

# The Yishuv: The Jewish Community in Mandatory Palestine

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## I. Introduction

At the end of [World War I](#), tens of thousands of Jews were living in Palestine. They constituted a heterogeneous community in a remote part of a declining empire, having neither institutional infrastructure nor recognized leadership. Within 30 years, however, this community, known as the [Yishuv](#), evolved into an autonomous society; “a state in the making,” ready for independence. This transformation took place under difficult circumstances as the *Yishuv* was subject to foreign rule and was involved in an escalating confrontation with Palestine’s Arab inhabitants (who were, throughout the period, the majority in the country). The *Yishuv* grew rapidly, absorbing hundreds of thousands of immigrants and, within these 30 years, the Jewish population increased from 56,000 to 600,000.

The *Yishuv* was a national liberation movement aspiring to establish an independent Jewish entity in Palestine, though, unlike other such movements, it had to gather its constituency from all over the world. In 1922, the League of Nations entrusted [Britain as the Mandatory Power](#) with “full powers of legislation and of administration” over Palestine and it also made the British “responsible for placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home,” according to the [Balfour Declaration](#) of November 1917 [The Council of the League of Nations, “The Palestine Mandate,” 24 July 1922]. Indeed, the Zionist leadership and the leaders of the *Yishuv* viewed the mandate regime as a protective umbrella, designed to enable the development and growth of the national home.

Until the late 1930s, the *Yishuv* leadership conducted a policy of cooperation with Britain. On the eve of [World War II](#), after Britain abandoned the National Home policy in favor of establishing one Palestinian state with the Jews constituting a permanent minority, the policy of cooperation was replaced by confrontation. By the end of the war, after a period of renewed cooperation in the common struggle against the axis powers, relations between the *Yishuv* and Britain deteriorated and turned into open and sometimes violent conflict.

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly adopted [Resolution 181](#) that called for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. The resolution sparked violent measures between the Arab and Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, which turned into a full-scale war between the State of Israel and its Arab neighbor states the day after Israel was established on [May 14, 1948](#).

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The main purpose of this article is to describe and analyze how the *Yishuv* was transformed from a marginal, passive body into an active element whose activity largely determined the nature of Palestine and its history. A major question to be resolved is how, in spite of external obstacles and internal rivalries and conflicts between political parties, movements and sectors, the unifying forces in the *Yishuv* were stronger than the divisive ones and how the *Yishuv*, as a national liberation movement, succeeded in achieving independence without its own internal civil war.

## II. The Yishuv: Some Basic Definitions and Characteristics

The term *Yishuv*, which is usually defined as “the Jewish community in pre-State Palestine,” actually relates only to those Jews who aspired to the national revival of the Jewish people in Palestine or *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel. The *Yishuv* was made up of those who were involved in the political life of the Jewish community through elections, who accepted the authority of the elected leadership and who took part in the cultural life, based on the Hebrew language. From the early 1920s, two groups of Jews excluded themselves from the *Yishuv*: the ultra-orthodox and the communists.

The Jews living in [Mandatory Palestine](#) constituted only a tiny minority of the entire Jewish people. At the beginning of the 20th century, less than 1 percent of Jews lived in Palestine and on the eve of World War II, the weight of Palestine in the world Jewish population was 2.84 percent. This proportion, of course, increased enormously after the extermination of approximately one third of world Jewry during the Holocaust.

It is estimated that by the end of World War I, about 56,000 Jews and about 600,000 Arabs were living in Mandatory Palestine; a ratio of 1:11. At the beginning of the 1930s, the Jews constituted 17 percent of the total population and by the eve of World War II, they numbered 450,000 – about one third of the population in Palestine. This proportion remained until the outbreak of the 1948 War, with about 600,000 Jews and twice as many Arabs (both Muslim and Christian).

The main source of demographic increase of the *Yishuv* during the Mandate period was immigration. Therefore, the *Yishuv's* history was influenced by the whereabouts of Jews around the world, which affected not only the influx of immigrants but also that of financial resources, i.e. investments both by Jews who moved to Palestine and by many others who remained abroad. Furthermore, as an immigrant society, most of whose members were newcomers, the *Yishuv* had diverse ties with Jews in the Diaspora, and many of the *Yishuv* members retained a deep attachment to relatives and friends whom they had left behind.

## III. The Yishuv and the Arabs: Mandatory Palestine as a Dual Society

Officially, all the inhabitants of Mandatory Palestine were subjects of the same political entity, but this fact had almost no practical significance. The British Royal Commission, better known as the [Peel Commission](#), which investigated the Palestine question in 1936/37, came to the conclusion that Arabs and Jews living in the same country were two distinct and separate communities:

There is no common ground between them. The Arab community is predominantly Asiatic in character, the Jewish community predominantly European. They differ in religion and in language. Their cultural and social life, their ways of thought and conduct, are as incompatible as their national aspirations [Peel Report, Ch XX, Pr. 5].

