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Zionist-Maronite Relationship: The Pre-State Years

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ABSTRACT

Extensive relations in the political and economic fields developed between the Jewish community in Palestine and Lebanon during the 1930's and 1940's. Fully conscious of the fact that a violent Jewish-Arab conflict was in the making, Zionist leaders sought to shift their focus to one of establishing links with the Maronite Christians in Lebanon who in their opinion were engaged in a running battle against the onslaught of Arabism and Islam. As early as 1920s, a cooperation pact was signed for the first time between Yehoshua Khankin a Zionist emissary and some Maronite activists. In 1933 the Jewish Agency dispatched Victor Jacobson to Beirut to establish contact with prominent Christians and discuss with them the idea of an alliance between them and Jewish Palestine. The leading figures of the Maronite community whom Jacobson met expressed a keen interest in cooperating with Jewish Palestine in the economic, political and even military fields. Zionist hopes for forging close relations with Lebanon were however dashed due to the outbreak of Arab rebellion in Palestine. The Arab rebellion inflamed passions and in no time feelings ran high in the Arab world against the Palestine Jewry, compelling even pro-Zionist Maronites leaders to act with great restraint in their dealings with Jewish Palestine.

Keywords: Zionist, Maronites, Jewish Agency, Palestine, British Mandate, French Mandate, Arab Rebellion, Litani River, Boundary demarcation.

The roots of the Israeli interest in Lebanon and connections with the Maronite Christian community there can be traced to the second decade of the present century. At a time when it became evident that the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire was going to provide the Zionist movement with an opportunity to obtain an internationally recognized entity in Palestine, several Zionist leaders like Ben Gurion, Haim Kalwariski, Aharon Aronson and Tolklowski came forward with proposals regarding the boundaries of the desired Jewish colony.ⁱ During the course of the First World War the British had succeeded in occupying Palestine through a combination of military superiority and Zionist political support and in so doing had thwarted direct French access to the Sinai Peninsula and Suez Canal. In 1918 Palestine still did not exist as a political entity and its borders were, therefore, ill-defined. That Palestine's northern limit should be on the Litani river or further north near Sidon or any of a half a dozen more places as outlined in various Zionist plans was of little importance to the British once they had succeeded in placing strategic depth between the Suez Canal and the French forces in the Levant. It was, of course, a matter of tremendous import to the Zionist leaders who were interested in procuring for Palestine a defensible boundary and one which would include within Palestine the abundant water resources of Upper Galilee. On 27 February 1919 the World Zionist Organization (WZO) placed before the Supreme Council at the Paris Peace Conference a boundary proposal dated 3 February 1919. In deference to France's status as an ally of Great Britain, the WZO refrained from using security arguments in support of its boundary proposal. The main justification for the boundary request was the inclusion within Palestine of the Litani River and the headwaters of Mount Hermon. The proposed line started from the Mediterranean coast just south of Sidon, running in a northeasterly direction across the Litani River so as to include the whole of the Jordan catchment area up to its northernmost source in Rashaya before turning south towards the Golan Heights.ⁱⁱ

France which at that time had both Syria and Lebanon under its occupation rejected the Zionist claim and insisted upon following the original Sykes-Picot line. Months of negotiation then followed between Britain and France. Finally, in June 1920 France proposed a compromise solution. It called for a line that would leave the coast at Ras-an-Naqurah, a few miles north of the Sykes-Picot line and proceed eastwards. It was then to turn north, so as to include within Palestine a "finger" of territory containing the northernmost Jewish settlement (Metulla) and the Hula valley.ⁱⁱⁱ The inclusion of this "finger" was a direct consequence of the Tel Chai massacre, which has

taken place three months earlier.^{iv} With the northern settlements safely within Palestine the WZO then launched a vigorous campaign aimed at persuading the French to give up Litani but failed. Weizmann states, “I tried to convince General Gouraud the French High Commissioner in Beirut of the importance to Palestine of the waters of the river Litani, but could arouse no interest”^v. Final agreement between Britain and France reached in December 1920 accepted the French proposal of June in its entirety and the border between Palestine (later Israel) and Lebanon came to be established where it stands today. From the Zionist leaders considered vital for the power and irrigation plans they had in mind. More important, by falling to approximate any natural geographic boundaries, the borders left the country all but indefensible militarily.^{vi} Notwithstanding the existence of substantial economic and security problems, the Zionist movement was not, in the early 1920s in any position to reverse the Anglo—French decision. Zionist leaders, therefore, accepted the boundaries of Palestine as determined without much protest. At the same time, fully conscious of the fact that a violent Jewish-Arab conflict was in the making, Zionist leaders sought to shift their focus to one of establishing links with the Maronite Christians in Lebanon who in their opinion were engaged in a running battle against the onslaught of Arabism and Islam. As early as 1920s, a cooperation pact was signed for the first time between Yehoshua Khankin a Zionist emissary and some Maronite activists.^{vii} However, during the 1920s Jewish-Marionite relationship remained confined by and large to the question of land for settlement of Jews in Lebanon. Even in this endeavour the Zionist were not much successful because of the wariness of the French. Weizmann himself reported that he was told by the French High Commissioner, “Of course...I would not want you to work in Southern Syria, because immediately after you had come to Tyre and Saida you would want the frontier rectified”.^{viii}

