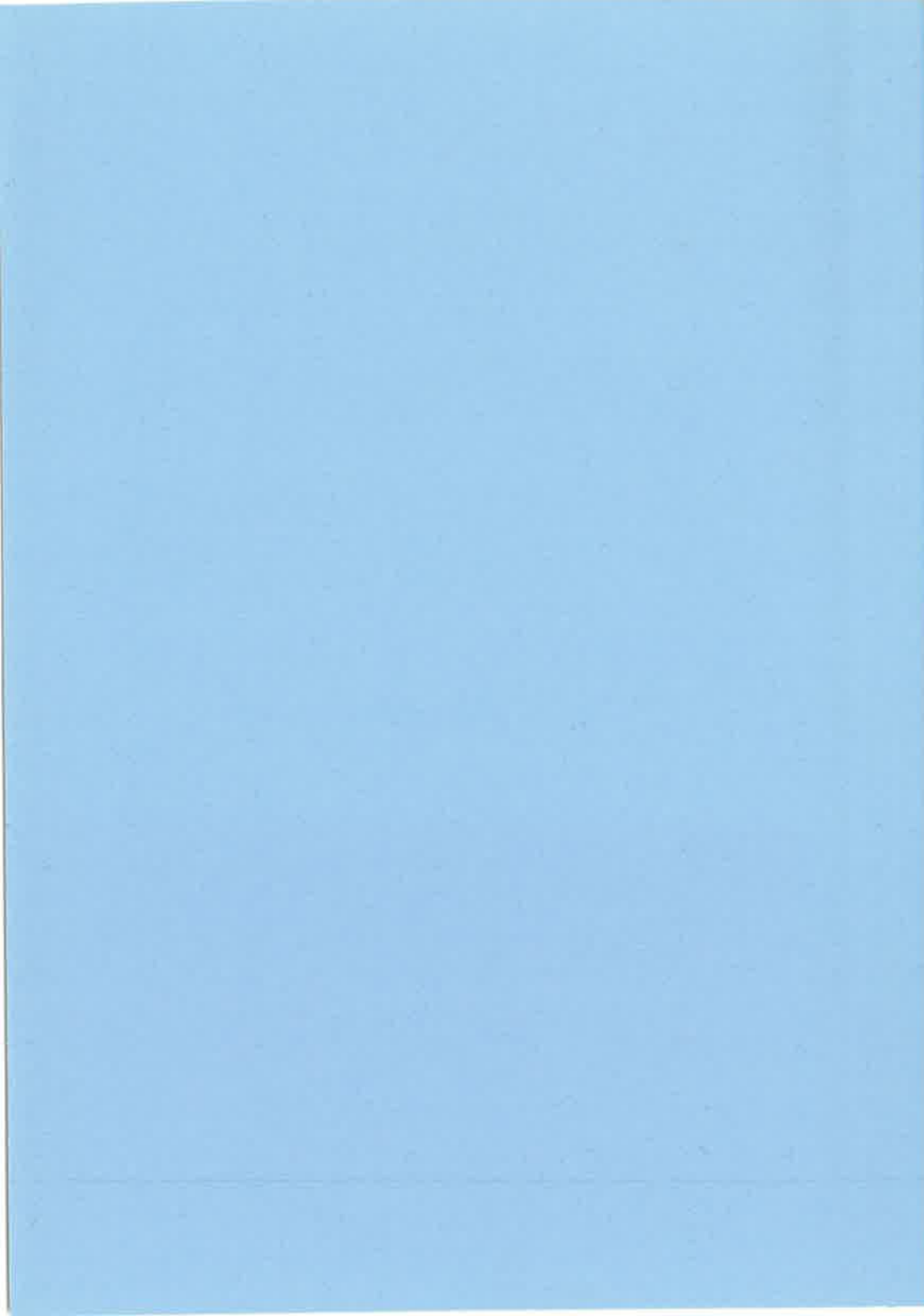


BERNARD
WASSERSTEIN

Herbert Samuel and the
Partition of Palestine

THE SIXTEENTH SACKS LECTURE

OXFORD CENTRE FOR
POSTGRADUATE HEBREW STUDIES



BERNARD WASSERSTEIN

Herbert Samuel and the
Partition of Palestine

*The Sixteenth Sacks Lecture of
the Oxford Centre for
Postgraduate Hebrew Studies*

1990

© Bernard Wasserstein, 1990

*Published by
The Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies
Yarnton Manor, Yarnton, Oxfordshire, England*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies.

Printed in Great Britain

Author's note:

I wish to thank the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, and most particularly its President, David Patterson, for inviting me to deliver the annual Sacks lecture at Yarnton Manor in June 1990. The text that follows is a revised version of my lecture on that occasion. It is largely drawn, by permission of Oxford University Press, from my forthcoming biography of Herbert Samuel (1st Viscount Samuel of Toxteth and Mount Carmel), to be published in 1991.

One of the central tasks that I set myself, as a biographer of Herbert Samuel, was to identify the sources of his enthusiasm for Zionism. The first practising Jew to hold Cabinet office in Britain (in 1909), he was also the first British politician to raise the subject of British support for Zionism to the level of serious Cabinet discussion soon after the outbreak of the First World War. In trying to understand why Samuel took this surprising initiative in 1914 (surprising given his roots in the Anglo-Jewish banking patriciate which was generally cool or hostile towards Zionism), I was drawn into an examination of his early attitudes towards Jews and Judaism, as well as those of his family. These connexions with the Jewish religion and the Jewish community, much less attenuated in the case of the Samuels than was common among others of his caste, help explain his apparent leap of faith in 1914.

When Chaim Weizmann first met him in December of that year he was amazed to find in Samuel a fellow-Zionist whose only criticism seemed to be that the Zionist movement was not ambitious enough. Samuel's support for the Zionist cause played a crucial part over the following three years in the tortuous negotiations that led to the Balfour Declaration of November 1917. His embrace of Zionism was all the more amazing to contemporaries because his general reputation hitherto had been as a hyper-efficient, colourless workhorse politician of supreme intelligence but little sparkle or imagination. Yet he suddenly espoused a cause that at the beginning of World War I seemed at best a romantic enthusiasm. In the biography I discuss the origins of Samuel's Zionism; here I wish to pose a related question: what sort of Zionist was he?

