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Bitter Roots: The Bases of Present Conflicts in the Middle East

Some months ago, at the invitation of the NSA/CSS International Affairs Institute, Mr. J. Rives Childs, a former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia, spoke in the Friedman Auditorium about his observations of events in the Middle East. The views he expressed regarding the origin and nature of conflict in that area aroused a great deal of controversy and sparked many a lively debate among those who attended. A shortened version of Mr. Childs' address is reproduced here for those who missed his talk and for those who might wish to examine his views more carefully.

The Arab-Israeli problem presents one striking dilemma for those who would weigh the scales between the two parties. It is that both have suffered appalling wrongs: the Jews at the hands of the Nazis, which impelled their search for a safe haven; the Arabs from their dispossession, to make way in Palestine for the Jews, to right a wrong for which they had no responsibility. Nor let us overlook the fact that for the Arabs Jerusalem is as much a sacred city as it is for Jews and Christians.

As a Foreign Service officer I spent the best part of my life in the Middle East. When asked to speak to you, it seemed to me I could not do better than present certain representative experiences I had in two of the most crucial and neuralgic areas of the Near East, namely Palestine, from which Israel was carved, and Saudi Arabia.

My first post in the Foreign Service, in which I spent thirty years, was Jerusalem. When I went there in 1923 as American Consul, Palestine was governed, after liberation from Turkey, under the League of Nations as a mandated territory by a British High Commissioner. It may come as a surprise to most of you that, when the British were charged with responsibility for the administration of Palestine in 1922, the Jewish population was only about seven per cent, the Arabs close to 90 per cent.

To form an adequate appreciation of why there has been such persistent turmoil in the Near East since the termination of the First World War, one must review, if only briefly, events from that period. We shall find that the present deeply disturbed situation had its inception almost *in toto* from the so-called Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the subsequent creation in 1948 of the State of Israel.

The Balfour Declaration was a British wartime measure designed to rally world Jewry for the Allied cause. Britain was fighting with its back to the wall and there was no time for searching scrutiny of legal niceties. The Declaration was a grab-bag into which almost anything could be read and as such was to have most fateful consequences. It also expressly excluded certain specific contingencies which nevertheless came in the end to eventuate by supreme irony of the gods.

Let us examine this fateful instrument.

First of all, let us note that there is no mention in it of a Jewish State. All it contemplated was the establishment in Palestine of a *National Home* for the Jewish people.

There was an all-important limiting provision that, in its fulfillment, "*nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine,*" a strangely elliptical reference to the Arab population comprising no less than 90 per cent of the total population of Palestine. In short, it was a provision, if any attention was to be paid to it, which rendered completely nugatory the Declaration itself. It was the sort of double-talk which from its very inception characterized the Balfour Declaration and the Jewish National Home in Palestine. Bluntly, it constituted nothing less than a most cruel deception.

From the establishment of the British mandate over Palestine in 1922 until its termination in 1948, with creation of the State of Israel, British policy oscillated between one or the other of the two incompatible provisions of the Balfour Declaration, depending on the shifting international situation and the degree of pressure brought to bear by the United States on the British under American Zionist pressure.

Note that the primary objective of the Balfour Declaration was the promotion of Jewish immigration into Palestine. Yet this was not realizable without prejudice to the rights of the preponderant Arab population.

It is important to bear in mind that not all Jews are Zionists. Rabbi Judah Magnes, a distinguished Jewish-American, head of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem until his death in 1948, urged a binational State for Palestine envisaging an Arab-Jewish partnership. Had his counsel prevailed there would be peace in the Near East. It is significant that even today voices are not wanting in continued support of this solution.

Zionist pressure on the United States government manifested itself as early as 1917 when President Wilson's endorsement of a Jewish National Home in Palestine was obtained. There were not lacking eminent American Jews who actively opposed Zionism for one reason, amongst others, that it would distract American Jews from a full allegiance to American citizenship and its obligations.

With the end of World War I a slow but steady trickle of Jewish immigration into Palestine passed almost unperceived. However, stimulation of an active anti-Semitic movement in Germany under mounting Nazi provocation in the 1920s resulted in an increased flow of Jews into Palestine with a counter reaction on the part of Arabs, culminating in civil disturbances. These became in time such that the British Government was persuaded, in the interest of the maintenance of law and order, to introduce checks on Jewish immigration into Palestine.