Cultural differences between Jews and Arabs existed from the beginning of the Mandate

period. As time went on, the gap between the two populations widened and deepened. To quote again from the Peel Report:

With every year that passes, the contrast between this intensely democratic and highly organized modern community [the Jewish one] and the old-fashioned Arab world around it grows sharper, and in nothing, perhaps, more markedly than on its cultural side . The literary output of the National Home is out of all proportion to its size. [...] The Hebrew Press has expanded to four daily and ten weekly papers. [...] Two periodicals are exclusively concerned with literature and one with dramatic art. But perhaps the most striking aspect of the culture of the National Home is its love of music. It was while we were in Palestine, as it happened, that Signor Toscanini conducted the Palestine Symphony Orchestra, composed of some 70Palestinian Jews, in six concerts [...] On each occasion every seat was occupied, and it is noteworthy that one concert was reserved for some 3,000 workpeople at very low rates [...] All in all, the cultural achievement of this little community of 400,000 people is one of the most remarkable features of the National Home.

There is Arab literature, of course, and Arab music, but the culture of Arab Palestine is the monopoly of the intelligentsia and, born as it is of Asia, it has little kinship with that of the National Home, which, though it is linked with ancient Jewish tradition, is predominantly a culture of the West . Nowhere, indeed, is the gulf between the races more obvious. Anyone who attended the Toscanini Concerts at Jerusalem might have imagined, if he closed his eyes, that he was in Paris , London, or New York. Yet, almost within earshot was the Old City, the Haram-esh-Sharif, and the headquarters of the Arab Higher Committee. It is the same with science. The Daniel Sieff Research Institute at Rehovot [later named the Weizmann Institute for Science] is equipped with the most delicate modern instruments; the experiments conducted there are watched by chemists all over the world: yet from its windows can be seen the hills inhabited by a backward peasantry who regard it only as the demonstration of a power they hate and fear and who would like, no doubt, when their blood is up, to destroy it [Peel Report, Ch. V. Prs. 7-8].

The separation between Jews and Arabs originated with the renewal of Jewish settlement in Palestine at the end of the 19th century; that is, the beginning of [Zionist](#) activity in the country. It was caused not only by the wide gulf between the two populations, but was also largely the result of intentional and conscious activity on the part of the Jews, who aspired to live apart from the Arab population. In mixed cities, Jews resided mostly in their own quarters and neighborhoods; while the new settlements founded by Jews, both urban and agricultural, were made up of Jews only. From the very beginning of the Mandate period, the Jews built their own political institutions to advance their autonomy, with the aspiration for full independence. In short, the *Yishuv* had a clear self-perception of being a distinct and separate entity and it acted on both the political and the practical levels to make this vision real.

The Mandatory government contributed to the reality of a dual society. English, Arabic and Hebrew were recognized by the League of Nations and the Mandatory Power as the official languages of the country, thus formally approving and encouraging the existence of a “tower of Babel,” including the preservation of separate education systems; each nourishing the national values and aspirations of its own group. Since the Mandatory government never set up common governing institutions for all of the country's inhabitants, there was no official framework encompassing Jews and Arabs, except for a few municipalities in mixed cities and towns.

The economic sphere was somewhat different from the cultural, geographic and political spheres. *Yishuv* institutions took active steps to close the Jewish economy to Arab workers to ensure employment for Jewish immigrants, thereby fulfilling two basic goals of Zionism. The primary one was to increase the *Yishuv's* population with the ultimate goal of having a Jewish majority in Palestine. Achieving this objective was dependent on the supply of jobs for new immigrants, and the closure of the Jewish market to Arab labor was intended to defend Jewish workers from unfair competition with the Arab workers for the limited supply of jobs (most Arab workers were employed in the citrus orchards and construction). It was much cheaper to employ Arab workers than Jewish ones, not only due to the Arabs' lower standard of living but also because working in the Jewish market was not, as a rule, the primary source of income for the Arab worker, who had his own farm or enterprise in his village or town.

Most of the jobs in Jewish workplaces were made available by Jewish capital, i.e., money invested by Jews – living either in Palestine or abroad – for the specific purpose of supplying jobs for Jews to stimulate Jewish population growth in Palestine. The Mandatory government admitted the right for exclusive Jewish labor in such enterprises.

Another goal of exclusive Jewish labor was to turn the Jews into productive workers, which was considered a crucial condition for building a “normal” and “healthy” Jewish society, with a full stratification structure including manual workers in agriculture and industry.

It was more difficult to sustain the separation between Jews and Arabs in the economic sphere than in others since this involved a clash between national interests (dictating the employment of Jews only) and economic interests (commanding employing more skillful and lower paid Arab workers). By and large, the economic considerations had the upper hand, though they were somewhat moderated by political pressure utilized by both sides. *Yishuv* institutions and organizations campaigned for exclusive Jewish labor while the Arab leadership declared sporadic boycotts of Jewish commodities and services. Eventually the issue was determined by the security situation, which overwhelmed the economic interests and accelerated the processes of separation along national lines. Hostile events in the late 1920s and the second half of the 1930s deepened the segregation of Jews and Arabs in mixed cities, decreased the scope of Arab labor in the Jewish sphere and sped up the creation of an independent Jewish economic infrastructure. For example, when the Arabs launched a general strike and closed the Jaffa port to Jewish commodities in the spring of 1936, the Jews inaugurated an alternative port in nearby [Tel Aviv](#).