In Zionist historiography Samuel has generally been characterised, not to say castigated, as a minimalist Zionist. He has been portrayed as an early enthusiast who rapidly lost the faith and betrayed many of the early hopes placed in him by Zionists in Palestine and elsewhere. Samuel's performance as High Commissioner in Palestine between 1920 and 1925 has been seen by many Zionists as a descent from high Zionist principles at the outset to appeasement of Arab nationalist violence, most notably following the riots in Jaffa and elsewhere in May 1921.¹

In the eyes of many Zionists, one of the major blots on Samuel's record in Palestine was his alleged 'partition' of Palestine in 1921-2 when Transjordan (so the argument runs) was cut away from the rest of Palestine. Here I should like to examine Samuel's attitude to partition - first in the period 1917 to 1921, secondly in the renewed crisis in Palestine in the late 1930s, and finally against the background of Samuel's general approach to Zionism.

II

An examination of Samuel's views on the territorial issue in Palestine must begin with his actions during the period between the Balfour Declaration and the determination of Palestine's eastern borders in 1921-2. When General Allenby's army occupied Jerusalem in December 1917 Samuel was out of office, having declined to enter Lloyd George's coalition government a year earlier. Until June 1920 Palestine was ruled by a provisional British military government many of whose officers were hostile to Zionism. Throughout the period of military rule Samuel concerted closely with Weizmann and other Zionist leaders. In London and Paris in 1919 he played a crucial but discreet behind-the-scenes role in urging the merits of Zionism on the peacemakers gathered for the Peace Conference. So great was Weizmann's confidence in him that at one point he suggested that Samuel might succeed him as Chairman of the Zionist Commission, the main Zionist organ in Palestine. Among the issues that Samuel pressed on the British Government on behalf of the Zionists at this time was the importance, in the negotiations with the other powers, of ensuring adequate boundaries for Palestine. In discussions with the Foreign Office Samuel insisted that Transjordan must be included in Palestine.²

When Samuel himself took office as High Commissioner in Palestine on 30 June 1920, the northern and eastern borders of Palestine had not yet been fixed. At the San Remo Conference in April 1920 the French had reluctantly acquiesced in a British mandate over Palestine but there was no agreement on the definition of Palestine's borders either in the north or in the east.

In the north Samuel was immediately presented with a delicate diplomatic problem when the French army, in late July 1920, ruthlessly deposed the Emir Faisal whose enthusiastic but ineffectual supporters had declared him 'King of Syria' the previous March. On 1 August the dethroned monarch sought refuge in Palestine together with his brother Zaid, an entourage of notables, a bodyguard of 17 with rifles, 72 followers with 25 women, five motor cars, one carriage, and 25 horses. A harried governor of Haifa complained that the retainers were 'round the place and in and out like a swarm of bees, and one never knows how many meals are required for lunch or dinner. . . They cannot stay here indefinitely.'³ Samuel received Faisal personally with full honours and, on instructions from London, conveyed a message that the British hoped to be able to reward him in the future.⁴ But he did not encourage the uninvited guest to stay for an extended visit. Shortly afterwards Faisal left for Europe.

Faisal's deposition and the assumption of power in Damascus by the French left a power vacuum in Transjordan, previously under the vague authority of Faisal. Under the Anglo-French wartime agreements, Transjordan had been assigned to the British sphere of influence, and Samuel was anxious lest the French step into the void created there by the collapse of Faisal's authority. On 7 August he therefore

sent a 'personal and private' telegram, marked 'very urgent', to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon:

Forgive my addressing personal message to you and Prime Minister. Am deeply convinced that we shall be making grave error of policy if we do not now include Trans-jordania in Palestine. It will certainly result in anarchy or French control across the border. Either would be disastrous and involve larger garrison here and greater expense. I should never advise Government to embark on military adventure. This is not such. Will Government authorise occupation if there is spontaneous formal and public demand from heads of all tribes and districts concerned?⁵

Samuel's sense of urgency was heightened by what appeared to be French encroachments from the north on the zone assigned by the Sykes-Picot agreement to the British.

Curzon raised the issue in a meeting with French ministers the next day. He protested that the French had summoned sheikhs from as far south as Kerak to go to Damascus. He declared that 'if that were the case he must say at once that the British Government were bound to protest and they might have to send up their troops into the threatened districts'. Philippe Berthelot, Secretary-General of the French Foreign Ministry, responded that he 'was quite certain that there was a mistake'. He granted that 'local French officials on the spot might have been guilty of a certain amount of excess zeal', but he assured Curzon that the French intended to adhere to their wartime agreements.⁶ Armed with this French assurance, Curzon instructed Samuel that there must be no immediate inclusion of Transjordan in Palestine and that no more than a few political officers, without military escorts, might be sent to Transjordan to prevent the territory's 'relapse into a state of anarchy'.⁷

Samuel, however, showed many signs of wishing to go beyond these very limited instructions with a view to extending the mantle of British protection over the disputed area. On 13 August he wrote to his wife, who was still in England: 'A great many sheikhs from across Jordan have come in to see me to urge British occupation as the only means of saving their country from anarchy - picturesque men, many of them in Bedouin dress, bearded and swarthy, clomping across my tiled floor with iron-shod boots. They are an amiable and courteous people. I love them all!'⁸

On 20 August he left Jerusalem with a handful of officers in four cars and crossed over into Transjordan. 'It is an entirely irregular proceeding [he confessed in a letter to his wife the same day], my going outside my own jurisdiction into a country which was Faisal's, and is still being administered by the Damascus Government, now under French influence. But it is equally irregular for a government under French influence to be exercising functions in territory which is agreed to be within the British sphere; and of the two irregularities, I prefer mine.' Joined by a small cavalry

escort, Samuel proceeded on horseback to es-Salt to which he made a processional entry with the cavalry, a small detachment of Palestine mounted police, a few political officers, and a number of bedouin and camp-followers. The assembled notables of the area greeted him warmly and unanimously asked for British protection. The following day, Samuel, in full dress uniform, delivered an address, translated sentence by sentence into Arabic, to a crowd of about six hundred gathered in the courtyard of a Catholic church. Again he was presented with demands for British administration, except from 'one unknown person who asked for an Emir from the Hedjaz'. 'It was all quite spontaneous', he wrote later. * 'I think it will be regarded as rather a striking tribute to the confidence of the people in the British, that I have been able to take over this vast stretch of wild country — roughly 250 miles by 50 — by myself with 50 soldiers and 12 policemen.' On the way back to Jerusalem he was serenaded by bedouin singing anthems celebrating the virtues of the 'Viceroy' of the country.¹⁰