Reaction of American Zionists was swift and quite unprecedented. The time was 1938, when I was on duty in the State Department, charged, amongst other duties, with serving as desk officer for Palestine.

Within a few days we were submerged by some 100,000 letters and telegrams from Zionists and Zionist sympathizers appealing for United States intervention with the British Government in opposition to any reduction of Jewish immigration into Palestine. Rarely in American history had there been such political action to influence public policy. Shortly thereafter, Secretary of State Hull summoned a conference on the issue. The group included Under Secretary of State Sumner Wells, Assistant Secretary Adolph Berle, the Legal Advisor Green Hackworth, Chiefs of the Near Eastern and European Divisions and a dozen or more others.

In this distinguished company I was the most junior officer present; accordingly I took my seat in as inconspicuous a place as I could find. I had never had occasion to exchange a word with Mr. Hull and had no reason to believe he knew me. However, when the discussion was approaching its end, to my surprise the

Secretary suddenly pointed a finger in my direction. "Can you think," he asked, "of any inducement that could be offered the Arab population of Palestine to persuade them to give up their homes and lands to make way for Jewish immigrants?"

I had no need to weigh my reply and I answered at once in the negative. He made no effort to challenge it, but followed it at once with another question: "Why not?"

I could not ponder my reply but answered it after only an instant of reflection: "Because of the attachment of every man for his own hearthstone."

I have never since been able to think of a better response, but I have often regretted that I did not have the courage to have preceded my reply by inquiring of the Secretary if he could think of any inducement which might be offered the native population of Tennessee to move out of that State to make way for foreign newcomers.

Press reports telegraphed from the United States to the Middle East of the political pressure brought to bear upon the White House gave rise to a quite new development in the Arab world, namely violent anti-American manifestations, as reported by the Associated Press from Jerusalem, on November 1, 1938. Until then the United States had enjoyed in Palestine, Egypt, Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, as well as throughout the Moslem world, a highly privileged place, enhanced by the presence in Cairo of an American University and a long-respected American College in Beirut. We were looked up to as the most disinterested of all foreign powers. For one who had gone out as early as 1919 to the Near East, as I had, in the heyday of our universal esteem, it was tragic to observe, from the 1930s, its progressive decline until today only the shattered shreds of it wave tattered in the breeze.

An attempt by the British Government to organize a conference in London to work out a mutual agreement between Arabs and Jews having proved fruitless, it issued a declaration on May 17, 1939, fixing unilaterally its future policy. Jewish immigration into Palestine would be permitted until the Jewish proportion of the population of that country had risen from the then existing ratio of 28 to 33-1/3 per cent. The Government observed that the framers of the Palestine mandate "could never have intended that Palestine would be converted into a Jewish State against the will of the Arab population of the country." It was a belated admission but nevertheless one taking into account practical and equitable realities.

Outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 suspended implementation of the new administrative measures contemplated for Palestine.

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The next important development affecting Palestine was the historic meeting on February 24, 1945, between President Roosevelt, returning from Yalta, and the aging King of Saudi Arabia, which took place on an American destroyer in the Suez Canal. Ibn Saud's recently created kingdom in the barren wastes of the Arabian peninsula was but slowly adapting itself to the ways of the modern world. With the conclusion of agreements in the early 1930s with American oil interests for the exploitation of what was to prove one of the richest sources of petroleum in the world, diplomatic relations had been established between the United States and Saudi Arabia. These were destined to develop into very close ties, the closest of those with any Arab State and only disturbed by the appearance upon the scene in 1948 of the newly created State of Israel, which has remained until the present time unrecognized by any Arab State.

In the course of the historic meeting between President Roosevelt and the Saudi King, the former gave his personal assurance to the latter that the United States would not change its Palestine policy without full and prior consultation with both Arabs and Jews. This undertaking was reaffirmed after Roosevelt's death by his successor, President Truman, in a formal communication of April 5, 1945, to King Ibn Saud.

