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BRITISH PLANS FOR THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE, 1929–1938*

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ABSTRACT. *The 1937 Peel Commission proposal for the partition of British mandatory Palestine has generally been framed as the precursor to the United Nations partition plan of 1947. This article demonstrates the importance of tracing the roots of the 1937 Peel Commission plan back to conversations taking place in the Colonial Office and government of Palestine as early as 1929. A close analysis of dialogues over territorial division and of preliminary partition plans, particularly those drawn up by L. G. Archer Cust and D. G. Harris, leads to the conclusion that Britain's focus on the ideal of representative government played a primary role in the development of partition proposals. This article argues that inter-ethnic violence played a much smaller role in the development of partition proposals than has previously been thought. Instead, partition was proposed as a solution to the political implications of non-representative government in Palestine, a topic constantly in the spotlight thanks to the League of Nations.*

Throughout the period of British rule in Palestine from 1920 to 1948, but particularly in the fifteen years after the endorsement of the mandate by the Council of the League of Nations, a central question underlay political discussions and policy-making: was Palestine in fact a unified nation within the boundaries of a (mandated) state, or did it contain within it multiple national bodies, or one nation and several religious groups? The tension between national and multinational statehood was evident in the text of the mandate itself. Jews were the only group in Palestine labelled 'national' in addition to being a religious community. All other communities were neither 'national' nor named. Instead they were subsumed under the category of the 'other inhabitants of Palestine' whose civil and religious rights were to be protected 'irrespective of race and religion'.[1]

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[1] Article 2, *League of nations: Mandate for Palestine, together with a note by the secretary-general relating to its application to the territory known as Trans-Jordan under the provisions of article 25*, Dec. 1922, Command Paper 1785 (London: HMSO, 1923).

The only possible suggestion of Arab nationality occurred in Article 22 of the mandate, which stipulated that English, Arabic, and Hebrew were to be the official languages of Palestine. This, however, was overshadowed by the predominance of religion as a category in the text of the mandate. Religious communities were to be protected, religious groups were to be permitted to conduct education in their own languages, and the mandatory government was to make the holy days of each religious community into legal holidays for members of that community. From within the text of the mandate, Palestine appeared at once as a nation and a nation containing both a Jewish national home and a collection of unnamed religious communities. The coincidence of nationality, religion, and statehood was left ambiguous, a condition which led the historian of the British Empire, W. K. Hancock, to call the mandate 'a hesitating document, in which two systems of thought jostle each other'.[2]

It quickly became clear to officials in Palestine and Britain that a stable state could not exist on a foundation that was not only ambiguous, but also poorly reflected reality on the ground. Violent Arab uprisings in the 1920s and 1930s indicated the presence of a self-proclaimed national group protesting its virtual elision from the mandate. This presented something of a conundrum for Britain. As the mandatory power, Britain was responsible for 'placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home, as laid down in the preamble, and the development of self-governing institutions, and also for safeguarding the civil and religious rights of all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of race or religion'.[3] Since the mandate's inception, British officials had been trying to reconcile these conflicting requirements. However, since Arabs were both a majority and largely opposed to the establishment of the Jewish National Home in Palestine, it seemed impossible to institute a representative government without subordinating the principle of a Jewish National Home to that of majority rule. Carrying out one part of the mandate would mean negating the other, equally important, part.

Similarly, the question of land imposed contradictory requirements on the mandatory power. Britain was charged with facilitating the 'close settlement' of Jews on the land, but without harming the interests of the non-Jewish population. When Jewish individuals, and, even more importantly, Jewish land colonization associations, bought land, particularly from Arab absentee owners holding large plots, they expelled Arab tenant farmers. Land owned by the major Jewish land associations was neither to be worked by non-Jews, nor sold again. In effect, such land became permanently alienated and its peasant farmers lost their livelihoods. Finally, Jewish immigration posed a related problem for British administrators. Article 6 of the mandate directed Britain to facilitate Jewish immigration 'under suitable conditions' in connection with the establishment of the Jewish National Home. Jewish immigration naturally became a contested subject as Arabs

[2] W. K. Hancock, *Survey of British commonwealth affairs* (London, 1937), I, p. 473.
[3] Article 2, *League of Nations mandate for Palestine.*

demanded its complete cessation and Jewish Agency officials wrangled with British officials over immigration quotas. Immigration, land sales, and representative government were intrinsically linked. More Jewish immigrants increased the Jewish population and demand for land.

This article charts the development in Palestine between the 1929 violent disturbances and the release of the Palestine Royal Commission report of 1937 of a potential answer to these questions of nationality and the state. For those officials who believed that a unitary Palestinian nationality did not exist or could not be created, territorial division – either in the form of cantonization or outright partition – offered Britain a way to make nationality and statehood coterminous. Generally speaking, cantonization plans followed the Swiss model with the cantons joined together in a federation, whereas partition entailed a 'clean cut' and the creation of new independent states. According to its advocates, territorial division would solve the three major problems afflicting British rule in Palestine: representative government, land sales, and immigration. The logic and form of territorial division were hotly debated in this period; from the viewpoint of its many detractors, a territorial solution to what quickly became known as the 'Palestine problem' was deeply unjust, impractical, and would only multiply Britain's problems. A process of debate and concrete planning finally culminated in the report of the Palestine Royal Commission (commonly known as the Peel Commission, after its chairman Lord Peel), which first presented a coherent partition plan on the public stage.

I

The history of partition in Palestine before the Peel Commission is a comparatively neglected topic in the otherwise extensive literature on the British mandate. The most comprehensive analysis of cantonization and partition plans is provided by Shmuel Dothan, who situates these plans in what he terms the 'struggle for Palestine'.[4] Dothan traces the movement from mono- to multi-national state in Palestine, and sees the growing number of cantonization and partition plans as indicative of a movement away from unitary nationalism. In the period before the Peel Commission's arrival in Palestine, Dothan's focus is largely on Zionist, and to a lesser extent, Arab, debates over partition. Itzhak Galnoor and Yosef Katz expand on the politics of partition within Jewish and Zionist circles, but similarly pay less attention to the development of partition by British officials.[5] In more recent scholarship, discussions of pre-Peel Commission British partition plans tend to take the form of brief narratives, and the plans are not examined in detail or analysed in the broader contexts of the League of Nations mandates system

[4] Shmuel Dothan, *A land in the balance: the struggle for Palestine, 1918–1948* (Tel Aviv, 1993), pp. 104–46, 180–93.