Without authorization from London, indeed contrary to his instructions from the Foreign Office, Samuel had thus, in what amounted to little more than a weekend picnic trip, quadrupled the area of territory under his administration. Curzon cabled him what amounted to reprimand on 26 August: 'His Majesty's Government have no desire to extend their responsibilities in Arab districts and must insist on strict adherence to the very limited assistance which we can offer to a native administration in Trans-Jordan. . . There must be no question of setting up any British administration in that area and all that may be done at present is to send a maximum of four or five political officers with instructions on the lines laid down.'¹¹ This amounted to an official repudiation of Samuel's attempt to enlarge the British empire almost single-handed. But he remained convinced that the River Jordan was, as he put it to Curzon, a 'very bad frontier strategically, economically and politically', and he awaited a convenient moment to give effect to this view notwithstanding the Foreign Office's initial rebuff.¹² In the meantime the area remained in limbo, with only six young British political officers stationed there exercising a strange form of local benevolent dictatorship.¹³

The opportunity for which Samuel was waiting arose a few months later. In the autumn of 1920 Faisal's brother Abdullah began moving north from the Hejaz with armed men, apparently with the intention of attacking the French in the hope of regaining Syria for the Arabs. Abdullah's activities further soured Anglo-French

* Perhaps there was an element of self-delusion in this remark. But there is no reason to doubt the basic accuracy of Samuel's account of the episode. Yet Mary Wilson, the recent historian of these events, although relying on Samuel as her source, refrains altogether from mentioning the Arab requests for British rule. She writes: 'In the confusion and disarray which followed Faysal's expulsion, no one among the inhabitants or the political refugees had sufficient stature or local backing to defy what Samuel had so mildly proposed.'⁹ That is, no doubt, a plausible apologia for the un-nationalist conduct of the inhabitants. But while their speeches may need to be excused (at least before the court of Arab nationalism) it seems over-protective thus to censor them altogether.

relations in the Levant and appeared to Samuel to indicate the need for a definitive settlement concerning Transjordan. In early 1921 control of Palestine policy was shifted from the Foreign Office to the Colonial Office, headed by Churchill who shared not only Samuel's enthusiasm for Zionism but also his imperial zeal. In March 1921, Churchill presided over a conference of British officials in the Middle East, at which an attempt was made to reach broad decisions on a number of pressing issues. It was agreed that Faisal would be installed as King of Iraq and Abdullah as ruler of Transjordan. Samuel and his deputy, Wyndham Deedes, expressed reservations about Abdullah as did T.E. Lawrence, but in the end they agreed to the proposal.¹⁴

The Transjordan settlement, however, had certain strings attached. First, Abdullah, who was to be 'Emir' rather than 'King', was given clearly to understand that he must abjure any attack on the French that might embroil the British in an undesired conflict with their erstwhile allies. Secondly, Transjordan was to be included formally within the area of the League of Nations mandate for Palestine, but with a separate administration subject to the overall supervision of the High Commissioner. Thirdly, the clauses of the mandate that gave effect to the establishment of the Jewish National Home in Palestine were to apply, as hitherto, only to the area west of the Jordan. Following the conference Churchill visited Palestine and stayed with Samuel at Government House. Abdullah was escorted to Jerusalem by Lawrence and inducted into the details of the proposed arrangement which was sweetened by Churchill's promise of a 'stipend' of £5,000.¹⁵

The arrangement, initially contracted for a period of only six months, laid the foundation for one of Britain's most enduring Middle East alliances. Abdullah proved a cheerful and compliant client: he abandoned his threats, though not his long-term designs, against Syria; he co-operated with the British Resident who directed the policy of his little emirate; and he proved amenable to friendly approaches and cash gifts from the Zionists. From time to time he volunteered his services as King of Palestine, but such pretensions were discouraged by the British — at any rate until 1948. Samuel's expansionist aim was thus achieved — but at the price of the exclusion of Transjordan from the Jewish National Home.

This price, regarded as too high by many Zionists, gave rise to the myth that Palestine was 'partitioned' in 1921. In fact, what occurred was a huge addition to the territory of Palestine, not any subtraction. Zionist disappointment at the loss of what they had never been promised and never possessed led to the idea that they had been somehow cheated out of part of their birthright. The legend persists.¹⁶

The animating conception behind Herbert Samuel's actions concerning Transjordan in 1920 and early 1921 was not, as is often suggested, 'appeasement'. Nor did Samuel see the arrangement arrived at in 1921 as contrary to Zionist interests. If anything, I think he saw the attachment of Transjordan to Palestine under the same mandate and under British overlordship as offering, in the long run, a vast area for potential Arab and even Jewish settlement that could help relieve

pressure in Palestine west of the Jordan River. As we shall see in a moment, this idea, half-formed in his mind at the start of the 1920s became much more clear-cut in his thinking in later years.

III

Although Samuel did not, in truth, preside over what may properly be called a territorial partition of Palestine in the early 1920s, he was responsible for initiating a profound and significant development which does merit the word 'partition' — not a territorial but an institutional partition between Jewish and Arab political communities in Palestine.¹⁷

The full impact of this internal, institutional partition became visible only gradually after Samuel's departure from Palestine in 1925. For the next decade Samuel avoided interference in Palestinian politics. But he was kept closely informed by his son Edwin who served as an official in the Palestinian Government.

With the huge increase in Jewish immigration to Palestine from Poland and Germany between 1932 and 1935 and with the outbreak in 1936 of a countrywide Arab revolt, there could be no denying the reality of the schism in the body politic of Palestine. It was at that point that Samuel re-entered the arena. As the debate moved increasingly towards discussion of the possibility of partition, Samuel addressed this issue directly. His reaction recalled his earlier approach to this question.