Four months later, in August 1945, with the ink hardly dry on the assurance given, President Truman requested the British to facilitate the admission into Palestine of 100,000 Jewish immigrants. A few months later, in December 1945, resolutions were passed by the United States Senate and House for unrestricted Jewish immigration into Palestine, limited only by the economic absorptive capacity of that country.

There are passing references to these and other broken American pledges to the Arabs in one of the most informative and reliable studies of the Arab-Israeli conflict with which I am acquainted, *The Arabs, Israelis and Kissinger*; the author, Edward Sheehan. It was written under the auspices of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University and published last year. As Sheehan related:

Within a year President Truman was telling his ministers to the Arab states, 'I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands of people who are anxious for the success of Zionism.'

Feisal never forgot what seemed to him a breach of faith . . . Following the Six-Day War of 1967 . . . President Johnson and Nixon assured Feisal that they would press Israel to relinquish conquered Arab territory; nothing happened . . . In the Spring of 1972 Washington conveyed hints to Feisal that if he would help to persuade President Sadat to diminish the enormous Russian presence in Egypt, the U.S. would mount more serious pressure upon Israel . . . Sadat expelled the Russians in July of that year. But Nixon ignored this momentous action. Feisal felt humiliated and betrayed.

One of the understandable consequences was the Arab oil boycott of 1973. I was in Nice at the time and had a long distance call from a former member of my staff who had retired in Rome. The following conversation took place:

"What do you think of it?"

"The same as you, Paul. We had it coming to us. You can only kick a man in the back side for a certain time until he reacts."

Paul chuckled. "I wonder if we shall draw any conclusions from the lesson."

"Very unlikely. We have been kept in such ignorance of the realities by our leaders."

"Quite and also by the press. They have been frightened to disclose the truth on account of their advertisers."

In 1946 I was appointed by President Truman as American Minister to Saudi Arabia after twenty-three years in the career Foreign Service. On July 1, 1946, I presented my letter of credence in Juddah to His Royal Highness Prince Feisal in his capacity as Foreign Minister and Viceroy of Hejaz. At dinner that evening he emphasized that a fair solution of the Palestine question was a matter of life or death to the Arabs, who viewed Zionist aspirations in Palestine as having the ultimate aim of swallowing up the Arab world. He said that his country and the Arab world were placing great store in the sense of justice of the United States.

In my telegram reporting these events, the first after assuming charge of the American Legation, subsequently raised to the rank of Embassy, I observed somewhat prophetically, as subsequent events would prove, that "I AM CONVINCED THAT UNLESS WE PROCEED WITH UTMOST CIRCUMSPECTION, IN CONSIDERING ALL PHASES OF POSSIBLE REPERCUSSIONS OF PALESTINE QUESTION, WE MAY RAISE DIFFICULTIES FOR OURSELVES IN THIS MOST STRATEGIC AREA OF VITAL NATIONAL INTEREST WHICH WILL PLAGUE UNITED STATES IN YEARS TO COME."¹

In February 1947 Great Britain, as mandatory power, referred the Palestine problem to the United Nations. A United Nations Commission of Inquiry recommended on August 31 partition of the country into Arab and Jewish States with economic union. Jerusalem would be international. These recommendations were substantially adopted by the General Assembly on November 29th at a time when Palestine comprised 1,289,000 Arabs and 679,000 Jews and when

¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Near East and Africa*, vol. VII, page 641.

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Zionist landholdings represented 8 percent of Palestine's total area.

The preponderant Arab population expressed violent opposition, and in March 1948 fighting broke out in Palestine. The United States expressed opposition to a forcible implementation of partition and, three days later, called for declaration of a truce and further consideration of the problem by the General Assembly of the U.N.

The Zionists, insisting that partition was binding, launched military operations to establish their State. Jewish terrorists of the Irgun, a factional organization, massacred 250 civilian inhabitants of the Arab village, Beit Yasin, putting it to fire and sword. The result was that anticipated by the attackers: panic on the part of the Palestine Arabs, who fled in thousands for safety to nearby Arab countries.