[5] Itzhak Galnoor, *The partition of Palestine: decision crossroads in the Zionist movement*, SUNY series in Israeli studies (Albany, NY, 1995); Yossi Katz, *Partner to partition: the Jewish agency's partition plan in the mandate era* (London, 1998).

or the British empire. A chapter in Roza El-Eini's book on the impact of British mandatory rule on the Palestinian landscape analyses partition reports in an attempt to identify underlying assumptions about land and population, and to determine the British role in forming the literal and metaphorical landscape of a partitioned Palestine.[6] The bulk of El-Eini's work covers the period from the 1936 Peel Commission through to the 1947 United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, though she does trace the partition idea back as far as 1935. In his book on boundary-drawing in Palestine, Gideon Biger mentions 1929 as a turning point in the development of partition plans, but is less interested in their development than in their significance as implicit legitimations of the earlier delimitation of Palestine's borders. Biger recognizes that little scholarly attention has been paid to these 'paper plans', but then declines to give them more than a superficial examination.[7]

Despite the appearance of early partition plans in a range of literature on the British mandate, a full and contextualized study on the development of partition as a policy and practice in Palestine and the larger British Empire has yet to be written. This is in part due to the tendency of British imperial historians to leave Britain's empire in the Middle East to historians of the Middle East.[8] Even in the more specialized historiography of Palestine, pre-1937 partition proposals largely have been overlooked, perhaps for the very reason that the partition plan proposed by the Royal Commission is seen in the obscuring light of hindsight, namely, as a precursor to the aborted post-war partition of Palestine under the United Nations. Many historians therefore frame the Peel report as the major starting point for a narrative about partition, rather than as a statement embedded in a long-running dialogue about the range of configurations for the future of Palestine.

Although the report itself referenced earlier ideas about the division of Palestine,[9] scholars have tended to present the Peel Commission, and in particular one of its members, Professor Reginald Coupland, as the author of partition.[10] In some accounts, Coupland is merely partition's primary champion,[11] whilst in others he

[6] Roza El-Eini, *Mandated landscape: British imperial rule in Palestine, 1929–1948* (London, 2006), pp. 314–79.

[7] Gideon Biger, *The boundaries of modern Palestine, 1840–1947* (London, 2004), pp. 190–7. In addition to being brief, Biger's examination of these early plans contains several errors. For example, a Colonial Office minute by A. C. C. Parkinson reporting on a conversation with Ahmed Khalidi is identified as a memorandum by Khalidi himself.

[8] Peter Sluglett complains that British imperial historians tend either to ignore the Middle East or 'subsume it under some generalized notion of "the periphery"'. See Peter Sluglett, 'Formal and informal empire in the Middle East', in Robin Winks, ed. *Oxford History of the British Empire*, v (Oxford, 1999), p. 422.

[9] Hancock, *Survey of British commonwealth affairs* p. 375.

[10] Roza El-Eini and Shmuel Dothan are exceptions; El-Eini makes the point that Coupland was open to ideas from various sources and briefly traces the partition idea back to 1935, though not before (El-Eini, *Mandated landscape*, p. 320). Dothan calls Coupland's primary role 'a myth' (Dothan, *A land in the balance*, p. 196).

[11] See, for example, Joe Cleary, *Literature, partition and the nation-state: culture and conflict in Ireland, Israel, and Palestine* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 24.

is the idea's creator and skilled salesman.[12] Near-contemporary observers similarly linked the conception of partition to Coupland. An article in a Jewish-American journal in 1946 labelled Coupland as 'the originator of the idea of partition'.[13] Reflecting on events in 1937 some thirty years later, a former Colonial Office official claimed that Coupland was 'the chief influence over the Palestine partition scheme'.[14] Undoubtedly Coupland's was an influential voice in favour of partition, and he certainly possessed the rhetorical skill to persuade others. But he did not, as many accounts suggest, single-handedly create and shape the concept of partition. Coupland was partition's author only inasmuch as he wrote the majority of the Peel report and thus gave a coherent and eloquent form to what had previously been an inchoate set of shared ideas.

Tracing the evolving roots of partition in internal British debates of the 1920s and 1930s is fruitful on two counts. First, examining the notion of territorial division helps to highlight a central concern underlying the structure and function of the mandate, namely that of representative government. How was representative government to be instituted? Who was to be represented? Which groups in Palestine had legitimate claims to nationality and by extension to sovereignty? In a sense these questions were ones of decolonization, though since Palestine was not technically a British colony they were rarely framed as such. Nevertheless, what was being contemplated was at least a partial transfer of power. But to whom was power to be transferred and how? These were questions to which territorial division was one of several possible answers. In the eventual settlement of the Palestine question after the Second World War, partition and independence went hand in hand. The story of early cantonization and partition plans in Palestine is a story about the roots of decolonization in British planning for the devolution of power. Second, the existence of territorial division as a persistent trend in British thinking before the Peel Commission plan of 1937 demonstrates that the Peel report and its partition plan were very much part of a dialogic continuum and were, indeed, far less individual or idiosyncratic productions than has been argued by contemporary observers and by many historians.

[12] T. G. Fraser, 'Sir Reginald Coupland, the round table and the problem of divided societies', in Andrew Bosco and Alex May, eds., *The round table, the empire/commonwealth and British foreign policy* (London, 1997), p. 410. Fraser writes of Coupland's mind 'turning to a more far-reaching course of action' than cantonization – that is partition – which he then 'launches' to Weizmann and the members of the Peel Commission. See also Martin Gilbert, *Sir Horace Rumbold: portrait of a diplomat, 1869–1941* (London, 1973), pp. 415–16; Katz, *Partner to partition*, pp. 2–3; Galnoor, *Partition of Palestine*, pp. 70–4. Howard M. Sachar, *A history of Israel: from the rise of Zionism to our time* (Oxford, 1977), identifies Coupland as '[t]he single most influential' member of the Peel Commission and emphasizes that it was Coupland who first raised the possibility of partition in one of the Commission's secret meetings with Chaim Weizmann (pp. 201–3).

[13] Robert Weltsch, 'Palestine plans and counter-plans: Zionism face to face with world realities', *Commentary*, 2 (1946), p. 305.

[14] Alvin Jackson, 'Ireland, the Union, and the empire, 1800–1960', in Kevin Kenny, ed., *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2004), p. 144. Citing Cox to Cairncross, 5 June 1972, covering a memorandum by J. S. Bennett on 'Palestine and Ireland': The National Archives, London (TNA), CJ.4/236.

II

The earliest conceptions of territorial division for Palestine predate the establishment of the mandate by over a decade, though it was not until around the time of the 1929 violent disturbances that British officials adopted and developed such ideas. Partition's earliest proponents were Zionist thinkers who believed that the movement could attain its fullest expression only through political and concomitant territorial autonomy. Territorial separatism engaged both pragmatic issues of land acquisition and settlement, and labour practices, and broader philosophical questions about the ultimate goals of Zionism.[15] Leaders such as Zionist Organization head, Chaim Weizmann, and Zionist Executive representative in Geneva, Victor Jacobson, invariably spoke with Arab and British contacts about these new ideas, and so variations on partition quietly took their place on the outer edges of the range of possibilities for Palestine. Before about 1929, however, suggestions for territorial separation came from individuals rather than organizations, and appeared in forms that made them unlikely to be taken up in British policy-making circles. For example, one of the earliest British publications to mention partition was the philosophical travelogue published by the writer G. K. Chesterton after his trip to Palestine in the winter of 1919. In the midst of anti-Semitic musings on the plight of 'the Jew' Chesterton wrote that Weizmann had spoken with him about the possibility of cantonizing Palestine. According to Chesterton, Weizmann did not think that

> Palestine could be a single and simple national territory quite in the sense of France; but he did not see why it should not be a commonwealth of cantons after the manner of Switzerland. Some of these could be Jewish cantons, others Arab cantons, and so on according to the type of population.[16]

Nearly a decade later, a press summary in the *Palestine Weekly* vaguely mentioned a scheme to carve 'out of the Holy Land a special *enclave* which should be wholly Jewish'.[17] Although of great interest to Zionists, and to a lesser extent to Palestinian Arabs, such imprecise plans would have been unlikely to appeal to British officials, particularly in the early years of the mandate when, especially in comparison to the French mandates, British Palestine was relatively calm.