In September 1936 he cautiously intervened behind the scenes to try to effect an end to the disturbances and to promote Arab-Jewish agreement on constitutional changes. In collaboration with Earl Winterton, Conservative MP for Horsham and Worthing, who had contacts with Arab leaders, Samuel drew up a plan for an Arab-Jewish settlement that was presented to Nuri Pasha as-Sa'id, Foreign Minister and former Prime Minister of Iraq, who had previously been involved in an abortive attempt to mediate between the Palestinian Arabs and the Zionists.¹⁸

The scheme proposed an Arab-Jewish agreement 'covering the period to the end of 1950'. During that period Jewish immigration was to be limited voluntarily so that the Jewish proportion of the population should not exceed forty percent. Jewish land purchases would be limited in specified areas of the country. Trans-Jordan would be opened to settlement by both Jews and Palestinian Arabs, although the National Home provisions of the mandate would not be extended to include Transjordan. A legislative council would be established consisting of one third Jewish, one third Arab and one third Government-nominated members. Other elements in the draft included substantial expenditure on Arab agriculture and education, reaffirmation of the rights of Muslims in their holy places, and the creation of a customs union for the whole of the fertile crescent including Palestine.¹⁹

Samuel appears to have envisaged his intervention as a reprise, in a different context, of his performance in ending the British General Strike in 1926. As on that occasion he coordinated his activity closely with the British Government while insisting that he was operating as a private individual.²⁰ This time, however, the Government was privately less interested in Samuel's endeavours. A Royal Commission under Earl Peel had recently been appointed to examine the Palestine question, and the Government did not want its inquiry to be pre-empted by any arrangement between Samuel and Nuri. Moreover, whereas in 1926 Samuel could plausibly present himself as an independent and neutral figure, his credentials in this instance were less acceptable to all parties. On the one hand, the Government feared that Samuel, as a former High Commissioner, might be regarded as in some sense an official representative. On the other, in spite of his studious impartiality as governor of Palestine, he was regarded 'as a Jewish leader in the eyes of many' — as the Colonial Secretary, William Ormsby-Gore, pointed out in a letter to Samuel.²¹ In discussions at the Colonial Office Samuel agreed that his conversations with Nuri should be tentative in nature. In spite of the unofficial character of his intervention, he undertook to conform to the 'instructions' of the Colonial Secretary. He added that he had no doubt that he would meet with 'great opposition' from the Zionists 'but that would not deter him from putting his proposals forward as, taking the Jewish community as a whole, he knew that in many directions he would get strong support.'²²

Samuel had already informed Weizmann confidentially of his proposals and received an unenthusiastic response. The Zionist leader warned Samuel that the Palestinian Jews would 'feel bitterly aggrieved' if they were presented with 'anything which looks like a *fait accompli*'.²³ Samuel sought to reassure Weizmann that he 'certainly had no thought of endeavouring to come to an agreement with the Arabs, and presenting such an agreement to the Zionists to be accepted or rejected.' He explained that he intended that 'both sides should be approached simultaneously and on equal footing.' But the first requisite was to ascertain 'whether Nuri Pasha will concur in such proposals as those for which Lord Winterton and I have agreed to take responsibility, and be willing to act as intermediary with the Arab leaders in Palestine.'²⁴ After further discussion with Weizmann and with the Colonial Office, Samuel amended his draft, deleting the reference to 1950 and to a 40 percent ceiling on the Jewish population.²⁵ At the same time Samuel gave an undertaking to the Government that he would act only as a private individual. He told the Colonial Office that the Zionists 'had approached his proposals in a very reasonable spirit.'²⁶

Armed with these equivocal responses from the Government and the Zionists, Samuel proceeded to Paris, where he and Winterton held two meetings with Nuri al-Sa'id on 19 September 1936. Nuri immediately made it clear that he did not believe the draft scheme 'would be acceptable to the Arabs of Palestine'. The proposal for a legislative council in which Jewish and Arab delegates were equal in numbers 'would be quite unacceptable'. The projected colonization of Trans-

Jordan 'would be considered likely to work out very much in favour of the Jews, who would prove the real beneficiaries'. A customs union was all very well, but if Palestine were included 'again the chief beneficiaries would be the Jewish industrialists there'.²⁷ Samuel does not appear to have been greatly impressed by Nuri. He commented later, in a private letter to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Sir Arthur Wauchop: 'The impression left upon my mind by our conversation with Nuri was that he was more concerned to promote a political union between Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Iraq, than to act as an impartial friend trying merely to help to find a way out of a difficult situation.'²⁸ Perhaps Samuel was naive to expect that the Iraqi Foreign Minister could possibly be 'an impartial friend'. In any event, the failure of the meeting in Paris brought Samuel's intervention to an abrupt halt.

Although the episode had no practical result, it opened a fissure between Samuel and the Zionists. After the failure of Samuel's talks with Nuri, Weizmann told Ormsby-Gore that Samuel was 'not *of it* as we are' and 'might even prove harmful'.²⁹ The breach widened after the publication in June 1937 of the report of the Palestine Royal Commission, which recommended the termination of the mandate and the partition of Palestine into sovereign Jewish and Arab states (the latter to be joined to Transjordan), with a residual British mandatory enclave. Samuel got wind of the partition proposals in the spring of 1937 and voiced his reservations at the Colonial Office. He told his son Edwin: 'I do not like the partition project, but would not refuse consideration of any proposal if it were likely to create a good situation for the future. I should prefer the other plan, of a limitation of Jewish immigration during a period of years, the opening of T[rans]-J[ordan] to Arab and Jewish settlement, and an active phil-Arab administrative policy in Palestine.'³⁰

In June 1937, before the Peel Report was published, Samuel wrote to Ormsby-Gore, warning that if, as was 'widely believed', the report recommended partition, the proposal would probably 'be received with the most vehement opposition from both sides.' He urged the Government not to commit itself to partition irrevocably without providing an opportunity for further public debate. He made it clear that he opposed partition 'on merits':