Despite French opposition, contacts between Zionist leaders and Maronite during this period over the question of land purchase undoubtedly helped to lay the foundation for future political cooperation between the two. In the early thirties, the Jewish Agency was approached by Nejjib Sefir with an offer of political cooperation. Referring to his visit Hayim Arlosoroff, Political Secretary of the Jewish Agency stated:

A few days ago we were approached by a very intelligent and, I think, not uninfluential Lebanese Christian named Nejjib Sefir, who tries for some time to bring about a rapprochement between us and the various Christian communities, particularly with the Maronites in Lebanon and Palestine. He is likewise prepared to organize

certain activities among them directed against the Pan-Islamic Conference. Although I knew that Christian circles have been the hotbed of violent anti-Jewish sentiment in Palestine we cannot afford to forgo chance that in present circumstances the Christians minorities should look to us as their national ally. There is at the moment any number of reason for assuming that the tendency towards such an alliance is growing....in view of the fact that at present we are entirely isolated and cut off from any non-Jewish forces in this and the neighbouring countries, I think we should not neglect such possibilities.^{ix}

In 1933 the Jewish Agency dispatched Victor Jacobson (who had served as the Zionist movement's official emissary in Istanbul before World War I and thereafter in Paris and Geneva) to Beirut to establish contact with prominent Christians and discuss with them the idea of an alliance between them and Jewish Palestine. In his letter to Jacobson, which is highly instructive about the pattern of thinking prevalent among Zionist leaders regarding minorities in the Arab world, Arlosoroff wrote:

As time goes on the Lebanese Christians must come to cherish the idea of an alliance with a preponderantly Jewish Palestine which would strengthen their power of resistance against Muslim aggression or domination. There are Lebanese people of a relatively high political intelligence and education who have already expressed some such thoughts. It is now the most opportune moment to develop these ideas in direct touch with the influential accentuating the antagonism between our aims and Muslim aspiration or further arousing their animosities....^x

The leading figures of the Maronite community whom Jacobson met expressed a keen interest in cooperating with Jewish Palestine in the economic, political and even military fields. "The Christian Lebanese entity" in the opinion of prominent Maronite politicians:

cannot and shall not be treated in the same way as other parts of Syria. Lebanon will develop into a sovereign independent state. In its development it may be constantly threatened by a Muslim Syria, possibly by a 'Greater Arab' or Pan-Arab alliance. Alone, it will be too weak to withstand the Muslim pressure. Therefore, it will depend, for a long period, upon the protection of the Mandatory powers, while at the same time seeking a strengthening of its position in a political union with Jewish Palestine which

finds itself in a similar position..... Their parallel situation from a geographic, economic (being the industrial area of the Near East) as well as political point of view, compels both countries to seek protection mainly in this close (perhaps even military) union.^{xi}

The Jewish Agency also evinced a keen interest in the Christian separatist Young Phoenician movement started by Charles Corm and sought to establish close links with it. Eliahu Epstein (later Elath) a protégé of Arlosoroff who during his period of studies at the American University of Beirut from 1931 to 1934 had made a wide network of influential contacts frequently met with Corm and other prominent figures of the Phoenician movement. In one of these meetings in mid-1934 when Corm suggested the setting up of a Palestine-Lebanon club, he immediately received an enthusiastic response from the Jewish Agency. Epstein informed Corm:

I have had a talk with Shertok (later Sharett) regarding our plan. Mr. Shertok expressed his appreciation of the activity contemplated since it will not only inaugurate the revival of a common and glorious cultural past but help to further our mutual interests, present and future. The Palestine-Lebanon club will fulfil a vital cultural need and should needless to say, be approached with the seriousness due to an undertaking of this nature.^{xii}

The election of Emile Edde, a passionate Francophile, as the President of Lebanon in January 1936 was a matter of immense satisfaction for Zionist leaders in Palestine. He was known to share many of the Zionist misgivings regarding the Arabs and his views regarding the common interests of Christian Lebanon and Jewish Palestine were similar to those held by Zionist leaders. In one of his meetings with Epstein, Edde had remarked that the Jews and Lebanese were both occidental people living in the East and he always believed that they had a common programme to implement.^{xiii} With the accession of Edde to the presidency, the Jewish Agency, therefore, looked forward to an era of close cooperation with Christian Lebanon.

