LUISS

Department of Political Science
Master's Degree in International Relations
Major in Security

Chair of *History and Politics of USA*

The Irgun Zvai Leumi Along Israel's Path to Independence: Insurgency, Arms Procurement, and US Lobbying

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Academic Year 2023/2024

ABSTRACT

The years leading up to Israel's independence were marked by a complex interplay of political negotiations, ideological disagreements, international cooperation, and violence. This thesis investigates to what extent the Irgun, a right-wing Zionist terrorist organization, influenced the process of statehood through its violent insurgency, clandestine arms procurement, and lobbying in the United States. The central research question revolves around whether the Irgun's activities were a peripheral force reacting to broader political developments or a decisive factor that shaped them. The findings suggest that the Irgun's terrorist attacks and international advocacy made continued British rule untenable, accelerating the push toward diplomatic resolutions rather than merely responding to them. While diplomacy and international cooperation played a crucial role, this study concludes that bottom-up processes such as the Irgun-led insurgency of 1944-1948 were instrumental in creating the conditions that made Israel's independence unavoidable.

SUMMARY

This thesis examines the role of the Revisionist Zionist terrorist organization Irgun Zvai Leumi in the establishment of the State of Israel, focusing on its contributions through armed activity, weapons procurement, and lobbying efforts in the United States. It challenges the dominant historical narrative that attributes Israeli independence primarily to diplomacy and international political agreements, arguing instead that militant Zionist activities hastened British withdrawal from Palestine, significantly influencing the future of the region. While much of the historical discourse surrounding Israel's creation emphasizes key diplomatic milestones such as the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, this study contends that these political developments were not the sole determinants. Rather, it argues that these events were the inevitable consequences of bottom-up processes such as the Irgun's militancy.

The research begins by exploring the broader ideological foundations of Zionism, from Theodor Herzl's early political vision to the emergence of various Zionist streams, with a particular focus on Revisionist Zionism. Unlike mainstream Zionism, which pursued a gradualist approach to statehood through economic development and diplomatic engagement with British authorities, Revisionist Zionism, developed by Vladimir Jabotinsky, advocated immediate and uncompromising territorial sovereignty. This ideological stance rejected any notion of partition and insisted that both banks of the Jordan River constituted the rightful land of the Jewish state. Central to this vision was the belief that force was necessary to achieve self-determination. This ideology provided the foundation for the Irgun, which emerged in 1931 as a right-wing breakaway faction from the Haganah, the primary Jewish paramilitary organization operating in Palestine under the supervision of the Jewish Agency. Unlike the Haganah, which generally sought cooperation with British authorities and adhered to a policy of *Havlagah* (self-restraint), the Irgun believed in direct action and armed confrontation as essential tools for achieving Jewish statehood. Its early leadership included figures such as Avraham Tehomi, who played a key role in organizing the first attacks during the Great Arab Revolt (1936-1939). The Irgun's rise to greater influence occurred under the leadership of David Raziel, who further distanced the organization from the Haganah by formulating the active defense policy, in contrast to the socialist-oriented group's commitment to non-retaliation. At the outbreak of World War II, the Irgun ceased hostilities against the British to prioritize the fight against Nazi Germany, aligning itself with the mainstream Zionist leadership. This decision sparked disagreements within the Irgun, leading some members to break away and form Lehi (also known as the Stern Gang), an even more radical right-wing organization. Following Raziel's death during a British mission in Iraq, the Irgun eventually came under the command of Menachem Begin, who declared an insurgency against the British just a few months later, on February 1, 1944.

The Irgun's renewed militant campaign led to the *Hunting Season* of 1944-1945, during which the Haganah actively suppressed Irgun activities, fearing that its actions would jeopardize Zionist diplomatic efforts. The Haganah handed over Irgun members and intelligence to the British, deepening internal divisions within the Yishuv. However, by 1945, frustration over the continued enforcement of the 1939 White Paper – which severely restricted Jewish immigration even after the Holocaust – led the Haganah to

secretly join forces with the Irgun and Lehi in their struggle against the British. The three paramilitary organizations formed the United Resistance Movement, carrying out joint operations until 1946, when the Irgun's bombing of the King David Hotel led the Haganah to withdraw from the alliance. The attack – one of the most controversial acts of the Jewish insurgency due to its high civilian casualties – underscored Britain's growing inability to maintain control in Palestine, contributing to its decision to withdraw and hand over the issue to the United Nations.