If Governments on both sides of the long and intricate frontier were agreed in making the system work, it is just possible that might prove practicable administratively. But if the Arabs, having opposed partition now, were to make difficulties for the Jewish State, how could law and order be enforced? When any political terrorist, or any ordinary criminal, who committed an offence in one territory, could immediately move across the frontier in a motor along a high-road or on a donkey along a mountain path, into the jurisdiction of another police authority, who might be indifferent and unhelpful, how could Palestine be prevented from becoming a worse - and a far worse - scene of crime than now?³¹

Samuel's ability to influence policy was enhanced by his elevation to a viscountcy in the 1937 coronation honours. He took his seat in the House of Lords in time to participate in the debate there on the Peel Report on 20 July 1937. His speech against partition was regarded as one of the most formidable of his political life and significantly influenced parliamentary and official opinion. Samuel agreed with the Commission's conclusion that a deadlock had been reached in Palestine and that a new policy was required. But he rejected an imposed solution: 'I can see no reason why a British Government should engage in a policy of repression and coercion. It seems to me a monstrous thing that we should be required to lock up a whole division of our small Army in Palestine, with the possibility that in any world crisis we might have to lock up even two or three divisions.' He warned against the 'delusion . . . that all that is necessary is to remove the Mufti* and that then all will be well.' He compared that with the calls to 'Arrest Gandhi' and 'Deport Zaghul' which had failed to dispose of nationalism in India and Egypt.

Ruthlessly dissecting the Peel Commission's central proposal, Samuel drew attention to the serious obstacles to partition: the fact that under the Commission's proposed boundaries one third of the Jews of Palestine, including those of Jerusalem, would find themselves outside the Jewish state; the fact that the proposed Jewish state, within the boundaries set by the Commission, would contain 225,000 Arabs as against 258,000 Jews; the fact that the Jewish state, however the boundaries might be drawn, would inevitably contain a large Arab minority.

He condemned the Commission's suggestion that these problems might be resolved by 'a removal of population, or what is called, strangely enough, an exchange of population'. He pointed out that the so-called 'exchange of population' between Greece and Turkey had taken place in the wake of a savagely fought war and had been far from voluntary. As for the Commission's indication that, in the last resort, it might be necessary to remove Arabs by compulsion, Samuel put his finger on a logical contradiction: 'Yet in another part of the Report there is reference to the need of guarantees for the protection of minorities in each State. Protection of minorities! Will not these be minorities, and is the form protection is to take that they should be compulsorily uprooted and put elsewhere?'

He poured scorn on the specific division of Palestine outlined in the report: 'The Commission seem to have gone to the Versailles Treaty and picked out all the most difficult and awkward provisions it contained. They have put a Saar, a Polish Corridor and half a dozen Danzigs and Memels into a country the size of Wales.' But his criticism went beyond any particular scheme and to the heart of the question: 'The noble Earl, Lord Peel, said that at all events this plan would free the Jews from

*Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who had been appointed to the position by Samuel in 1921, headed the Arab Higher Committee, the coordinating group of Arab nationalist parties. He was widely regarded as the leader of the Arab revolt and there were many calls for his arrest. In October 1937, fearing detention, the Mufti fled from Palestine to Lebanon (later to Iraq and thence to Berlin).

the watchful hostility of neighbouring Arab States. Will not these Arab States be watching day by day what is happening to their *irredenta*, the Arabs living in the Jewish State, making grievances of every small point?’

In the final and most controversial section of his speech Samuel put forward his own alternative recommendations:

It appears to me that the Jews must be ready to make a sacrifice. They must reassure the Arabs. We cannot go on without it. Therefore they must consent to a limitation of immigration other than on the principle of economic absorptive capacity. They must accept the principle proposed by the Commission that political considerations must be brought in. I see no reason why the figure of 12,000 should be the one adopted.* . . . The Jews might well be asked to consent to an agreement covering a period of years - it might well be a substantial period - and during that period the Jewish population of Palestine should not exceed a given percentage of the population, perhaps 40 percent or whatever might be agreed upon, but that is the figure I have in mind.

Secondly, the Jews who, he said, had ‘never been sufficiently aware or sufficiently understanding’ of the underlying loyalty of the Arabs of Palestine to the Arabism that was once again in the ascendant, would have to ‘recognise the reality of Arab national aspirations.’ That required the creation, with British assistance, and ‘within the assent of France and the full co-operation of the Zionist movement’ of an ‘Arab Confederation’ that might eventually include all the countries of the Fertile Crescent.

Samuel’s third and fourth proposals followed the lines of the scheme he had presented to Nuri al-Sa’id the previous year: the development of Transjordan on the basis of settlement by both Jews and Arabs; and guarantees for the Muslim holy places. His proposals for the government of the country, however, varied from his earlier suggestion for a Legislative Council. He now urged ‘that within Palestine there ought to be two communal organizations, Jewish and Arab. The Jewish one already exists and an Arab one should be created. Those organisations should have large powers, should be representative bodies.’ Significant administrative functions should be delegated to these communal authorities and they should draw on public revenues. In addition, there should be a non-elected Federal Council composed of Jews, Arabs, and British officials to advise the mandatory government³²

Samuel’s prescription was notable for the continuity of view that it disclosed not merely with his proposals of a year earlier but with his policies of the early 1920s.

*Although the Peel Commission had gone beyond its terms of reference by suggesting that the mandate be terminated, it had also recommended that if the mandate were continued a ‘political high level’ for Jewish immigration should be set by the mandatory government. The suggested upper limit was 12,000 per annum for at least the next five years.

Then as now his first reaction to serious Arab opposition had been to attempt to limit Jewish immigration. His idea of a Palestine that would fit naturally into a large regional confederation had first been set forth in a letter to the then Foreign Secretary, Curzon, immediately after his first visit to Palestine in the spring of 1920.³³ He renewed the suggestion in December 1922. On each occasion it was rejected by Curzon.³⁴ On the face of things, Samuel's proposal for a framework of communal self-government in Palestine was new. In essence, however, it indicated a recognition by Samuel of the system of functional partition that he himself had inaugurated in Palestine. He had not wanted it. He struggled against it. But his repeated efforts to create a unified political community in Palestine had utterly failed. That was why he could approve the Peel Commission's diagnosis that the mandatory government had lost all legitimacy, while contesting its prescription of drastic surgery.