In general, there was a great deal of separation between the Jewish and Arab economies in Mandatory Palestine; contact, to the extent that it existed at all, worked in one direction only: The *Yishuv* transferred money to Arabs in exchange for land, labor and consumption products. Jewish employment in the Arab sphere was negligible. Thus, two distinct economic units existed in Mandatory Palestine, each having its own ethnic-national character, differing in their state and pace of development. In other words, there is almost no way of relating to a Palestinian economy as such, but rather to two separate national units functioning within the framework of Mandatory Palestine (Metzer, *The divided economy of Mandatory Palestine*; Horowitz, Lissak, *Origins of the Israeli polity: Palestine under the Mandate*).

This paradigm of Mandatory Palestine as a dual society is prevalent in most of the literature published to this day. It is disputed only by a few historians, commonly labeled “New Historians” who attempt to portray the relations between the two societies in Mandatory Palestine as a colonial situation, assigning the role of the colonizer not to the British but rather to the Zionists.

#### **IV. Institutions, Political Parties and Organizations**



The *Yishuv* had already acquired its basic features as an autonomous, vibrant society early in the Mandate period, as depicted in an official British document issued in 1922:

During the last two or three generations the Jews have recreated in Palestine a community, now numbering 80,000, of whom about one-fourth are farmers or workers upon the land. This community has its own political organs; an elected assembly for the direction of its domestic concerns; elected councils in the towns; and an organisation for the control of its schools. It has its elected Chief Rabbinate and Rabbinical Council for the direction of its religious affairs. Its business is conducted in Hebrew as a vernacular language, and a Hebrew press serves its needs. It has its distinctive intellectual life and displays considerable economic activity [Cmd. 1700].

### *Institutions*

The *Yishuv* was headed by a two-winged system of national institutions – those elected by the *Yishuv* and those of the [Zionist Organization](#). These two sets of institutions complemented each other and were based upon the common push for the independence and sovereignty of the Jews in Palestine. They fulfilled the dual role of conducting day-to-day life in an autonomous setting (through the *Yishuv* institutions) and constructing the infrastructure for an independent Jewish state (through the Zionist institutions). The umbrella of the Zionist organizations, recognized by the League of Nations and the Mandatory Power as the sole representative of the Jewish people in all matters relating to Palestine, transcended those of the *Yishuv*. The most powerful and influential body in the *Yishuv* was the Palestine Zionist Executive and, as of the early 1930s, the [Jewish Agency](#) Executive in Jerusalem.

The *Yishuv* functioned as a parliamentary democracy, formally having all three branches of government: (1) the parliament: *Asefat ha-Nivharim* (the "National Assembly"); (2) the executive organ: *ha Va'ad ha-Le'umi* (the national council or committee); and (3) the judicial system: *Beit Mishpat ha-Shalom ha-Ivri* (lit. the Hebrew Court of Peace). Within a few years, the stature of the Hebrew legal system declined for several reasons: Its limited scope of jurisdiction (the British government granted rabbinical courts exclusivity over personal matters), the opposition of the Jewish legal profession (Shamir, *Colonies of Law*), its voluntary character and lack of coercive means for enforcement of decisions, and the reliance of the Jews on the efficient Mandatory judicial system.

The first elections to the National Assembly were held in April 1920, after resolving the issue of the women's right to vote (at a time when women's suffrage was quite rare around the world). The Orthodox community and the "*Mizrachi*" (the religious Zionist party) opposed the participation of women in the elections. After much deliberation, it was agreed that only men would cast their votes in the orthodox quarters, but each vote would count as two, to compensate for the women. This was, however, only a temporary solution and eventually the [religious Zionist](#) parties complied with the inclusion of women in the democratic process, while the ultra-orthodox, who were never members of the Zionist Organization in the first place, quit Knesset Yisrael (the single Jewish Community officially recognized by the Mandatory authorities) and did not take part in its elections and institutions (and thus are not considered part of the *Yishuv* as defined in this article). Though elections to the National Assembly should have been held every four years, they were held only in 1920, 1925, 1931 and 1944.

The Mandatory government granted the Zionist Organization (and, from the early 1930s, the [Jewish Agency](#)) partial authority over matters that are customarily handled by the government in independent states, such as immigration, settlement, economic development and even some military issues. The *Yishuv* institutions dealt with internal matters (education,

health, welfare). By definition, the Zionist organs had the upper hand in leading the *Yishuv* and they cast their shadow over the local institutions.

The weakness of the *Yishuv* institutions was also a result of its political factionalism, which prevented the crystallization of a power center with strong public backing. In the first election to the National Assembly, for instance, no fewer than 20 lists competed for 28,765 potential voters (with 77 percent participation).

The Rabbinical Council, headed by two chief rabbis, one [Sephardic](#) and one [Ashkenazi](#), was the religious organ of the *Yishuv*, officially recognized by the Mandatory power. There were local Rabbinical Councils in the all-Jewish cities and towns, and in those with a substantial Jewish population, as well as a network of Rabbinical courts with jurisdiction over matters of personal status – marriage, divorce and inheritance.