[15] Arthur Ruppin, a member of the Zionist Executive, proposed in 1907 that Jewish settlement be concentrated on the coastal plains so that Jews could eventually become the majority there and gain regional autonomy. The journalist and Zionist activist, Itamar Ben-Avi, proposed a similar clustering of Jewish settlements in 1918, and advocated the creation of a cantonal system similar to that of Switzerland. For a detailed discussion of the development of territorial separatism in Zionist thought, see Dothan, *A land in the balance*, pp. 13–38, 72–103.

[16] G. K. Chesterton, *The new Jerusalem* (London, 1920), p. 297. Chesterton was enamoured of this proposal only inasmuch as it gave him the idea of creating Jewish cantons *outside* of Palestine as well since all the Jews could not possibly fit in Palestine. His vision was that virtually all the world's Jews would be concentrated in a series of cantons around the world, and would have their spiritual centre in one of the Jewish cantons in Palestine. This, he argued, would solve the 'Jewish problem'.

[17] 'Zionism: a critical phase', *Palestine Weekly*, 17 Feb. 1928, p. 146.

The first recorded interest by British officials in a form of territorial division for Palestine occurred around the time of the failure of renewed attempts to institute a legislative council, and of the violent Arab disturbances of 1929. Whereas outright partition was the most common method of division discussed by Zionists, British officials initially considered cantonization based on the Swiss model. Eventually, officials rejected cantonization and turned to partition a few months into the violent rebellions of 1936. Political violence, it seems, brought previously marginal ideas to the centre of British policy-makers' fields of vision, but these ideas were then debated and shaped over longer time frames in response to international and domestic political pressures rather than to sudden spikes in violence. Indeed it is worth noting that cantonization and then partition developed as potential British policies in a period that was remarkably peaceful apart from the book-ends of 1929 and 1936.

Contemporary American sources and later British ones both confirm that British officials began to explore various possibilities for cantonization in Palestine by the autumn of 1929. In November, Wallace Murray, the head of the US State Department's Division of Near Eastern Affairs wrote to Paul Knabenshue, the US consul general in Jerusalem, about an idea in the Department that the Jews might be given an autonomous region around Tel Aviv.[18] Knabenshue responded that he found the idea 'entirely impracticable' both because it would give the Jews the most fertile land in Palestine and also because following the principle of granting Jews limited autonomy in areas of maximum Jewish ownership of land or industry would necessitate handing over the Jordan valley on account of the Rutenberg hydro-electric concession, the Dead Sea potash works, and a large area of settlement around Safad and Tiberias. Knabenshue also mentioned that Jews and Arabs whom he had sounded out about this idea roundly rejected it, as had the British high commissioner, John Chancellor, who said that 'at one time he had flirted with this idea and had soon rejected it as impracticable'.[19]

Not until early 1932 did cantonization make its way from conversations in Palestine and elsewhere to the desks of the Colonial Office in London. But Colonial Office records from 1932 suggest that there had been some discussion of cantonization even in London in the late 1920s. In February 1932, Revisionist Zionists opposed to the main Zionist leadership released letters and memoranda claiming to prove that the ex-Khedive of Egypt, Abbas Hilmi, and the Mufti of Jerusalem were collaborating with members of the Zionist Executive to devise a new constitution for Palestine.[20] The Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) published the documents with the caveat that there was no proof that such planning was taking place or that the documents were authentic. One of the alleged proposals

[18] Murray to Knabenshue, 22 Nov. 1929: National Archives, Washington, DC (NA), RG84.350/26/14/1, Class 840.1.

[19] Knabenshue to Murray, 21 Dec. 1929, p. 4: NA, RG84.350/26/14/1, Class 840.1.

[20] On Zionist politics over the so-called Abbas Hilmi affair, see the Central Zionist Archives (CZA), S25/2, and CZA Z4/286/13.

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suggested dividing Palestine into two administrative districts whose formation and administration would roughly follow the provincial constitution in India. The Jewish district would be called the National Home and would 'be part of the state of Palestine as a whole but [would] be under a Constitution securing for the Jewish Community full autonomy for internal affairs, while at the same time it [would] guarantee them their due and proper share in the government of the whole country'.[21] One of the leaked memoranda mentioned that the Palestine Arab Executive was still undecided about whether or not to divide the land based on the ratio of Jews to Arabs in the population, and about how to solve the question of Jerusalem.

The Revisionist response was unequivocal. Dividing Palestine would 'wreck' the Jewish National Home and could not be permitted. These plans were being put forward with the 'connivance' of British officials trying 'to avoid the odium and responsibility of directly destroying the Jewish National Home'. 'It is our duty', the Executive of the Zionist Revisionist World Union wrote, 'to unmask before the whole world this deliberate plan which cannot be regarded as other than a conspiracy, under the pretext of a peace gesture, against a people which put its material and personal resources under the protection of the Mandate.'[22] Despite the JTA's contention that the Revisionist sources were at the very least incomplete, the release of these summary allegations sent a stir through Jewish communities around the world and provoked suspicion of Britain's intentions in Palestine.

On 28 February 1932 the Russian-language Jewish periodical *Rassweit* published in Paris, ran an article claiming that British plans for dividing Palestine in co-operation with the Arabs, and particularly the Mufti, had been hatched in the autumn of 1931. The article contended that

> As far back as the beginning of last autumn, there was put into circulation at the Colonial Office and among the British officials in Palestine, a confidential memorandum the contents of which may be summarised as follows: (i) the present situation provokes the indignation of Jews and criticism at Geneva; (ii) it must not and cannot be changed so as to favour the Jews throughout the area of Palestine; (iii) it is useful to remember the White Paper of 1922, where it was stated that England had not promised to make the whole of Palestine into a Jewish National Home, but had only promised to establish such a Home 'in' Palestine; (iv) hence the way out – one or several Jewish cantons; (v) it would be preferable to have this proposal emanate not from the Government but from the Jews or the Arabs; there are among the Jews influential groups which have long been sympathetic but which might fear to come into the open; there is a possibility to influence the Arabs in this sense through people whom they trust; (vi) whoever had taken the initiative, the Government can easily bring quite enough pressure to bear on Jews and Arabs.[23]

[21] Jewish Telegraphic Agency Bulletin, 10 Feb. 1932: TNA, CO 733/219/2.