Samuel's speech was admired in Whitehall and Westminster; but it earned him bitter criticism from most Zionists, whose anger was aroused particularly by the suggestion of a ceiling on Jewish immigration. No matter that it was to be only a temporary ceiling. No matter that his proposal would in fact have permitted a much larger volume of immediate immigration than the Peel Report's 'political high level' of 12,000. No matter that Samuel's proposal for the opening of Transjordan to Jewish immigration, which he called 'an essential part of the plan'³⁵, would have permitted further immigration beyond the limit proposed for western Palestine. Any limitation other than on economic grounds was seen by the Zionists as unacceptable, particularly in the light of the huge pressure for emigration from central and eastern Europe. In any case, Jewish Agency economists repeatedly argued that no valid economic ground for limitation existed. The *Va'ad Leumi* (National Council) of Palestinian Jewry sent Samuel a telegram of protest and this was echoed by most, though not all, of the Jewish press in Palestine and elsewhere.³⁶ Samuel, who only a year earlier had won the plaudits of the Zionists for his work on behalf of German-Jewish refugees, now found that the wrath of Judah descended on his head. It was a strange fate for the man who had first proposed the creation of a Jewish state to a British Cabinet.

Samuel's separation from the mainstream Zionists, hitherto tacit, now explicit, was widely noted, and reduced whatever capacity he might have retained to mediate in the conflict. In a private letter to Wauchope, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office, Sir Cosmo Parkinson, commented: 'I thought, reading the debate, that Lord Samuel's criticism of the Commission's proposals was very well done, but, naturally, when he came to put forward a constructive alternative, he himself becomes open to a good deal of criticism. Anyway, I doubt, from what I hear, whether there is any Jew more disliked by Jews as a whole at the moment than Lord Samuel.'³⁷ Weizmann wrote to the Liberal leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair a little later: 'I am extremely sorry that Lord Samuel should have taken the line he did. I have not yet met one important Jew or Jewish group who share his view, and I am

sure he is quite wrong.³⁸ Samuel, however, persisted in his opposition to partition which he voiced again in an article in *Foreign Affairs* in October 1937.³⁹ One notable source of support was Churchill, who wrote to him in October 1937: 'The more I think of this Partition Scheme, the more sure I am it is folly.'⁴⁰

In early March 1938, on his homeward journey from a trip to India, Samuel paid a short visit to Palestine, where he discussed alternatives to partition with Ragheb Nashashibi, A. S. Khalidi, and other Arab and Jewish leaders. In Egypt he met Auni Abd al-Hadi, a prominent Palestinian Arab nationalist and discussed with him the 'forty-ten' formula: a forty percent Jewish population limit over ten years. On his return to London he wrote to Ormsby-Gore reporting his impressions. He conceded that 'a large part of the Jewish population of Palestine, especially among the younger generation, would prefer Partition'. He stressed that 'in no circumstances would any section of the Jews accept a formula which limited the Jewish population of Palestine to a minority for all time.' Auni Abd al-Hadi had told Samuel 'without hesitation that the Arabs would accept the forty percent proposal, if it was not for a period of years but as a final settlement.' Samuel replied 'that it would be quite impossible to obtain Jewish acceptance of that. . . Both sides must make some sacrifice if there is to be any agreement at all; the Jews have to accept a limitation on immigration other than economic, which will be a bitter pill for them to swallow; the Arabs must realize that immigration cannot be stopped, and accept a review after an interval of years.'

Samuel estimated that his proposal would allow for an average Jewish immigration of 30,000 per annum over a ten year period - 'apart from the results of the proposed opening of Trans-Jordan'.⁴¹ The result would have been a doubling of the Jewish population to 800,000 within a decade. Samuel's 'forty-ten formula' was broached to the Zionists later that year by Ormsby-Gore's successor at the Colonial Office, Malcolm MacDonald, but Weizmann replied that it 'would meet with determined opposition from the Jews'.⁴²

Partition was rejected by the Arabs and accepted only with reservations and only as a basis for negotiation by the Zionists. But the British Government, which had initially accepted the idea in principle, gradually withdrew from it. It was persuaded to do so more by the worsening international situation in late 1938 than by the reasoned arguments of Samuel, Churchill and others - although these, no doubt, afforded the Government a convenient cover for its reversal. With the looming possibility of war in Europe, the Government determined that it could not afford any policy in Palestine that would require a heavy commitment of British troops. Partition, which would require large British forces if it were to be imposed (there was, of course, no prospect of its implementation by agreement), was therefore ruled out by the end of 1938. Instead the Government moved towards a new policy which went much further than Samuel's proposals towards appeasing Arab nationalism.

A further speech by Samuel, in December 1938, in which he returned to his 'forty-ten' formula, aroused renewed grievance among Zionists. Their antagonism was

inflamed especially by a passage in which Samuel lectured them on their attitude to the Arabs. He dismissed the widespread Zionist notions that Arab opposition to Zionism 'was really due to a small group of wealthy landowners', or was stirred up by agents of European powers, or was the work of the Mufti, or was due to the weakness or pro-Arab sympathies of British officials: 'There is possibly some fraction of truth in all these allegations, but they leave out the factor which is more important than any of them - namely, that the Arab national movement exists, that it is a reality and not an artificial creation fostered by British timidity and foreign intervention. To think that is a mere delusion.'⁴³ The indignation among Jews in Palestine led to the removal from walls of popular tapestries depicting him in his High Commissioner's uniform and the defacing of a street sign in Tel Aviv bearing his name.* Samuel responded with an open letter to 'a correspondent in Palestine' (his son Edwin) in which he again defended his appointment of the Mufti in 1921 while denying that he had 'engaged in a defence of the Mufti'. He asserted that he remained deeply concerned to promote the cause that he had first advocated to the Cabinet in 1915 but added: 'I feel distressed at the failure shown in many quarters to recognize the gravity of the present situation or to appreciate its realities.'⁴⁴

As the position of Jews in Germany and elsewhere in Europe deteriorated, Samuel felt growing despair at the impasse in Palestine and fear lest the 'whole foundation of the J[eewish] N[ational] H[ome]' collapse.⁴⁵ He ascribed much of the blame to the Zionists, writing to his son Edwin in January 1939 that Zionist policy

in recent years seems to me to be heading for certain and irreparable disaster; possibly even to a fate for the Jews in the Middle East such as has fallen upon the Armenians. I feel bound to do what little I can to avert such a catastrophe. What I have said publicly is but a small part of what I feel.⁴⁶