### *The Political Parties*

A basic consensus prevailed in the *Yishuv* over the goal of striving for a Jewish majority in the country and the eventual establishment of an independent Jewish entity in Palestine. Another widely agreed upon aspiration was the molding in Palestine of a new collective Jewish identity; one that would not be only a mixture of the specific traditions and heritages of the various components of the *Yishuv* population but, rather, a new amalgamation based on the Hebrew language and culture.

Beyond these consensual ideas, the *Yishuv* was divided on a wide range of issues that can be grouped into four topics:

- (1) The territorial dimension of the Zionist enterprise
- (2) The social order: what kind of a society does Zionism aspire to build in Palestine? Does the Zionist enterprise contain only national aspects or does it also embrace social goals such as building a just society? The right and center parties were of the opinion that the object of Zionism should be limited to establishing an independent Jewish national entity while the left wing parties expected it also to have attributes of social justice and equality.
- (3) Respect for the authority of the elected institutions.
- (4) The “Arab Question”: the wide spectrum of practical, political, and moral dilemmas confronting Zionism and the *Yishuv* due to the existence of Arab population in Palestine.

The *Yishuv* was a very politically oriented and motivated society and its members were involved in intensive political activity. Political parties played a central role in the *Yishuv* not only in the conventional spheres of political party activity but in almost all aspects of public life. Political affiliation had a significant role in everyday life and was essential for gaining access to services such as medical care, housing, employment and education. For Jews abroad wishing to immigrate to Palestine, the party key was influential in obtaining immigration certificates.

The *Yishuv* political map, shaped in the first decade of the Mandate period, was composed of the bloc of workers' parties (left), the civic bloc (center), the Revisionist party (right) and a bloc of religious parties. The basic division of power was determined in the early 1930s and the main features remained intact for many years (until the establishment of the State of Israel and, in many respects, until the defeat of the Labor Party in the 1977 election). The left of center Labor Party (*Mapai*), headed by [David Ben-Gurion](#), enjoyed hegemonic status as the

largest party. Since it received less than 50 percent of the vote, however, it had to form a coalition with at least one other party. In the 1930s, [Mapai](#) forged "a historic alliance" with a religious party (*Mizrachi*) and the two formed the core of the governing coalitions, which also included part of the center party, the General Zionists.

The Revisionist party, headed by [Zeev \(Vladimir\) Jabotinsky](#), advocated the "One Banner" or monistic attitude, claiming that the aspirations of Zionism were solely national while he rejected the socialist component of [Labor Zionism](#). The Revisionists withdrew from the Zionist Organization in 1935, after realizing that they had no chance of becoming its leading force. They advocated a hard-line policy on the Zionist-British front and in relations with the Arabs. The Revisionists founded the [New Zionist Organization](#), which conducted its own policy, repudiating the legitimacy of the "old" Zionist Organization and defying its decisions and authority. The Revisionists set up their own institutions (health, employment, trade union and fundraising) and even had their own military organization – the *Etzel* (an acronym for *Irgun Tzva'i Leumi*: National Military Organization, or the Irgun), which conducted military and terrorist activities against Arabs and the British. After 1940, a splinter group of *Etzel* formed another underground group – *Lehi* (*Lohamei Herut Yisrael*: Fighters for Israel's Freedom, the Stern Gang). After 1935, there were actually three groups of Jews in Palestine: The "Organized *Yishuv*" (the labor Zionists, the General Zionists and the religious Zionists), the "*Porshim*" (dissenters, i.e., the Revisionists) and the ultra-orthodox.

#### *The Histadrut: The General Federation of Jewish [Hebrew] Laborers in Palestine*

In late 1920s, Jewish workers in Palestine founded the [Histadrut](#), a unique organization that played a central role in the history of the *Yishuv* at large, not only that of the workers and left wing parties. The *Histadrut* was a country-wide labor organization that fulfilled a wide range of functions: It operated as a trade union and as an employer; ran a job placement agency (*lishkat avoda*), was involved in settlement activity, had its own economic institutions (including a bank, an insurance company and a pension fund) and also provided health care. It had its own education system, a daily newspaper, a publishing house and a theatre group and conducted a variety of cultural activities. For many years, the *Histadrut* was in charge of the military arm – the *Hagana* (defense) – and it played a central role in organizing illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine in defiance of Mandatory laws. In short, the *Histadrut* was "a state within the state in the making." The leadership that headed the *Histadrut* also became the dominant political force in the *Yishuv*, and in the Zionist organization, starting in the 1930s, so the *Histadrut's* activity complemented rather than challenged the authority of the *Yishuv* leadership. Founded with about 4,500 people, by 1947, *Histadrut* membership had grown to 175,000.

## **V. The Yishuv as a Democratic Society**

The *Yishuv* featured almost all the attributes of a democratic state except sovereignty. It was organized and functioned along the lines of a parliamentary democracy and even its underground paramilitary arm, the *Hagana*, was subject to the control and authority of the democratically elected civil leadership. This impressed the various committees that investigated the situation in Palestine, such as the [Peel Commission](#) in 1937 and the [United Nations Special Committee on Palestine](#) (UNSCOP) ten years later. The strong institutional structure established by the *Yishuv* was later manifested in the smooth transfer from foreign rule to becoming an independent state in May 1948.