[22] Statement of the Executive of the Zionist Revisionist World Union, 4 Feb. 1932: TNA, CO 733/219/2.

[23] Translated excerpt from *Rassweit*, 28 Feb. 1932: TNA, CO 733/219/2.

In his letter covering a translated excerpt from *Rassweit*, Dr Selig Brodetsky, head of the political department of the Zionist Organization in London, challenged the British government to refute the allegations, adding that the Jewish Agency was in no position to do so. Following the release of documents by the Revisionist Zionists, Colonial Office official, O. G. R. Williams wrote in a file minute that '[i]t is useless to speculate as to the origin or motive of the suggestions. The idea of the segregation of Jews in a special area has been canvassed on various occasions.'[24] Faced with two separate leaks or forgeries concerning partition in Palestine in less than a month, officials at the Colonial Office reviewed their files before issuing denials. One official noted that '[t]he registers (public and secret) have been searched for any document which might have given rise to this report that a scheme for the partition of Palestine (with Jewish "cantons") was in circulation last autumn in the Colonial Office and among British officials in Palestine. Nothing can be traced.'[25] Two years later, however, another official had a conversation about partition with a former official in the Education Department and Secretariat, George Antonius, who recalled 'that when he was in Government services under Chancellor [high commissioner from 1928 to 1931] this kind of proposal was mooted and after examination rejected'.[26]

Since the Colonial Office found no written evidence to substantiate these allegations, it was able to issue a credible denial. The statement was supported by pro-Arab groups in London and by the Zionist Organization, all of whom denied that there had ever been plans for a round table conference, a new constitution for Palestine, or any sort of cantonization or partition. Notes in the Colonial Office files, however, suggest that there had certainly been discussion, albeit verbal, in British official circles about the possibility of a division. The idea appeared to have existed in diffuse verbal form well before its written articulation. One Colonial Office official wrote a minute in which he outlined several chains of hearsay in which both High Commissioner Chancellor and a member of the Jewish Agency were said to have mentioned a possible cantonization scheme before the autumn of 1931, but noted that he could not find anything in the files.[27] Another file minute vaguely suggested that its author might have come across a letter or press cutting on cantonization in the past, and warned that '[i]t would be dangerous to say that such a suggestion has <u>never</u> been mooted with the cognizance of His Majesty's Government because it would be impossible to verify that some tentative démarche may not have been made in the past ten years or so'.[28] It thus seems clear that territorial division had begun to figure – albeit sporadically and furtively – as a viable solution to what was already being seen as a possibly irreconcilable conflict, even if British officials were not, as the documents suggested, actively crafting a partition plan. Regardless of the authenticity

[24] Minute, O. G. R. Williams, 11 Feb. 1932: TNA, CO 733/219/2.
[25] Minute, H. F. Downie, 9 Mar. 1932: TNA, CO 733/219/2.
[26] A. C. C. Parkinson to A. Wauchope, 14 Dec. 1933: TNA, CO 733/248/20.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Minute, O. G. R. Williams, 10 Mar. 1932: TNA, CO 733/219/2.

of the plans revealed in the Jewish press in early 1932, the reaction to their publication certainly gave the Colonial Office a clear sense of what to expect if partition for Palestine became official policy.

This clarity was obscured in the next few years as the Colonial Office witnessed the development of an ambiguous *modus operandi* between the principal actors in Palestine. In private conversations, Jewish and Arab leaders seemed interested in cantonization or partition, or at least not categorically opposed to it, while in their public pronouncements they refused to consider such divisions as viable solutions. In November 1933, Chaim Weizmann, the head of the Zionist Organization, raised the possibility of partition in Palestine in a meeting with Vito Catastini, the head of the mandates section of the League of Nations secretariat.[29] Catastini's apparent support of the idea perturbed members of the Colonial Office who felt that the subject lay beyond the League's purview. Weizmann seemed to think otherwise, discussing his idea for a territorial division with the head of the Permanent Mandates Commission, Marquis Theodoli, and with Italian head of state, Benito Mussolini, who was beginning to style himself as a protector of the Jews and came out strongly in favour of partition.[30]

While opposed to interference in Palestine by the League and by Italy, the Colonial Office showed considerable ambivalence on the partition issue. On the one hand, partition was considered impractical: it had been considered and rejected at some point under the Chancellor administration in Palestine.[31] On the other, the prospect of a solution, especially one supported by at least some members of the competing factions, seemed too good to ignore. Weizmann was not the only important player to countenance a territorial answer to the Palestine question. In a letter to High Commissioner Wauchope, Assistant Under-Secretary of State A. C. C. Parkinson noted that during his previous visit to Palestine he had chatted over dinner with Ahmed Khalidi, the head of the Government Arab School in Jerusalem who

> had a similar idea in mind … His suggestion was that Palestine might be divided by a line drawn roughly east, from Jaffa–Tel Aviv and that the northern part might be given to the Jews and the southern part to the Arabs, but some kind of 'internationalisation' would, he thought, be necessary for Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth.[32]

Other Arabs were reported to have raised the possibility of dividing Palestine into cantons in conversations with Parkinson and other officials, and Jewish leaders

[29] This was certainly not the first time that a Zionist leader had suggested partition as a possible solution. The roots of partition in Zionist thought could arguably be traced back to the notion of transferring Arabs out of part or all of Palestine. See for an early example, Theodor Herzl, *The complete diaries of Theodor Herzl*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, NY, 1960), I, p. 88; or for one during the British mandate, TNA, CO 733/231/1. See also Tom Segev, *One Palestine, complete: Jews and Arabs under the British mandate*, trans, Haim Watzman (New York, NY, 2001), pp. 403–8.

[30] Minute, O. G. R. Williams, 4 Dec. 1933; letter from Sir Eric Drummond, British ambassador in Rome, 13 Dec. 1933: TNA, CO 733/248/20.

[31] A. C. C. Parkinson to A. Wauchope, 14 Dec. 1933: TNA, CO 733/248/20.

[32] Ibid.

publicly rejected the plan.[33] Parkinson alluded to a more open-ended state of affairs when he concluded: 'I should be unwilling to reject, out of hand, any solution of the Palestine tangle, though there are obvious difficulties in a territorial division.'[34]

There were two principal reasons for the inconclusive tenor of British discussions on the division of Palestine between 1931 and 1934. First, the plans of which the Colonial Office was aware were amorphous in a context that called for a high degree of specificity and, secondly, the political cost of antagonizing Arabs, Jews, and the League itself was high. No written material on the subject made its way into the Colonial Office files before 1931, but even thereafter cantonization and partition were regarded as exceptionally abstract ideas. More concrete proposals were emerging in Zionist circles, but if they were published at all, it was in Hebrew-language periodicals.[35] The extreme shortage of Hebrew-speaking British officials meant that such proposals had little chance to make an immediate impact on the development of British thinking about territorial division.[36] Conversations among British officials in London and Jerusalem therefore were tentative attempts to establish the ideological viability of territorial division rather than to address its complex practicalities. Officials repeatedly sidestepped the question of partition in principle by pointing out its 'impracticability', while asserting their inability to comment on something so vague. In effect, the division of Palestine could not be vetted on principle until it had been grounded firmly in facts, figures, and maps.