In 1936 negotiations were going on for parallel French treaties with Lebanon and Syrian which would have confirmed the final separation of the two countries. Sensing that his was an appropriate moment for the conclusion of a formal treaty of friendship with Christian Lebanon, the Jewish Agency sent Epstein to Beirut to sound out the mood of Christian leaders. When Epstein met Edde in September 1936 and placed before him the proposal of

the Jewish Agency, the President offered, when the new status of Lebanon was settled, to come out with a public statement in favour of a Maronite-Jewish alliance.

This time (Shertok wrote to Weizmann) Epstein broached the subject of giving concrete shape to this alliance idea in view of the impending negotiations between France and Lebanon which are to culminate in a Treaty. Edde declared himself again all in favour, but made it clear that it was not enough for him to hear from us about the favourable attitude of the Quai d'Orsay to such an agreement. The Haut Commisariat in Beirut often spoke with a different voice.... If we are interested in seeing progress made with the Jewish-Maronite accord, it was up to us to get our friends in Paris to send to Beirut a suitable instruction and as soon as he would be informed by the French High Commissioner of his favourable attitude he would get in touch with us and enter into formal negotiations.^{xiv}

The Jewish Agency also shrewdly assessed that it was an opportune moment now to reactivate plans for the settlement of Jews in Lebanon in view of the favourable political climate prevailing there. "Just because the Lebanon was on the threshold of independence" Shertok wrote to Weizmann:

the ruling Maronite element was likely to be more interested than before in promoting a suitable scheme of Jewish settlement in the Lebanon.... It is the paramount interest of the Maronites-if they wish to maintain their political ascendancy in the republic and prevent its fusion with eastern Syria-to force the Muslims down into the position of a minority. This they can do in one of two ways; either by ceding strips of territory inhabited mainly by Muslims.....which would mean throwing out the baby along with bathwater or by introducing a new element which, without swelling the ranks of their own community, would nevertheless make the Muslims lose their position of numerical superiority as against the non-Muslim communities.^{xv}

Zionist hopes for forging close relations with Lebanon during Edde's Presidency were, however, dashed due to the outbreak of Arab rebellion in Palestine. The Arab rebellion inflamed passions and in no time feelings ran high in the Arab world against the Palestine Jewry, compelling even pro-Zionist Maronites like Edde to act with great restraint in their dealings with Jewish Palestine.

The Arab revolt created grave security problems for the Jewish community in Palestine, and in time, districts of Lebanon bordering Palestine became sanctuaries and launching pads for Palestinian Arab guerillas. The British authorities, finding themselves incapable of preventing the infiltration of guerilla bands from the north, appealed to the French for assistance. The French were unwilling to antagonize the nationalist elements in Lebanon or Syria any further and turned a deaf ear to the British entreaties. Unable to get French help in sealing the border, the British decided to act unilaterally. Unofficial raids were launched against Arab villages through Lebanese territory by Jewish commandos led by a British officer Orde Wingate.^{xvi} As the security condition worsened the British government action on the proposal of the security advisor to the Palestine government, Sir Charles Tegart, finally decided to physically seal the border.^{xvii}

The Jewish firm of Solel Boneh Ltd. was given contract to construct a barrier along Palestine's border with Lebanon, Syrian and Transjordan. Along the Lebanese border, the barrier was to consist of two or three barbed wire fences with tangled wire in between. The barrier was to be guarded by existing frontier posts; additional ones to be constructed wherever footpaths crossed the boundary.^{xviii}

The barbed wire fence which came to be known as "Tegarts Wall" instead of improving the security, united Arab peasants on both sides of the boundary in a violent campaign against the wall. A rural mounted police sent to guard the fence was not match for the anger of the Lebanese and Palestinian peasants and the authorities in Jerusalem had to impose curfews in the Arab villages near the border with Lebanon.^{xix} The negative consequences of the border fence induced Britain to once again appeal for French help. Eventually France agreed to deploy a thousand-strong force to patrol the Lebanese and Syrian Boundaries with Palestine following which there was a partial decline in cross-border operations.