What were the sources of inspiration for the *Yishuv's* democratic practices? Some roots can be traced to the self-governing tradition of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora for many generations. The Zionist Organization had functioned in a democratic manner since its inception in 1897. Another source of influence was the Mandatory power – Britain, the

parliamentary democratic state *par excellence*. The fact that Palestine was under British rule exposed the heads of the *Yishuv* and the leaders of the Zionist movement to the conduct of a democratic regime and encouraged them to use methods acceptable to the decision makers in London. Many of the *Yishuv* leaders admired Western democracy British and later American.

Fostering democracy in the *Yishuv* can also be explained by the need of the Zionist movement to gain the support of public opinion in democratic states, thus obligating it to be attuned to the values of those states and to the view of the Jewish communities that supported the *Yishuv* both politically and financially.

A crucial factor in molding the *Yishuv* as a democratic society was its voluntary character. Unlike a sovereign government with coercion authority, voluntary organizations are based on free will and persuasion.

Nevertheless, there were other, countervailing sources of influence. To begin with, most of the *Yishuv* members and leaders had no experience with democratic practices in their former countries of residence. On the contrary, most of them lived under totalitarian regimes. In addition, certain circles in the *Yishuv* admired the Soviet Revolution and accepted the notion of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" and the arbitrary role of the *avant-garde* in times of turmoil and change. Furthermore, the Jewish religion itself contains non-democratic elements, such as unequivocal reliance on the *Halacha* (Jewish religious law).

All in all, the democratic sources of influence toned down the opposing factors and the *Yishuv* acted as a formal democracy and was conducted according to the decisions of the majority. The *Yishuv* was spared dilemmas faced by liberal democracies, mainly relating to the rights of the individual and of the minority, since those issues were outside the authority and control of the *Yishuv* while it was under foreign rule.

Somewhat paradoxically, the very lack of sovereignty had a positive influence on sustaining the democratic character of the *Yishuv*. Though the Mandatory government curbed the authority and power of the national institutions, it also relieved them of the burden of building and maintaining a physical infrastructure – roads, railways, sea and airports, postal and telegraphic services, a basic health system – and guaranteed internal and external security provided by the army and the police force. The Mandatory regime also provided a protective umbrella that enabled the national institutions, and the *Yishuv* as a whole, to gradually expand and strengthen, prior to shouldering full governing responsibilities.

The lack of political sovereignty also meant that many issues were conducted according to Mandatory regulations, thus relieving the *Yishuv* of the need to deal with controversial issues at the heart of the tension between religious and secular factions in the State of Israel. Along with the many disadvantages of being under foreign rule, the Mandate had the positive effect of increasing internal cohesiveness in the *Yishuv* which was strengthened by the continuous and intensifying conflict with the Arabs.

## **VI. Major Spheres of Yishuv Activity**

Functioning as a state in the making, the *Yishuv*, in spite of being under foreign rule, was involved in many activities usually dealt with by sovereign states. This section discusses the issues of immigration, settlement, education and the political and military struggle.

### *Immigration*

The *Yishuv* was an immigrant society, the majority of whose members were first generation immigrants, many with relatives abroad whom they were eager to bring to Palestine. In



addition, Zionist ideology had conditioned the *Yishuv* to adopt a favorable attitude toward Jewish immigration to Palestine and made it an integral component of the Zionist ethos. From the Zionists' point of view, immigration to Palestine was the ultimate realization of Zionist ideology and all Jews were welcome to settle in the country.

Ideological commitment and personal obligation to continuous immigration prevailed even when the flow of newcomers harmed the Jewish "natives" in the short run, and countered their immediate interests. Unlike other immigrant states where, in times of economic depression, trade unions were among the leading restrictive forces, as was the case in the United States in the 1930s, the *Histadrut* supported large-scale Jewish immigration even when unemployment was high.

The *Yishuv* went through short periods of vibrant economic activity, even prosperity (the mid-1920s and 1933-1935), and long periods of recession and economic crisis. During most of the mandatory period, with the exception of the years 1925 and 1933-1935, Palestine suffered from chronic unemployment. It recovered from the economic crisis of the second half of the 1930s only during World War II, when the British war effort supplied new sources of employment.

The League of Nations made Britain "responsible for placing Palestine under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home." Britain proclaimed that "for the fulfillment of this policy it is necessary that the Jewish community in Palestine should be able to increase its numbers by immigration," but added that "it is essential to ensure that the immigrants should not be a burden upon the people of Palestine as a whole, and that they should not deprive any section of the present population of their employment" (Cmd. 1700). Until 1937, officially, immigration to Palestine was conducted according to the economic absorptive capacity of the country, a yardstick defined as the annual rate at which a country can receive immigrants without being subject to friction and serious economic derangement.