Sustaining open confrontation with the British while laying the foundation for the future IDF – which proved indispensable for Israel's survival during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War – required not only extensive recruitment and military training but also a large arsenal. The Irgun and the Haganah engaged in a wide range of arms acquisition strategies, including raiding British arsenals, smuggling weapons from sympathetic foreign actors, and purchasing matériel from war-ravaged European countries. Secret arms deals with the Czechoslovak government facilitated the purchase of rifles, machine guns, and aircraft, which were then smuggled into Mandatory Palestine. The Jewish diaspora in the United States also played a crucial role in arms procurement: American Zionists circumvented US surplus war asset sales to acquire military equipment that was discreetly shipped to Palestine. These operations overcame logistical and legal challenges, ultimately ensuring that Zionist forces entered the 1948 Arab-Israeli War with a well-equipped military infrastructure.

Beyond its paramilitary efforts, the Irgun was deeply involved in lobbying and advocacy in the United States, as Zionist strategy increasingly turned away from Britain. Discontent with the British administration of Mandatory Palestine, particularly the White Paper of 1939, highlighted the necessity of seeking alternative avenues to pursue Zionist aspirations. With Britain's influence in the Middle East declining and the United States emerging as the dominant global power, Zionist leaders focused on mobilizing American public opinion, influencing policymakers, and securing financial support for the cause of Jewish statehood. A key figure in these efforts was Hillel Kook (a member of the Irgun known in the United States as Peter Bergson), who led the Bergson Group in orchestrating media campaigns, public rallies, and congressional lobbying to pressure the US government into supporting Zionism. These activities were conducted through five organizations created by Kook: the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine, the

Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation, and the American League for a Free Palestine. Unlike mainstream Zionist organizations, which operated within official diplomatic channels, the Bergson Group adopted a more confrontational approach, leveraging provocative newspaper advertisements, mass rallies, and financial loopholes to support the Irgun from abroad. These efforts played a key role in shaping US policy, ultimately contributing to American recognition of Israel in 1948 and cementing the United States as Israel's most crucial ally. By integrating these three dimensions – terrorist activity, arms procurement, and international lobbying – this thesis presents a comprehensive analysis of the Irgun's role in the establishment of the Jewish state. It argues that while diplomacy and political negotiations were instrumental in legitimizing the Zionist movement, they were not the primary drivers of British withdrawal from Palestine. Instead, the Jewish insurgency, spearheaded by the Irgun, escalated the conflict to a point where continued British rule became unsustainable. The cumulative effect of sustained attacks on British military and administrative infrastructure, backed by efforts in arms smuggling and lobbying in the United States, forced Britain to relinquish control over Palestine and transfer the issue to the United Nations. The thesis concludes that the creation of Israel was not merely the outcome of high-level international cooperation but also a bottom-up process driven by militant actors who shaped history through lobbying and terrorism.

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INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 is often regarded as the culmination of a diplomatic process, rooted in historical milestones such as the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947. This perspective attributes Israel's creation primarily to international cooperation, emphasizing the role of influential global leaders and the diplomatic negotiations that shaped Zionist aspirations. It frames 1948 as a top-down process, guided by calculated political decisions rather than grassroots initiatives. However, this interpretation overlooks the significant role played by militant Zionist organizations during the British Mandate period. While the Haganah, the largest and most structured of these paramilitary groups, was closely aligned with the Jewish Agency and thus functioned as an extension of Zionist leadership, other organizations operated with greater autonomy. The Irgun, known for its right-wing revolutionary stance and terrorist activity, challenged British rule through direct action, often diverging from the strategies of the official Zionist leadership. This thesis examines its role in the struggle for Jewish statehood, investigating *to what extent the Irgun's activities contributed to Israel's independence*. This question steers the progression of this research, seeking to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse forces that shaped the creation of Israel. At the core of this inquiry lies a broader question: did political superstructures shape the actions of grassroots actors, or did these smaller forces influence high-level political decisions in Israel's path to independence? The working hypotheses of this research are that the role of international diplomacy in Israel's creation has been often overstated and that political negotiations were, to a large extent, a reaction to the unmanageable situation created by the Jewish insurgency of 1944-1948.