The outbreak of the Arab revolt led to the appointment of the Peel Commission which was to inquire into the fundamental causes of the unrest, to explore Arab and Jewish grievances and to make recommendations for the future Jewish state to be contiguous to Lebanon. They sought open Christian support for Lebanese contiguity with the future Jewish state. The Maronite leaders were told that only by close cooperation in all spheres could Jews and Christian face the danger from their neighbours, who were totally unprepared to come to terms with the existence of independent national minorities in their midst. Maronite leaders should therefore, be on their guard

and make sure that when the partition map was decided upon, it would adhere to the principle of a contiguous and joint border between the Jewish state and Lebanon and that there should not be corridors between the two states which would pass through Muslim territory.^{xx} At the same time Zionist leaders sought to influence the British by citing ties of friendship with Lebanese Christians as a valid justification for their demand for a common border. Replying to the British High Commissioner in Jerusalem, Sir Arthur Wauchope's request for his "personal opinion on certain aspects of the partition question", Shertok wrote that it was:

Vitally important for the Jews that the area of their settlement should remain contiguous with Lebanon. Ties of friendship have already sprung up between us and the Maronites and among the thinking people of both communities there is a strong hope that in future this friendship will be cemented into a permanent economic and political alliance to the advantage of both communities and countries. Any wedge driven between us and the Lebanon will reduce the chances of stability and prosperity for both countries and for the Mediterranean littoral as a whole.^{xxi}

In the midst of all this diplomatic activity, in August 1937 the local Arabic press in Beirut carried reports that the Lebanese government was about to publish a statement on the Palestine political situation in favour of the Arabs, similar to the statement which had been published by the Syrian government. The publication such reports caused immense concern among the Zionist leaders and the Jewish Agency promptly sent Bernard Joseph to Beirut with a view to endeavouring to prevent the publication of any such statement. Joseph met Edde and obtained the latter's assurance that no such statement would be published though there was tremendous pressure for its publication both internally and externally.^{xxii} The following month the Jewish Agency scored yet another diplomatic victory when upon its insistence the Lebanese government forbade its member's attendance at the Pan-Arab Bludan Conference hosted by Syria. The Jewish Agency was also successful in dissuading the Lebanese government from participating in the Arab inter-Parliamentary Conference held in Cairo a year later to discuss the situation in Palestine.^{xxiii}

When the Mufti of Jerusalem Haj Amin al-Husseini fled to Lebanon in October 1937 following the outlawing of the Arab Higher Committee, a new phase opened in Zionist-Marionite relations. Beirut and Damascus became centers for pan-Arab propaganda and the Jewish Agency's efforts were directed towards pressurizing the French

to curb Palestinian activities in Lebanon and at encouraging the Maronites to demand more forceful action by mandatory authorities. During the first few months 1938 the Zionist press repeatedly threatened Lebanon with a boycott if the anti-Jewish activities of the Palestinians were not curbed. In one of its editorials the Palestine Post noted:

We are on general principles opposed to boycott measures, whether they be directed against commerce of tourist trade, and we should deeply regret it if the resentment which is being widely felt in Palestine against Lebanon and Syria being used as a centre of operations against the peace of the country were to lead to a boycott of Syrian and Lebanese goods or to a cancelling of holidays trips to the north...the new habit of Palestinians to regard the Lebanon as a holiday resort will not be encouraged if tourists and holiday makers feel that in close proximity to their holiday resorts plots are being hatched against their own lives and peace of their homes.^{xxiv}

Zionist threats to boycott tourism and trade, however, had little tangible impact on Lebanon. Their Maronite friends in Lebanon were as concerned as they were themselves by Haj Amin's activities but there was strictly defined limit to what the Maronites could actually do.

References

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ⁱⁱFor the text of the Zionist proposal to the Paris Peace Conference, see Bannet Litvinoff, ed., *The Essential Chaim Weizmann: The Man, the Statesman, the Scientist* (London, 1982), pp.77-78.

ⁱⁱⁱH.F. Frischwasser-Rannan, *The Frontiers of a Nation: A Re-examination of the Forces which Created the Palestine Mandate and Determined its Territorial Shape* (London, 1955), p.136.

^{iv}In February 1920 a band of Arab guerrillas attacked the Jewish colonies of Metulla and Tel Chai along Palestines northern frontiers, in a twilight area between the British and French zones of occupation. Among those killed defending the settlements was Joseph Trumpeldor leader of the Zion Mule Corps and a Zionist folk hero.

^vChaim Weizman, *Trial and Error* (London, 1950), p.360.

^{vi} Howard M. Sachar, *The Emergence of the Middle East : 1914-1924* (New York, 1969), p.284.

vii Neil Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy – Early Arab Zionist Negotiations Attempt: 1913-1931*(London,1983), pp.162-63.

viii Weizman, n.12, p.452.

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xvi Leonard Moshe, *Gideon Goes to War* (New York, 1966), p.57.

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xxi Shertok to Wauchope, 21 June 1937, S 25/5474, Central Zionist Archives.

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xxiv *Palestine Post*, 21 April 1938.