Mandatory immigration regulations divided immigrants into four groups: Persons of independent means (Category A, "Capitalists"); Students and persons of religious occupations whose maintenance is assured (Category B); Persons who have a definite prospect of employment (Category C, "Labor"); Dependants of permanent residents of Palestine or of immigrants in other categories (Category D). Only category C, Labor, was subject to the economic absorptive capacity principle, as the immigrants of categories A, B and D were not expected to enter the labor market. Therefore, until 1937, there was no limit on the number of immigrants in these categories (A, B and D), and most importantly, on that of persons of independent means (A).

Britain alone regulated the immigration of categories A, B and D, granting the Zionist Organization partial authority over category C in return for undertaking to guarantee the maintenance of the immigrants during their first year in Palestine. The Zionist Organization had no influence over the volume of immigration; Britain determined the rules of the game and always had the final say. Thus, the maneuverability of the Zionist Organization in the area of immigration was very limited.

Nonetheless, even this limited authority over immigration matters constituted one of the few bases of power of the Zionist leadership. The labor certificates were the most precious resource that the Zionist Organization controlled and could divide among its citizens. In the 1930s, the certificates were primarily distributed according to party affiliation; the various Zionist parties in the Diaspora made promises regarding the prospect of immigration and competed in providing this benefit to their members. The chance to receive a labor certificate was a weighty incentive for joining the Zionist Organization and speculation as to the

probability of getting one had some bearing on the decision regarding which party to join. Consequently, the distribution of the certificates had some effect on determining the balance of power in Zionist institutions, and since immigration was the main source of growth for the *Yishuv*, distribution of the certificates played a role in shaping its political structure.

Immigration in the 1930s was governed primarily by political rather than economic considerations. The main concern of the British authorities was law and order in the country and they were attuned to the complaints of the Arabs that Jewish immigration was both economically harmful and threatened their status as the majority in the country. The Peel Commission found, however, that Jewish immigration actually increased the economic absorptive capacity of the country as a whole [Peel Report, Ch. III. Pr. 82].

Following the [Arab Revolt](#), which broke out in 1936 and continued until late 1939, Britain acted to maintain the existing demographic balance of Palestine (about one-third Jews and two-thirds Arabs). In July 1937, it formally abandoned the principle of economic absorptive capacity as the yardstick for Jewish immigration, replacing it with the “political high level” principle, aimed at preventing the growth of the Jewish population beyond the one-third limit. The “political high level” principle fixed a ceiling on immigration of all types and was determined by political and demographic considerations, regardless of the country's economic ability to absorb immigrants. In 1937, this ceiling was set at 12,000 Jewish immigrants annually (Cmd. 5513, par. 6). In May 1939, the number was raised to 15,000 (Cmd. 6019, par. 14 [1]), which reflected the rapid natural growth of the Arab population in Palestine.

### *Settlement*

Most of the *Yishuv* population was urban (80 percent), living in four types of cities and towns: Tel Aviv, an exclusively Jewish city; [Jerusalem](#), a mixed city with a Jewish majority; [Haifa](#), [Tiberias](#), [Safad](#), and [Jaffa](#), mixed cities with a substantial (up to 50 percent) Jewish minority; [Hebron](#), [Beersheba](#), [Gaza](#), Tul Karem and Nablus, some of which were totally abandoned by the Jews after the 1929 disturbances and others mixed towns with a significant Arab majority.

The majority of Jewish agricultural settlements were privately owned. The location of these settlements and their sources of livelihood were chosen according to universal rules of economic profitability. The different types of collective settlements, *Kvutza*, [Kibbutz](#) and [Moshav](#), were founded on national land, financed by national funds with their location and economic activity determined by the Zionist Organization and the *Histadrut* in keeping with a complex set of considerations. The agricultural settlements had a dual role in achieving Zionist goals: To increase the number of Jews in Palestine and to expand the Jewish territorial base. The Zionist settlement activity was, at first, dependent on the supply of land for sale, the economic-agricultural feasibility of that land and the financial resources of the Zionist Organization. Later, after the 1929 disturbances, a new element of security considerations was introduced and, in the mid-1930s, yet another aspect, the political-strategic one, was increasingly being taken into account.

Jewish casualties in the August 1929 disturbances occurred mostly among those who lived in mixed cities, in the mountain area villages and in isolated settlements, while the dense Jewish population concentrations in the shore and valley areas remained unharmed. Consequently, the architects of settlement policy decided to refrain from founding isolated villages and focused on creating blocks of settlements within view of one another; with decent roads paved between them and accessible routes connecting them to the major Jewish population clusters. Old and new settlements were surrounded by fences and took other security measures so as to enable them to endure Arab attacks until the arrival of reinforcements. As a result of these measures, after 1929, no Jewish settlement was abandoned until the invasion

of the regular Arab armies in 1948.

A conceptual change in settlement policy began to take place after the outbreak of the Arab revolt in 1936 and, even more so, after the public became (unofficially) aware of the conclusions of the Peel Commission, which recommended in 1937 the partitioning of Palestine. Thereafter, the nationally funded settlements were located according to political-strategic considerations, directed by the assumption – or rather, the hope – that the borders of the future Jewish state would be determined by the last furrow plowed by a Jewish farmer. Settlements were positioned so as to have an impact on the final partition map in two ways: Strengthening the Jewish hold on areas designated by the committee for the Jewish state but sparsely populated by Jews; and further populating areas already settled by Jews that were to be assigned to the Arab state. The settlement activity continued to be politically motivated through the 1940s with the aim of stretching the borders of the State of Israel to include the [Negev](#) and other areas considered vital for guaranteeing a viable Jewish state.