III

The year 1935 saw both the publication of a book in English containing a fairly concrete cantonization plan, and the submission to the Colonial Office of a detailed memorandum on cantonization. In *Palestine of the Arabs*, the British director of the Palestine Information Centre in London, Mrs Steuart (Beatrice) Erskine, noted that cantonization provided the best hope for Palestine since Weizmann, an ex-official from British Palestine, and an unnamed Arab friend of hers all supported the concept. Erskine reprinted what was presumably a letter from her anonymous Arab source, laying out in some detail a plan for federated cantons. Among its most notable features was its proposal for what appeared to be a uniquely complex sovereignty. The proposed cantons were to be treated as sovereign states that would join the League of Nations, but these states would grant control over currency, transportation, security, customs, law courts, and

[33] Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Daily News Bulletin, 3 Jan. 1934: TNA, CO 733/248/20.

[34] Minute, A. C. C. Parkinson, 5 Dec. 1933: TNA, CO 733/248/20.

[35] Examples include Itamar Ben-Avi, 'Pilpelaot', *Doar Ha-Yom*, 30 July 1929, and Paltiel Dieckstien, *Ha-Olam*, 11–18 Feb. 1930. See Dothan, *A land in the balance*, pp. 107–12.

[36] By 1936 when the Peel Commission was gathering evidence, less than 10 per cent of senior British officials in the Palestine government knew Hebrew. See Command Paper 5479, *Palestine Royal Commission Report* [*Peel report*] (London: HMSO, 1937), p. 164.

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religious sites to a central Supreme Council composed of Arab, Jewish, and British representatives. Geographically, this plan consisted of rejoining Trans-Jordan to Palestine and carving out a lopsided H-shaped Jewish canton running from the coast north of Jaffa up to near Haifa, east to Esdraelon and the western shore of Lake Tiberias, and then up to Rosh Pina and Huleh. A Jewish bloc south of Jaffa would be attached to the Jewish canton with Tel Aviv as its port and capital. The remaining area of Palestine plus Trans-Jordan would constitute the Arab canton/state. Haifa would be a free port and Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, Safad, Bethlehem, and Nazareth would be classified as religious cities and put under the authority of the League of Nations.[37]

In February 1935, a former member of the Palestine Administration, L. G. Archer Cust, submitted to the Colonial Office a lengthy memorandum that he had written a month earlier when he was still an assistant district commissioner of Jerusalem. Cust had served in every district of Palestine over his twelve years of service, was aide-de-camp to the first high commissioner, Herbert Samuel, and private secretary to High Commissioner Chancellor.[38] In his memorandum, Cust proposed the creation of three cantons and two mandated enclaves: the Arab canton would cover the hills, would preferably be joined up with Trans-Jordan by the eradication of the 'unnatural and unnecessary' border, and would be ruled by Emir Abdullah of Trans-Jordan;[39] the Jewish canton would comprise the areas already heavily settled by Jews, namely the Acre–Gaza coastal plain and the Jezreel and Huleh valleys; in a mixed canton would be the mixed cities of Tiberias and Safad as well as part of the Huleh basin; and finally Britain would retain its mandate over the holy cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the vital port of Haifa, and possibly the chemically rich Dead Sea. The various cantons and enclaves would be joined together under a British-supervised federation. Cust's proposal differed significantly from Erskine's Arab friend's in envisioning a larger Jewish canton, establishing a mixed canton, and giving oversight for holy cities to Britain rather than to the League.[40]

Cust's memorandum extended well beyond drawing new lines across the map of Palestine. Perhaps even more interesting than his patchwork of cantons and enclaves was Cust's articulation of the problem with Palestine: 'Under present conditions, despite the various political obligations that have been internationally guaranteed, there is no alternative to the indefinite continuance of

[37] Beatrice Erskine, *Palestine of the Arabs* (London, 1935), pp. 226–9.

[38] Cust was also well connected, though this did not appear to aid his efforts for cantonization. His cousin was Sir Ronald Storrs, first British governor of Jerusalem, and his father was a close confidante of King George V.

[39] L. G. Archer Cust, 'The future of Palestine', 18 Jan. 1935, p. 16: TNA, CO 733/283/12.

[40] The movement of ideas between non-official and official spheres was quite common and it is not clear whether in 1935 the cantonization concept jumped from the Arab source cited in Erskine's book to the 'British ex-official' (presumably Cust) via Erskine, or vice versa. It is also possible that there was no direct line of transmission since cantonization was simply 'in the air'.

non-representation and autocracy.'[41] Violence was never mentioned in Cust's memorandum or in his various letters to High Commissioner Wauchope and members of the Colonial Office. Although the Arab revolt was still eighteen months away at the time that Cust penned his cantonization plan, mandatory Palestine had experienced significant unrest in 1929. Whilst these disturbances were never cited as reasons for cantonization, Cust's two primary fears were instead that the proposed legislative council would never materialize, and that the Zionists would slowly acquire all the best Arab land. Cantonization, Cust argued, would circumvent the legislative obstacles facing the creation of a unitary Palestine and, perhaps most importantly, would ensure protection for Arab farmers. Jews would be prohibited from, and presumably would have no interest in, purchasing land outside the Jewish canton. The land issue was crucial in Cust's estimation

> for it is Britain's just boast that throughout her empire its dependent peoples may feel assured that whatever may be their colour, whatever their state of civilisation, whatever the circumstances may be, they will inevitably enjoy the uniform standards of protection and fair play that are the unquestioned foundation of British Imperial Administration.[42]

The Colonial Office reaction to Cust's cantonization plan was largely sceptical. While one official wrote that the proposal was 'eloquent and interesting'[43] another raised the issue of security, noting that policing two new states would present significant challenges to the maintenance of law and order.[44] Parkinson expressed the greatest optimism among Colonial Office officials, gamely declaring 'You can do almost anything if you are driven to it.'[45]

The Colonial Office's main concern, however, was that Cust not 'embarrass' the government by publicizing his cantonization idea. Since Cust had only recently retired from fifteen years' service in the Palestine government, the Office feared that any proposals from him would be read as revealing official policy in the making. Parkinson strongly discouraged Cust from sharing his plan with anyone other than the former high commissioner, Chancellor. In an article published in *The Near East and India* eight months after his initial memorandum on cantonization, Cust included only one sentence on a type of federal system as a possible solution for Palestine.[46] Not until nearly a full year after his departure from the Palestine administration was Cust authorized to make his proposal public in a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society. Even then, he was told that, in Palestine, Jewish and Arab leaders who had heard about cantonization 'all hated the scheme for different reasons'.[47]

[41] Cust, 'The future of Palestine', p. 4.

[42] Ibid., p. 12.

[43] Minute, H. F. Downie, 9 Feb. 1935: TNA, CO 733/283/12.