To address these questions, this thesis draws on multiple sources, with particular emphasis on two key works: *Terror Out of Zion: The Fight for Israeli Independence* by American historian John Bowyer Bell and *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* by Israeli historian Benny Morris. These books provide essential perspectives on the subject, each approaching it from a distinct perspective. Bell's Terror Out of Zion offers a detailed account of the activities of Zionist paramilitary organizations, particularly the Irgun. His analysis, which incorporates firsthand accounts

from former Irgun and Lehi members, presents an alternative to the conventional diplomatic narrative by underscoring the significance of armed insurgency in forcing British disengagement. In contrast, *Righteous Victims* situates the Irgun's activities within the broader historical context of Zionist and Arab nationalist struggles. By tracing the evolution of political Zionism and the long-standing conflicts between Jewish settlers and the local Arab population, Morris provides a more comprehensive overview of the actors at play. Unlike Bell, who focuses primarily on the militant struggle, Morris examines the Irgun's role within the wider framework of Zionist leadership, Arab resistance, and British policy. His extensive use of archival sources and memoirs ensures a balanced portrayal, making his work invaluable for assessing the Irgun's significance relative to other forces that shaped Israel's independence. Together, these two works provide a foundation for analyzing the Irgun's contribution to the establishment of the Jewish state both in absolute and relative terms.

Given the multifaceted nature of the Irgun's activities, this thesis extends beyond its violent operations to consider its broader strategic efforts of arms procurement and political lobbying in the United States. The Irgun's influence cannot be fully understood without examining these components, which allowed it to challenge British rule and advance the Zionist cause. Before delving into these aspects, however, the first chapter provides a historical and ideological foundation for the study. It outlines the evolution of militant Zionism, tracing its roots from Theodor Herzl's vision to Vladimir Jabotinsky's Revisionist doctrine, which emphasized militarized self-defense and an uncompromising approach to achieving Jewish sovereignty. This chapter also examines the broader political landscape of Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine, including the Balfour Declaration, Arab opposition, the 1939 White Paper, and the escalating tensions that set the stage for the final insurgency.

The second chapter focuses on the Irgun's armed activity in Mandatory Palestine. It begins by providing an overview of early Jewish defense organizations before examining the Haganah, the Irgun, and Lehi in greater detail. By analyzing the ideological distinctions between these groups and their respective strategic approaches, this chapter highlights the Irgun's evolution from a dissident offshoot of the Haganah to a key actor in the Jewish insurgency. It also explores leadership shifts and internal debates that influenced the organization's direction during the final years of the British Mandate.

The first parallel analysis is presented in the third chapter, which investigates the efforts of the Haganah and Irgun to acquire weapons. This section examines how these non-state actors secured matériel through clandestine operations, international sympathizers, and underground networks. By detailing the logistical challenges involved in smuggling and distributing weapons, this chapter underscores the strategic importance of arms procurement in sustaining the Haganah and the Irgun's armed activity during the Jewish insurgency and in preparation for the defense of the new State.

Finally, the fourth chapter shifts the focus to the Irgun's lobbying and advocacy activities in the United States. It begins by examining the factors that led Zionist aspirations to look away from Britain as the primary arena for political influence. It then provides an overview of US mainstream Zionist organizations before analyzing the activities of Irgun-aligned groups. By tracing their efforts to mobilize public opinion, garner political support, and shape US foreign policy, this chapter illustrates how the Irgun extended its influence beyond Palestine. It also explores the rhetoric and strategies used to frame the Jewish insurgency as a legitimate struggle for national liberation while addressing the opposition these efforts faced from more moderate Zionist circles. Through this analysis, the chapter highlights the significance of American support in legitimizing the Irgun's cause and advancing its objectives.

By examining the Irgun's development through these three interconnected dimensions – terrorist activity, arms procurement, and lobbying efforts – this thesis seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment of the organization's role in the establishment of the State of Israel, highlighting the impact of grassroots insurgency in shaping the course of history.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON ZIONISM AND MANDATORY PALESTINE

1.1. Introduction

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 marks one of the most transformative and contentious moments in modern history. Deeply intertwined in religious identity, power transition, ethnic discrimination, and state interests, it is easy to lose track of the thesis's main focus. However, to better comprehend the contribution of terrorism and US pressure groups, it is essential to unravel the multifaceted process that led to the 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence. By providing the foundational historical context, this chapter traces the intricate journey from a sparsely cultivated land in the Ottoman Empire to a densely populated region with different cultures, conflicting populations, and a Jewish state.

The chapter begins by examining the ideological and historical roots of Zionism, a movement born in response to centuries of Jewish displacement and persecution. Starting from the biblical roots of the idea of a Jewish state, it highlights the visionary role of figures like Theodor Herzl, who formalized Zionist aspirations in his pamphlet *Der Judenstaat*, and explores the subsequent diversification of Zionism into various streams, each with unique approaches to addressing the Jewish question. A separate subparagraph is dedicated to Vladimir Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionism, as it constitutes the foundational ideological set for some terrorist organizations and US pressure groups, which are addressed in the following chapters.