### *Education*

The *Yishuv* operated an educational system on all levels from kindergartens, through elementary and secondary schools as well as higher education. Despite the fact that the *Yishuv* was a voluntary society lacking the authority to impose taxes and enforce laws and particularly without a compulsory education law in Palestine at the time, “practically every Jewish boy and girl attends a primary school. A substantial proportion of them go to a secondary school” [Peel Report, Ch. V, Pr. 12].

At the beginning of the Mandate period, the Zionist Organization resolved to maintain the Hebrew education system independent of Mandatory government control to avoid any intervention or supervision of the content of its curricula. This ideological decision had a price: The *Yishuv* relinquished most of the Mandatory government’s financial support. Initially, the Zionist Executive took financial responsibility for the *Yishuv* education system, but gradually the financial burden was transferred to *Yishuv* institutions, the municipalities and the pupils' parents. The *Yishuv* delegates continued to negotiate with the British government to increase its share in the Jewish education budget.

The decision to maintain the independence of the education system was motivated by the perception that Hebrew education was the flagship of the national revival process and that it played an essential role in conveying Zionist values to the younger generation. The various ideological and political bodies of the *Yishuv* viewed the schools as primary agents of socialization and education and each of the major ideological streams wished to have its own education system, instilling its particular values along with the common Zionist values shared by all.

At the beginning of the Mandate period, there was one general Hebrew education system, with about 20 percent of the pupils attending schools having a religious Jewish inclination. These schools later formed the basis for a separate religious education stream, directed by the religious *Mizrachi* party. In 1926, a third education stream was recognized – “the Labor stream,” including schools in cities, towns and agricultural cooperative settlements (*Kibbutzim* and *Moshavim*) and directed by the *Histadrut*. Thus, there were three distinct education streams in the *Yishuv* (with a fourth belonging to the ultra orthodox). By 1948, about 50 percent of the *Yishuv*'s children went to schools of the General stream, 30 percent to the Labor stream and 20 percent to the *Mizrachi* stream.

Though the three educational streams were free to prepare their own curricula and select their teachers, they still had much in common. Throughout the educational system, teaching was conducted exclusively in Hebrew, an emphasis was placed on the national dimension of

Jewish history and culture and a difference was stressed between the Jewish society emerging in Palestine and the Jews living in the [Diaspora](#).

The streams had their share of differences as well. The General stream, affiliated with civic circles and municipalities in cities, towns and *Moshavot*, held a liberal orientation and a positive attitude toward Jewish tradition. The *Mizrachi* stream emphasized religious education through the teaching of Jewish sources and observing the commandments. The Labor stream encouraged and instilled socialist values in addition to the national ones. Its schools were called "Education Houses for Laborers' Children." According to a report of the Mandatory government's Education Department, the *Mizrachi* stream was educating in the spirit of yesterday that would probably never return while the Labor stream was educating for a tomorrow that most likely would never arrive.

### *The Political and Military Struggle*

Initially, the *Yishuv* expected the Mandatory Power to maintain law and order in Palestine and to protect its inhabitants' lives and property. However, violent clashes with Arabs in the upper Galilee in the winter of 1920 (including the famous [Tel Hai](#) incident), and in Jerusalem (Passover of the same year), made it clear to the Jews they could not depend solely on the Mandatory security forces but that they would have to play a more active role in defending themselves. In June 1920, the workers' party called *Ahdut ha-Avoda* laid the foundations for the *Hagana*, an underground paramilitary organization which, from its inception until the end of the Mandate operated along a number of principles: Every Jew could join, it was subject to the authority of elected civil institutions (first those of the party, then of the *Histadrut* and, from the early 1930s, of the national institutions), it was a country-wide organization, it was illegal according to the prevailing laws of the country and therefore an underground organization (although its existence was well known to all). Members of the [Hagana](#) were volunteers. They continued to hold their jobs and took part in training during off-work hours in the afternoons, Saturdays and holidays and were summoned for duty when the need arose.

The 1929 disturbances put the *Hagana* to the test, revealing its advantages as well as its weaknesses and provoking a number of changes. The organization was enlarged, its units were better spread throughout the country, training was intensified, more equipment was purchased and an overall command was established that was composed of representatives of the *Histadrut* and the civic circles on a party basis.

The Arab revolt (1936-1939) intensified the cooperation between the *Yishuv* and the British, including operating joint military units and all-Jewish paramilitary units armed by the British, who also paid full or partial salaries to the members. The military cooperation between the *Yishuv* and the British reached a peak during World War II, when about 30,000 men and women (out of a population of about 450,000) volunteered to serve in various units of the British army, including a [Jewish Brigade](#), which was formed toward the end of the war as an integral part of the British army. Thus, the Mandatory Power was the chief factor in training the military force of the *Yishuv* and, unintentionally, preparing it for its eventual war with the Arabs.