[44] Minute, O. G. R. Williams, 11 Feb. 1935: TNA, CO 733/283/12.

[45] Minute, A. C. C. Parkinson, 14 Feb. 1935: TNA, CO 733/283/12.

[46] L. G. Archer Cust, 'Whither Palestine', *The Near East and India*, 19 Sept. 1935: TNA, CO 733/283/12.

[47] A. Wauchope to A. C. C. Parkinson, 23 Nov. 1935: TNA, CO 733/283/12.

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Cust's lecture at the Royal Central Asian Society in March 1936 elaborated on the plan he had sent to the Colonial Office and embodied the tension between a uni- and multi-national state in Palestine. On the one hand, he seemed to posit the existence of two nationalities in Palestine:

> There may still be prevalent the conception of the upbuilding of a future Palestinian national unit … But there is no Jew so Jewish as the Jew in the Land of Israel … Similarly, and no less rightly, the Arab remains an Oriental, and regards himself as a member of the great Arab race whose past was so glorious.[48]

On the other hand, however, elements of Cust's language suggested a unified nation riven by factionalism, as when he wrote, 'To-day only the presence of a tremendous British force prevents a ghastly *civil war* breaking out again.'[49] As if to dismiss the possibly shaky ideological foundations of cantonization, Cust repeatedly emphasized that 'Palestine is in effect "Cantonised" already.'[50] Assuring his audience that cantonization would not require forced population movement because the two nations were already separated on the ground, Cust hammered home the concept that cantonization would make *de jure* what existed *de facto*.

Throughout June and July 1936, Cust shuttled between Colonial Office officials, members of the Jewish Agency, and Arab leaders visiting London, in an effort to convince all three parties to agree to a cantonization plan. While Chaim Weizmann was willing to engage in detailed discussions with Cust, the four Arab leaders visiting London, Jamal Husseini, Shibli Jamal, Izzat Tannus, and Emile Khoury, expressed interest in the general scheme but claimed that they could not speak for Arab leaders in Palestine. Officials at the Colonial Office indicated to Cust that they did not want to be implicated in any cantonization proposals, and that it would in fact be preferable for any such proposals to appear to come from a non-British source. Soon even Weizmann's precision broke down and he insisted that his discussions with Cust be regarded as 'purely tentative' and a 'very general basis for further discussion'.[51] By the time the Colonial Office received word that Jewish Agency representatives in Palestine had vetoed cantonization in a meeting with the high commissioner, Cust's grand plans appeared to be floundering.[52]

IV

Despite these initial obstacles, the idea of cantonization proved resilient. It was debated in the Colonial Office and Palestine government throughout the summer and autumn of 1936, following the Arab uprising. Although some high officials found the concept problematic (Ormsby-Gore told Weizmann it 'would merely

[48] L. G. Archer Cust, 'Cantonization: a plan for Palestine', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 23 (1936), p. 211. [49] Ibid., p. 201. Italics mine. [50] Ibid., p. 206.

[51] C. Weizmann to L. G. A. Cust, 30 June 1936: TNA, CO 733/302/9.

[52] Report of an interview between High Commissioner Wauchope and Moshe Shertok and David Ben Gurion, 9 July 1936: TNA, CO 733/302/9.

result in a repetition of the ghetto'),[53] Douglas Harris and Lewis Andrews, two members of the Department of Development in Palestine, wrote up a cantonization plan in July 1936.[54] Harris was a commissioner on special duty and irrigation adviser, while Andrews was the officer in charge of the Department of Development and later liaison officer to the Peel Commission. The Harris–Andrews plan closely mirrored the Cust plan in proposing Jewish, Arab, and mixed cantons, and enclaves. A later map of the Harris–Andrews cantons was a graphic illustration of the plan's jig-saw nature. Edward Keith-Roach, district commissioner of Palestine's northern district, angrily dismissed it largely on the basis that even this excruciating division of Palestine into miniscule and oddly shaped bits and pieces did not properly reflect the territorial distribution of the population. Keith-Roach argued that the plan ignored large numbers of mixed villages and that even homogeneous villages had significant lands lying outside their designated canton. Using extensive statistics commissioned exclusively for his anti-partition memorandum,[55] Keith-Roach demonstrated that approximately 27,000 Arabs would end up residing in Jewish cantons and that another 25,000 Arabs residing in Arab cantons derived much of their livelihood from land that would end up inside the proposed Jewish cantons.[56] The total number of 52,000 Arabs negatively affected by cantonization represented more than half the total number of Jewish agriculturalists in all of Palestine. Finally, Keith-Roach pointed out, the best land overall would go to the Jews. All of these factors, he argued, meant that cantonization along the lines proposed by Harris and Andrews would violate Article 6 of the mandate, which charged the mandatory authority with facilitating Jewish immigration and close settlement on the land, but not at the expense of the rights of the non-Jewish inhabitants.

Keith-Roach's memorandum precipitated the final demise of the cantonization idea and therefore encouraged officials in Palestine, and later the Peel Commission, to champion its more extreme cousin, partition. Having read Keith-Roach's arguments, Harris himself rejected cantonization in the strongest terms, pointing out that the kind of federation he had envisioned was only possible if undertaken voluntarily by pre-existing self-governing entities.[57] In a carefully constructed memorandum, Harris argued that legislation could address the three main problems of land sales, self-government, and immigration, without the many complications attached to cantonization. Legislation was already in force which mandated that a landholder retain at least a government-approved

[53] Confidential note by C. Weizmann, 19 June 1936, covering a conversation on 16 June 1936: CZA, A185/134.

[54] This plan was never sent to the Colonial Office and does not survive in the remnants of the Palestine government files in Israel. However, later memoranda and maps sent to the Colonial Office clearly indicate the shape of this proposal.

[55] I. N. Camp, 'Statistical memorandum on Arab population in the two proposed Jewish cantons', 22 Sept. 1936: TNA, CO 733/316/9.

[56] Edward Keith-Roach, 'Recommendation on future policy', 30 Sept. 1936: TNA, CO 733/316/9.

[57] D. G. Harris, 'Cantonisation in Palestine', 4 Oct. 1936: TNA, CO 733/302/9, p. 1.

subsistence area from any sale. If the aim of cantonization was to prevent the creation of landless Arabs, the same end could be achieved either through this legislation or through the division of Palestine into zones, in some of which the sale of land from non-Jews to Jews would be prohibited.[58] Similarly, Harris claimed, self-government could be more economically and practically established through a system of local government rather than through the creation of a new cantonal system. The latter would pose financial and political problems; economies of scale would make cantonal governments more expensive to run, and Britain would invariably have to support financially the Arab cantons. Large numbers of Arabs living under Jewish cantonal authority would create a political and security disaster. Cantonization would require the establishment of a central legislature, and this would lead to pitched battles over the representation of communities, the division of responsibilities between central and cantonal legislatures, and the division of financial and material resources. Harris proposed instead the establishment of sub-district councils similar to rural district councils in England. New, more homogeneous, sub-districts would be created by altering sub-district lines to match more closely 'racial' demographics, though 'mixed' sub-districts would still exist after this gerrymandering. According to Harris, this system, though imperfect, would present distinct advantages over cantonization: 'There would be none of that definite segregation which cantonisation connotes, the authority of the central Government would remain supreme and the protection of minorities would continue to rest in its hands.'[59] Finally, Harris noted that cantonization would only exacerbate the immigration problem, as the Jewish cantonal authorities would allow large numbers of Jews to immigrate, creating population pressure on the ground and financial pressure on the central exchequer.[60] Far from alleviating the conflict over immigration, cantonization would open the floodgates.