Events now succeeded one another on seven-league boots. On May 14, 1948, the British Mandatory Administration ceased to exist with the withdrawal of the British High Commissioner. On the same day the State of Isreal was proclaimed in Jerusalem and at the same time recognized by President Truman. From that time to this there has been no peace in the Near East nor any acceptance of Isreal by the Arab world. The first reaction of the Arabs was an unsuccessful attempt on their part to invade Israel. Their repulse resulted in the flight with them of thousands of Arabs previously inhabiting Palestine. For almost thirty years these have subsisted as homeless refugees housed in tents or given shelter in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and elsewhere.

In the years which have followed, American newspapers, responsive to Zionist advertisers, particularly in the East where large numbers of Jews are concentrated, exercised a virtual boycott of news favorable to the Arabs. A striking example was given me in 1950 when visiting Lynchburg on my return from Saudi Arabia by a reporter of the *Lynchburg News*. In discussing the reserve of the American press to Arab news, she recalled the reaction of a Jewish resident of the city who had telephoned the *News*, after publication of the photograph of an Arab child refugee, to inquire whether this reflected any anti-Semitic attitude. Shortly afterward the United States Air Force invited me to visit a number of air bases where Saudi Arabian nationals were being trained under an accord with the Saudi Arabian Government by which, in return, we were granted certain facilities at their airports. My first stop was at the air base at Wichita Falls, Texas. When a reporter sought to interview me, the American General commanding the base informed me privately that he would have to telephone Washington for permission, as there had been a strict security regulation against

giving out any information about the presence on the bases of Arab trainees. The reason given was to avoid any hue and cry on the part of the Zionists. Happily a telephone call elicited approval from Washington.

On returning from abroad in the Spring of 1973, a number of my foreign service colleagues wrote me to express their concern at the undiminished pressure by Zionists on the shaping and control of American foreign policy in the Near East. In response I drafted a letter on the subject which I addressed to the Editor of the *Washington Post*, in the light of my long experience. When after the lapse of some time I had no acknowledgement and my letter remained unpublished, I addressed it to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, which promptly printed it in its entirety. My letter concluded that "there is not the least doubt in my mind, based on thirty years experience in the Middle East, that so long as our unconditional support of Israel continues, there will be no peace in that area."

The sequence of events accorded with these expectations. In its issue of July 7, 1973, from Paris the *International Herald Tribune* reported that King Feisal of Saudi Arabia warned that the traditionally strong Saudi ties with the United States "depend on the United States having a more even-handed and just policy" in the Middle East. It was added that Saudi Arabia might be compelled to freeze its oil production because of rising Arab resentment over United States support of Israel.

Three months later Saudi Arabia followed other Arab States in introducing a virtual embargo on the shipment of oil products to the United States.

From a position of universal respect and good will we once enjoyed in the Arab world before creation of the State of Israel, we are left with no firm friends on whom we may count in that area except Israel. The immensely powerful Zionist lobby in the United States, centering its influence on the government, has bent American foreign policy from one of benevolent but essentially passive approval of the aims of the Balfour Declaration to an undisguised defense of Israel, to the prejudice of American international interests in the Middle East, in particular our oil interests as well as the attainment of peace:

Let it be emphasized that the Arabs do not expect us to cut Isreal adrift but only that we maintain an even balance in our relations with these opposing forces.

We are not asked to abandon Israel or leave that country to its own devices. We are only asked to refrain from interposing our influence to give that power an unfair advantage vis-a-vis the Arabs. When I served in Saudi Arabia from 1946 to 1950, in a critical period

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of that country's evolution, I had many intimate conversations with the venerable, sagacious King ibn Saud. A constant refrain ran through his many declarations to me of his strong desire for close friendly relations with the United States. He and his sons who have succeeded him ask to that end only that we maintain an even keel and not favor Israel at Arab expense.

It is a fateful issue and demands the exercise by us of even-handed justice in the preservation by us of

fundamental American interests in a highly strategic area of our troubled world.

Mr. Childs was a volunteer in the ambulance corps in WWI before he served, as a U.S. Army officer, as Chief of the Cipher Dept. at AEF Headquarters in France. He had studied cryptanalysis under Mr. William Friedman at the Riverbank Laboratory in Illinois. As a Foreign Service Officer, he served in Jerusalem and Cairo, and was U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia. He is the author of a number of books and articles.