The Arab Revolt put the *Yishuv* and its leadership to a severe test regarding the appropriate ways to react to the escalating violence. The *Yishuv's* political leadership and the command of the *Hagana* advocated a policy of restraint while the Revisionists and other extreme elements were in favor of a policy of retaliation. Restraint did not mean passive acceptance of Arab attacks, but, rather, represented opposition to a line of counter-terrorist actions and blind attacks on innocent individuals with no proven connections to anti-Jewish violence. There were a number of moral grounds for the policy of restraint, but the main reasons were predominantly political-pragmatic ones and above all, the wish to preserve British goodwill



and cooperation in the political and military areas. The *Yishuv* leadership insisted on conducting all military activity according to the decisions of the elected institutions and on preventing uncontrolled actions that had the potential of being counterproductive.

National unity in defining both the ultimate goal and the tactics used to achieve it was of utmost importance at the final stage of the struggle for independence in the years 1945-1948. From late 1945 until summer 1946, the *Yishuv* conducted a multi-front struggle against the Mandatory Power: It organized illegal immigration (*Ha'apala*) and military operations against various British targets in Palestine, founded new settlements and engaged in a variety of diplomatic and political activities in London, New York, Washington and around the world aimed at winning support for statehood.

The struggle in Palestine reached its peak in the summer of 1946 with some impressive military successes for the Jewish side; however, in the political arena, the Zionists did not move one inch forward. It was decided, therefore, in August 1946, to tone down the armed struggle, to put an end to sabotage activity and to turn the *Ha'apala* into the main – and virtually only – front against the British. At the same time, it was decided to pursue mainly political measures for independence while secretly preparing for the inevitable and decisive battle expected with the Arabs.

Not all members of the *Yishuv* understood the tactical restraint needed at that stage of the struggle for the Jewish state, particularly when the dissident organizations continued to attack the British and boasted of their successes. The primary aim of the Zionist movement at that juncture was to prove that its elected leadership was capable of imposing its authority on the *Yishuv*. The terrorist activities of the dissident organizations (*Etzel* and *Lehi*) jeopardized this claim and threatened to infringe on the line of restraint adopted by the leadership. At that delicate point, the *Ha'apala* proved to be a useful tool in capturing the hearts of the *Yishuv's* young people and persuading the public that national obedience was the order of the day. Following the summer of 1946, the *Ha'apala* was largely responsible for the closing of ranks in the *Yishuv* and for proving that not only the dissenters were capable of beating the British. A national consensus approved of the elected leadership's policy of rescuing Holocaust survivors. The British, meanwhile, made sure that certain ground rules were maintained in their efforts to curb it, thus they never attempted to drown an immigrant ship and very rarely open live fire at the immigrants.

When the United Nations' Special Committee on Palestine arrived in the region in the summer of 1947, it was most impressed by the Jews' internal organization and the fact that most of them conformed to the rules set by the elected political leadership. These facts were decisive in convincing the international committee that the Jews were mature enough for independence and were able to undertake the responsibility of managing their own lives without British supervision. The broad consensus that united the Jewish population in Palestine around its leadership was a major factor in the *Yishuv's* ability to engage in the war with the Palestinian Arabs, which broke out at the end of 1947, and why Zionism, unlike many other national liberation movements, was spared a civil-war stage on its road to independence.

## VI. Conclusion

A few times during the Mandatory period, the *Yishuv* was on the verge of civil war, but once the differing sides realized the depth of the abyss they might fall into, they found ways to bridge the gulf and avoid catastrophe. Thus, even the bitterest conflicts never turned into a total and irreversible schism. The common goals and interests were stronger than the disputes and the controversies. The presence of an external power, the British, forced the parties to find a compromise, without external intervention or internal bloodshed. The presence of

hostile neighboring people further cemented the *Yishuv's* cohesion.

## VII. Epilogue

About a month before the scheduled end of the Mandate, the *Yishuv* formed two governing organs: (1) a parliament (*Mo'etzet ha-Am* - The People's Council), a 37-member temporary legislative body, representing the full spectrum of the Jewish population of Palestine, including all the *Yishuv* parties as well as the Communists, the Revisionists and the ultra-orthodox *Agudat Yisrael*; and (2) a 13-member cabinet (*Minhelet ha-Am* - The People's Administration). This executive body convened on May 12, 1948, to decide whether to declare independence. Ten members attended the crucial meeting (with two members stuck in besieged Jerusalem and one on a mission in the United States) with six voting in favor of declaring independence when the Mandate ended and four against. Two days later, on Friday May 14, 1948, the independent State of Israel was declared. All the members of *Mo'etzet ha-Am*, converted into the Provisional State Council (*Mo'etzet ha-Medina ha-Zmanit*), signed the scroll of the Declaration of Independence. *Minhelet ha-Am* became the Provisional Government (*ha-Memshala ha-Zmanit*). About two weeks later, the IDF (Israel Defense Forces; *Tzahal: Tzva Hagana l'Yisrael*) was officially formed out of the *Hagana*, incorporating the *Etsel* and *Lehi* as well. The official and practical transformation of the *Yishuv* into a sovereign independent state was completed.

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