In May 1939 the full extent of the Government's tergiversation was revealed when it issued a White Paper on Palestine that rejected partition and placed a limit on Jewish immigration of 75,000 over the next five years after which it would cease altogether unless the Arabs of Palestine permitted it to continue - a somewhat remote contingency. The Zionists were outraged and appealed through Lord Reading (the second Lord Reading, son of Rufus Isaacs) to Samuel to intercede with the Government.⁴⁷ Samuel visited MacDonald and argued strongly that the White Paper policy 'was wrong and was inconsistent with the purpose of the mandate and the Balfour Declaration.'⁴⁸ He expressed his opposition in the press and in Parliament where he complained that the policy would 'strangle the Jewish National Home'.⁴⁹ But whereas Samuel's criticism of partition had been useful to the Government in its retreat from the Peel Report, his condemnation of the White Paper, like that by

*Fifty years later his name was defaced in a different manner when 'Herbie Sam's' discothèque opened on the same beachfront promenade in Tel Aviv.

Churchill, was ignored. The White Paper remained Government policy throughout the next six years. Thousands of Jewish refugees managed to evade British naval patrols to reach Palestine as illegal immigrants during 1939 and 1940. Many more were prevented from leaving Europe as a result of the zealous implementation of the policy by the British Government. Samuel's wartime attempts to persuade the Government to mitigate the stringency of its restrictions on Jewish refugee immigration to both Palestine and Britain were similarly unavailing.⁵⁰

IV

In March 1948 Samuel made one further intervention in the Palestine problem as it moved towards its *dénouement*. He still opposed partition and submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister, the United Nations Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, and to Weizmann, proposing an alternative policy reminiscent of his proposals of 1937: communal autonomy, limited Jewish immigration (150,000 in the first two years, 60,000 thereafter), and the transfer of mandatory authority to the U.N. Trusteeship Council.⁵¹ But events in Palestine had now spun far beyond his or any outsiders' control.

After the State of Israel was established, he recognized that, as he put it in the House of Lords in September 1948: 'Events have marched beyond the kind of bi-national State that I had been hoping for ever since I was myself High Commissioner in that country.' In the same speech he urged the Government to grant Israel recognition, which Britain, unlike the USA and the USSR, had withheld.⁵² When the Israeli Legation in London opened in November 1948, Samuel signalled his support by being the first to sign the Visitor's Book. He visited Israel in April 1949 and was present with the Israeli commander, Yigal Allon, at a Bedouin feast in the northern Negev to celebrate the withdrawal of Egyptian troops from the area.⁵³ The Israeli Foreign Ministry made special arrangements for him to cross the lines to visit his old friend Abdullah at his palace at Shuneh.⁵⁴

Samuel was impressed by what he saw in Israel. His old differences with the Zionists now faded into the background. Both his eldest son and his eldest grandson settled permanently in Israel, and in his final years Samuel warmly supported Israeli causes, notably the Hebrew University with which he had been associated since its inception. A chair in political science, currently occupied by Professor Shlomo Avineri, was named there in his honour.

V

As I mentioned at the outset, Herbert Samuel has often been portrayed as a milk-and-water Zionist. He was not that. Nothing illustrates this point more clearly than his attitude towards the central and recurring Zionist argument over partition.

What Samuel wanted was a Palestine large enough to accommodate a steady flow of Jewish immigration. The pace of that immigration must, he believed, be limited by Arab opposition: limited, but not halted, because Samuel recognized and himself favoured the long-term Zionist objective of a Jewish majority in Palestine. Such a majority might take decades or even generations to attain. Its attainment would inevitably be reflected in a Jewish political preponderance and a Jewish state. But even with a Jewish majority, he felt, a condition for the success of a Jewish state must be some provision for the political aspirations for the Arabs. Here Transjordan might play a vital role as an outlet not for forcible transfer of the Palestinian Arabs but for their peaceful settlement on a voluntary basis. Far from wanting to cut Transjordan off from Palestine, it was Samuel who, almost singlehandedly, annexed it to the British mandate. His motive for doing that was precisely that he foresaw that Transjordan, with its vast unsettled spaces, could have an important bearing on the future of Palestine.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Samuel should be categorised as a Zionist 'maximalist'. He mistrusted what he saw as the maximalists' attempts to find short cuts in history. And he abhorred the violence that accompanied their search for quick solutions. As early as 1915 he had eerily prophesied that such attempts to speed up the motor of history would result in 'a series of squalid conflicts with the Arab population' which, he feared, might delay for generations the realization of Zionist goals. He insisted on the reality of the challenge posed by Arab nationalism. It could not be wished away. It could not be bribed away, as many Zionists imagined. Nor could it be cut away by means of partition. Rather than what he saw as a crude amputation, rather than lopping off a Jewish Palestine from the rest of the Middle East, Samuel's consistent aim was the incorporation of Palestine together with Transjordan in a regional framework that might afford ample space for the realization of both Jewish and Arab nationalisms. In this sense, his view of the ultimate objective of Zionism was of a piece from the earliest days of his involvement in 1914 right through until 1948 and beyond.

NOTES

¹ For a full discussion of Samuel's career in Palestine see my *The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict, 1917-1929* first published by the Royal Historical Society, London 1978; a second, revised edition will be published shortly by Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

² Samuel to Foreign Office, 5 June 1919, P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice] FO 371/4181/38; see also Weizmann to Samuel, 2 June 1919 (copy), C[entral] Z[ionist] A[rchives] Z4/15445.

³ Quoted in Sir Ronald Storrs, *Orientalisms* ('Definitive edition', London 1943), 431.

⁴ See Mary C. Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Transjordan* (Cambridge, 1987), 43.

⁵ Samuel to Curzon, 7 Aug. 1920, R. Butler & J.P.T. Bury, eds., *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, First series, vol. XIII (London, 1963), 334.

⁶ R. Butler and J.P.T. Bury, eds., *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, First series, vol. VIII (London, 1958), 716 ff.

