain their support. The Jews struggled to fight the policy while still backing the British war effort.

The British entered World War II “ aware that their Palestine policy reversal in the 1939 White Paper had outraged the Zionists without satisfying the Arabs. They accepted this as the price for temporarily stabilizing their military and strategic positions in Palestine and the Arab world at large...It was a short-term strategy of expediency and calculated appeasement designed to serve Britain’s immediate wartime and possibly long-range imperial designs that assumed a British presence in Palestine for the foreseeable future” (Smith 145).

Summary of each... Info about reexamination of Husayn-McMahon Correspondence? See also Khalidi p. 468 for this. The Zionist (Biltmore) Program held in ?? in May 1942 declared that “ The Conference calls for the fulfillment of the original purpose of the Balfour Declaration which...was to afford them [Jews] the opportunity, as stated by President Wilson, to found there a Jewish Commonwealth.

The Conference affirms its unalterable rejection of the White Paper of May 1939 and denies its moral or legal validity...The policy of the White Paper is cruel and indefensible in its denial of sanctuary to Jews fleeing from Nazi persecution; and at a time when Palestine has become a focal point in the war front of the United Nations, and Palestine Jewry must provide all available manpower for farm and factory and camp, it is in direct conflict with the interests of the allied war effort” (Khalidi 497).

They wanted Palestine to be an Arab state and they felt that the McMahon-Hussein correspondence had promised them that. They hoped to limit the number of Jews in Palestine to only those who were already there. The Jews argued that the White Paper violated promises made to them in the Balfour Declaration. Multiple standpoints existed within the Jewish community, from more moderate views to Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Party's radical opinions.