In his final memorandum on the topic, Harris deftly defeated cantonization as a method of tackling the issues of land, representative government, and immigration. By enumerating the potential pitfalls of cantonization, and the available legislative alternatives for achieving some degree of resolution to the main problems facing the mandatory government, Harris made cantonization seem not only impractical, but also unnecessary. Unlike Keith-Roach, whose language and statistics gave greatest weight to the implications of cantonization for Palestine, Harris addressed the matter of wider public perception and opinion. Cantonization, he wrote, would mean 'the definite abandonment of the ideal that the administration of Palestine shall be so ordered that Jew and Arab may live together in amity and concord'.[61] Harris's memorandum suggested that the benefits of cantonization could be had through legislation without the attendant political and public relations disaster.

It is perhaps not coincidental that cantonization was defeated as the Arab uprising was in process. The transition from cantonization to partition as the

[58] Ibid., p. 7. [59] Ibid., p. 12. [60] Ibid., p. 13. [61] Ibid., p. 17.

favoured model of territorial division over the summer and early autumn of 1936 appears closely linked to concerns over the definition and governance of the body politic. Cantonization would divide sovereignty incompletely, even as it drew clear boundaries through land. A major purported catalyst for the uprising had been the failure to convene a legislative council, and in requiring a central governing body, cantonization would merely replicate the existing problem. After several months of unrest, it became clear to many British administrators that anything other than a 'clean cut' would continue to complicate the definition and practical governance of a national entity. As one commentator put it:

> Certain matters, such as education, some categories of public works, and regional hospitalization might be devolved upon the cantonal administrations, working either with British advisers as was done in Iraq, or directly under a British Commissioner. Even this measure of decentralization would give rise to many serious practical difficulties of administration. But the creation of any central legislative or advisory body, representing the seat of Government, the various cantonal administrations, would, to my mind, be accompanied by almost precisely the same difficulties as those with which we were faced when trying to devise a Legislative Council. The same obstacles of racial representation, numerical proportions and special safeguards would be present.[62]

The existence of a central government would allow the conflict over representative government to persist, and would draw Britain into further negotiations as the 'neutral' party exercising oversight for a federation of cantons.

Cantonization was thus effectively eliminated from the range of possible solutions available to the Peel Commission. But in drawing up a detailed cantonization map and then undermining the principle of cantonization, Harris opened the door to partition, which had been developed in Zionist circles, proposed by Weizmann to the Italians, and considered intermittently by British officials over the previous few years.

V

If the text of the mandate contained a question about nationality and the state, the text of the Peel Commission report proposed an answer. In its unanimous report, the Commission recommended that Palestine be partitioned into an Arab state (to be joined with Trans-Jordan), a Jewish state, and a new British mandatory area covering the holy cities of Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Bethlehem, Lake Tiberias, a corridor to Jaffa, and for a time the 'mixed' towns of Haifa, Acre, Safad, and Tiberias.[63] Despite its dearth of details concerning either the precise line of partition or the procedure to be followed in dividing Palestine, the Peel report represented the first clear and public proposal of partition put forward by British representatives.

The immediate trigger for the appointment of a Royal Commission was a violent rebellion largely motivated by extreme discontent over the lack of a

[62] Note, J. Hall to A. Wauchope, 24 Aug. 1936: CZA, S25/22723.

[63] *Peel report*, p. 358.

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representative legislative body in a context of accelerating demographic change brought about by Jewish immigration from Europe. Although the Arab uprising of April 1936 was not the first in mandatory Palestine, it was certainly the most severe. Arab leaders reacted to what they regarded as the destruction of a scheme for a legislative council by Jewish-influenced politics in the British parliament at the end of March and, more generally, to an unprecedented surge of Jewish immigrants fleeing to Palestine from Germany after 1933. Setting aside their differences, they united to form the Arab Higher Committee, and called a general strike. Boycotts of Zionist and British economic interests and work stoppages were the main weapons of an uprising that also quickly turned violent. Armed gangs, some from outside Palestine, attacked Jews in the streets, on trains, and in theatres. In contrast to the previous major disturbances of 1929, activists also struck at British officials, police, and soldiers. By mid-May, public security had deteriorated to such a point that the British secretary of state for the colonies, J. H. Thomas, announced the government's intention to appoint an investigatory commission. Only in mid-October, after the intervention of the rulers of Egypt, Iraq, Trans-Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, was the strike called off, by which time it had inflicted substantial economic damage. In 1936-7 alone, the estimated cost of increased security due to the Arab uprising was £1·5 million while the estimated lost revenue was £900,000.[64] Although the Royal Commissioners had been appointed in August 1936, it was deemed too dangerous for them to travel to Palestine until the situation had stabilized, ensuring that they did not arrive until 12 November 1936.

Running to nearly 400 pages in its attempt to outline and analyse the complexities of Palestine, the Peel Commission report was the work of six appointed members who had spent the previous eleven months reading letters, memoranda, and petitions, listening to the oral testimony of British officials, Jews, and Arabs (though the latter boycotted the Commission until a week before its departure), and touring Palestine and parts of neighbouring Trans-Jordan. On the Commission were several members possessing a wealth of experience in colonial, diplomatic, and labour matters: Lord Peel as secretary of state for India from 1922 to 1923 and a member of the joint select committee on the Indian constitution in 1933–4; Sir Horace Rumbold as a diplomat in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia; Morris Carter as chief of Tanganyika Territory from 1920 to 1924 and chairman of the 1932–3 Kenya land commission; Reginald Coupland as Beit professor of colonial history at Oxford and editor of the *Round Table* from 1917 to 1919; Laurie Hammond as governor of Assam from 1927 to 1929 and chairman of the Indian delineation committee in 1935–6; and Sir Harold Morris as president of the Industrial Court from 1926 to 1945.

Starting its historical story from the Biblical days of Abraham, their report traced the history of the problem in Palestine, examined the minutiae of economic, social, and political life under the mandate, and offered suggestions for

[64] Ibid., p. 106.