⁷ Curzon to Samuel, 11 Aug. 1920, Butler & Bury, *Documents*, First series, vol. XIII, 337.

⁸ Samuel to Beatrice Samuel, 13 Aug. 1920, I[srael] S[tate] A[rchives] 100/41.

⁹ Wilson, *Abdullah*, 47.

¹⁰ Samuel to Beatrice Samuel, 20 Aug. 1920, ISA 100/41.

¹¹ Curzon to Samuel, 26 Aug. 1920, Butler & Bury, *Documents*, First series, vol. XIII, 344.

¹² Samuel to Curzon, 7 Aug. 1920, Butler & Bury, *Documents*, First series, vol. XIII, 333; see also Samuel to Lloyd George, 28 Oct. 1920, H[ouse of] L[ords] R[ecord] O[ffice], Lloyd George papers F/44/8/3.

¹³ See Sir Alec Seath Kirkbride, *A Crackle of Thorns: Experiences in the Middle East* (London, 1956), 18-28.

¹⁴ Wilson, *Abdullah*, 48-50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶ See e.g. Yitzhak Gil-Har, 'The Separation of Trans-Jordan from Palestine' in Lee I. Levine, ed., *The Jerusalem Cathedra*, vol. I (Jerusalem, 1981), 284-313; and *Jerusalem Post*, 28 & 30 June 1983. For an authoritative analysis of the question, see A.P. Alsberg, 'The Delimitation of the Eastern Border of Palestine', *Zionism*, 3 (1973), 229-46.

¹⁷ See my *British in Palestine*, esp. ch. 6.

¹⁸ See Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion, 1929-1939* (London, 1977), 204-11.

¹⁹ See text of proposals in Neil Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. II: *Arab-Zionist Negotiations and the End of the Mandate* (London, 1986), 224-5.

- ²⁰ See Samuel to Winterton, 10 & 11 Sept. 1936 (copies), ISA 100/18.
- ²¹ Ormsby-Gore to Samuel, 15 Sept. 1936, ISA 100/18.
- ²² Minute by Sir John Maffey, 16 Sept. 1936, PRO CO 967/92.
- ²³ Weizmann to Samuel, 14 Sept. 1936 (copy), W[eizmann] A[rchives].
- ²⁴ Samuel to Weizmann, 15 Sept. 1936, WA.
- ²⁵ 'Third and final draft of proposals', [September 1936], ISA 100/18.
- ²⁶ Minute by Sir John Maffey, 18 Sept. 1936, PRO CO 936/92.
- ²⁷ Memorandum by Samuel, 20 Sept. 1936, PRO CO 967/92; see also Nuri al-Sa'id's version of the conversation in Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. II, 224-9.
- ²⁸ Samuel to Wauchope, 23 Aug. 1936 (copy), HLRO, Samuel papers B/13/186.
- ²⁹ Minute by Maffey, 30 Sept. 1936, PRO CO 967/92.
- ³⁰ Samuel to Edwin Samuel, 9 April 1937, ISA 100/62.
- ³¹ Samuel to Ormsby-Gore, 15 June 1937 (copy), ISA 100/19.
- ³² *H.L. Deb.* 5 s., vol. 106 (20 July 1937), cols. 629-45.
- ³³ Samuel to Curzon, 2 April 1920 (copy), ISA 100/6.
- ³⁴ See my *British in Palestine*, first ed., 62, 80, 157-8.
- ³⁵ Samuel to Dr Maximilian Landau (Berlin), 14 Sept. 1937 (copy), ISA 100/19.
- ³⁶ *Va'ad Leumi* to Samuel, 28 July 1937, ISA 100/19.
- ³⁷ Parkinson to Wauchope, 6 Aug. 1937, PRO CO 967/93.
- ³⁸ Weizmann to Sinclair, 19 Oct. 1937 (copy), WA.
- ³⁹ Herbert Samuel, 'Alternatives to Partition', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 (Oct. 1937), 143-55.
- ⁴⁰ Churchill to Samuel, 3 Oct. 1937, ISA 100/19; see also Samuel to Churchill, 6 Oct. 1937, in Martin Gilbert, ed., *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. V, Companion, Part 3, *The Coming of War 1936-1939* (London, 1982), 780-1.
- ⁴¹ Samuel to Ormsby-Gore, 7 April 1938, ISA 100/20; see also Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. 2, 89-92.
- ⁴² Weizmann to MacDonald, 12 July 1938, WA.
- ⁴³ *H.L. Deb.* 5s., vol. 111 (8 Dec. 1938), cols. 420-31.
- ⁴⁴ Statement by Samuel, [24] Dec. 1938, ISA 100/63.
- ⁴⁵ Samuel to Edwin Samuel, 17 Dec. 1938, ISA 100/63.
- ⁴⁶ Samuel to Edwin Samuel, 15 Jan. 1939, ISA 100/64.
- ⁴⁷ Reading to Samuel, 9 May 1939, HLRO, Samuel papers B/13/240.
- ⁴⁸ Memorandum by Samuel, 15 May 1939, ISA 100/21.
- ⁴⁹ *Sunday Times*, 21 May 1939; *Contemporary Review*, 156 (July 1939), 8-17; *H.L. Deb.* 5s., vol. 113 (23 May 1939), cols. 97-110.
- ⁵⁰ See my *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945* (London, 1979), 176, 204; also my 'Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Great Britain during the Nazi Era', in Randolph Braham, ed., *Jewish Leadership During the Nazi Era: Patterns of Behaviour in the Free World* (New York, 1985), 40.
- ⁵¹ Memorandum by Samuel, April 1948, WA; Samuel to Clement Attlee, 15 March 1948 (copy), ISA 100/26; Samuel to Trygve Lie, 15 March 1948 (copy),

ibid.; Samuel to Weizmann, 15 March 1948 (copy), ibid.

⁵² *H.L. Deb.* 5s., vol. 158 (24 Sept. 1948), cols. 249-57.

⁵³ *New York Times*, 4 May 1949.

⁵⁴ Walter Eytan (Israeli Foreign Ministry) to Samuel, 15 April 1949, ISA 100/27; *Palestine Post*, 21 April 1949.