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managing problems within the terms of the mandate. However, the report's central recommendation, and the one for which it is best known, fell outside the bounds of the mandate altogether. After reviewing the operation of the mandate in light of complaints from Jews and Arabs, suggesting methods of satisfying both communities, and offering the advice that future outbreaks of violence should be suppressed by a proclamation of martial law, the commissioners wrote:

> These are the recommendations which we submit for dealing with the main grievances under the Mandate put before us by the Arabs and the Jews; but they are not, in our opinion, the recommendations which our terms of reference require. They will not, that is to say 'remove' the grievances nor 'prevent their recurrence'. They are the best palliatives we can devise for the disease from which Palestine is suffering, but they are only palliatives. They might reduce the inflammation and bring down the temperature, but they cannot cure the trouble. The disease is so deep-rooted that, in our firm conviction, the only hope of a cure lies in a surgical operation.[65]

The language of this statement, together with the report's structure, presented partition as a radical last-ditch effort, and a departure from precedent. Yet partition was in fact the product of a dialogue stretching back to at least 1920.

VI

The Peel report thus gave a concrete and consequential shape to ideas that had been developing in diffuse form and debated in the Palestine administration for years before the outbreak of the 1936 Arab revolt. The report articulated a comprehensive principle: the problem with Palestine could not be solved without a fundamental restructuring of the body politic. The mandate was unworkable so long as Jews and Arabs could not be brought together in a joint, representative legislature. The continuation of the status quo therefore threatened to bring Britain into further disrepute. The prominent use of medical metaphors in the Peel report is striking as part of a forcefully eloquent attempt to drive home the necessity of radical change. How to put this conclusion more graphically than to speak of the body politic as a diseased body requiring surgery?

A history of cantonization and partition before the Peel report is instructive, for it allows us to reframe the Peel partition proposal as the culmination of years of debate and reflection about principles of nationality and statehood and their intersection with facts on the ground. Partition, it seems, was meant to offer a territorial solution to a deeply entrenched political problem whose demographic contours were shifting rapidly after the early 1930s. Much of the testimony heard by the Peel Commission centred around questions of equity in the administration of the mandate including what languages were used, how schools were funded, the administration of justice, and the allocation of immigration certificates. By recommending partition, the Commissioners indicated that the struggle over sovereignty and the definition of the nation could only be resolved through a

[65] Ibid., p. 368.

fundamental shift in the physical definition of the polity. The Peel Commission's proposals championed a solution to the Palestine problem originally formulated and debated by those British officials physically closest to it.

Why, given its history, was the Peel partition plan clearly tacked on to the report at the last minute and given only the sketchiest of outlines? And why did the Commission not take public evidence whilst in Palestine on the question of partition if it was clear that partition was under consideration? Both bureaucratic and strategic influences probably helped keep partition off the table until the last minute. Partition fell quite clearly outside the Commission's mandate, which was to examine and report on the causes of the uprising and to propose methods for removing the causes of Arab and Jewish grievances. The Commissioners followed these instructions to the letter, asking witnesses to explain the root causes of discontent in Palestine, and writing the majority of the report on matters of everyday life under the mandatory administration. The Commissioners may indeed simply have been good social scientists who methodically attacked a problem until they realized that their evidence did not point in the direction that they had hoped. Partition was present as a concept and could then substitute as a solution. At the very least the Commissioners – even Coupland – knew that it would have been futile to propose something as radical as partition without first convincingly eliminating other possible scenarios. It may also be that strategic considerations were implicitly at work. Given the negative reactions to the partition leaks of 1932, it is not particularly surprising that the Commission did not vet partition in its public sessions in Palestine. By characterizing partition as a last-minute, last-ditch attempt at solving the problem, the Commissioners gave a reasonable excuse for their plan's lack of detail. Since it included specifics about land, population, and economy, the plan seemed serious and workable, but by not providing too much information, it retained a degree of flexibility and openness that could have helped it gain supporters.

Rather than strengthening the proposal, however, the vague quality of the Peel report led to its undoing. Despite a forceful report and the immediate support of the cabinet, the Commission's partition plan was quickly nullified by the report of a technical commission, ostensibly sent to Palestine to devise a detailed plan of partition and headed by Sir John Woodhead of the Indian Civil Service. Before the Woodhead Commission left Britain, cabinet ministers decided that it should be given the authority to recommend against partition if no reasonable and equitable plan could be reached.[66] In the event, the Woodhead Commission produced a report containing three partition plans, and a majority and two minority opinions.[67] Although the force and clarity of the Peel report was gone, the Peel partition plan had been vague, whereas the Woodhead report was built on extensive statistical documents and maps. Complexities of the Palestinian economy, geography, and population were revealed in minute detail and when

[66] CM 46(37)5, 8 Dec. 1937: TNA, CAB 23/90.
[67] Command Paper 5854, *Palestine Partition Commission report* (London: HMSO, 1938).

faced with such a volume of information, the Commissioners unsurprisingly came to divergent conclusions. By issuing a split verdict they effectively decided against partition.

Forces other than the facts on the ground in Palestine, however, were also at work in suspending the movement towards partition. Amongst these were the developing international situation, the negative response of the Palestinian Arabs to the Peel proposals and the intervention, once again, of the neighbouring Arab states, Zionist ambivalence towards partition, and public reaction in Britain.[68] The commissioners arrived in Palestine just after the *Anschluss* of March 1938, and published their report shortly after the Munich settlement over Czechoslovakia. The Foreign Office, and to a significant degree, the India Office, had opposed partition since the issuing of the Peel report on the grounds that Arab and Muslim opposition to partition would destabilize Britain's position in the Middle East and India. As the situation in Europe deteriorated strategic concerns came to the fore and the Foreign Office's desire for regional stability trumped the Colonial Office's preoccupation with the particular political problem of Palestine. Negative public reactions worldwide only helped to solidify partition's demise.

VII

The fact that there is a pre-history to the Peel partition plan is significant on several levels. First, it suggests that what appeared to be a plan hastily drawn-up in reaction to the violence of the 1936 Arab Revolt was actually the product of years of discussion. This is not to say that violence had no effect on Britain's Palestine policy, but rather that internal debates demonstrated a sensitivity to sporadic inter-ethnic violence and to the prospect of its continuation over the long term. While the partition plan itself was not a reaction to the violence that began in 1936, the endemic nature of such unrest may have eased the mental and bureaucratic transition from cantonization to partition. Secondly, the early cantonization and partition plans call our attention to the degree to which men with direct experience in Palestine influenced policy. Thirdly, the plan confirms the conflicted and fragmentary nature of the policy-making process. In a related point, this history more fully illuminates the paths not taken, and drives home the contingent nature of plans, policies, and statements. The discussions of 1931–6, and those surrounding the Peel partition plan, suggest that, although British officials and policy-makers tended to return repeatedly to variations on territorial and political division in the 1930s as a way of solving the Palestine problem, the details were vague and indeterminate and partition was by no means the inevitable choice. Finally, the Peel partition plan's deep roots suggest that the study of decolonization in Palestine, and undoubtedly in other parts of the British Empire,

[68] For more on the latter see Aaron S. Klieman, 'In the public domain: the controversy over partition for Palestine', *Jewish Social Studies*, 43 (1980), pp. 147–64.

would benefit from a broader chronological field. Restricting an examination of decolonization to the immediate period preceding the withdrawal of British forces from Palestine loses a vital piece of the story of decolonization, which arguably started as early as 1920 with the emergence of questions about nationality and self-determination.