Finally, a chronological overview of critical events in Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine is outlined, alongside the six waves of migration that increased the Jewish population in the region by almost 30 times. The number of Jews and Arabs in these faces is also provided, offering a clearer understanding of the demographic change and structure throughout the most important events that led to the establishment of Israel. Key diplomatic milestones such as the Balfour Declaration, structural changes in Europe including Nazism and World War II, internal tensions among Jews, Arabs, and the British, and the role of the United Nations are central to this chapter. By presenting these historical

facts systematically, this chapter aims to set the stage for the subsequent analysis of the contribution brought by terrorism and US pressure groups in the prelude to 1948.

1.2. Zionism

1.2.1. The Jewish State

The history of the Jewish people is deeply entrenched in religion, ethnicity, language, and culture. It also features exiles, persecution, and displacement, which gave rise to a global diaspora that shaped and consolidated the Jewish identity through territorial fragmentation. Nevertheless, the aspiration for a united Jewish homeland has remained a fundamental element of Jewish history, and its roots lie in the Book of Genesis[1]. God's promise to Abraham established a covenant in which Abraham's descendants would inherit the land of Canaan, a territory comprising modern Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. This promise is reaffirmed through Abraham's son Isaac and grandson Jacob, whose name was changed by God to Israel (Bradshaw, 2022).

Despite the strong biblical foundation, the Jewish people suffered a history of detachment from their promised land, beginning with the Assyrian captivity in the 8th century BC. The second captivity was carried out in the 6th century BC by the Babylonians and culminated with the destruction of Salomon's Temple, also known as the First Temple. The Second Temple was destroyed centuries later, in 70 AD, by the Romans, who also were at the center of the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-135 AD and the resulting depopulation of Judea, reinforcing the diaspora. Jewish history also experienced several expulsions from other territories, such as the Kingdom of England in 1290 and the Crowns of Castilla and Aragon in 1492, which solidified a deep spiritual connection to the biblical and historical homeland despite physical separation (Ahuvia, 2016).

After a rich and complex history of displacements, persecutions, and internal divisions[2], a turning point for the Jewish people came in the 19th century. This period was marked

[1] The Book of Genesis, often considered the first book of the Hebrew Bible, details the origins of the world, humanity, and the Jewish people. The covenant between God and Abraham, including the promise of the land of Canaan to his descendants, is found in Genesis chapters 12, 15, 17, and 22 (Bradshaw, 2022).

[2] Jews can be broadly classified by both geographic origin and religious practices. Geographically, Ashkenazi Jews are from Central and Eastern Europe, Sephardic Jews trace their roots back to Spain and Portugal, Mizrahi Jews hail from the Middle East and Central Asia, while the Beta Israel, or Falasha, are

by the rise of nationalism across Europe, which inspired various ethnic and cultural groups to seek self-determination. For Jews, this period was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the European Enlightenment and emancipation efforts in several countries opened opportunities for integration and equality. On the other hand, the rise of nationalism also fostered exclusionary ideologies that marginalized minorities, including Jews. Anti-Semitism, both in its traditional religious form and its newer racial-political variant, surged in this century and manifested through pogroms in Eastern Europe, especially in the Russian Empire during the 1880s[3], which were particularly brutal, prompting waves of Jewish emigration. Many Jews fled to Western Europe and the Americas, but these persecutions underscored the need for a national solution to Jewish vulnerability (Bell, 1996:10).

In 1890, an Austrian-Jewish journalist and political activist named Nathan Birnbaum coined the word *Zionism* in his periodical *Selbstemanzipation!*. The neologism derived from *Zion*, a hill in Jerusalem often used as a synecdoche for the city itself or, more broadly, Canaan, i.e., the Land of Israel (translated from the Hebrew *Eretz Israel*). In his new term, Birnbaum enclosed the need for a return to the historical and religious homeland. However, it was only six years later that Zionism was theorized, when Hungarian-Jewish journalist and playwright Theodor Herzl published a pamphlet titled *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*). It upheld that Jews constituted a nation without a land and could only secure safety and dignity through self-determination in a territory of their own. Herzl was galvanized by events like the Dreyfus Affair in France, where a Jewish military officer was falsely accused of treason amid a wave of anti-Semitic hysteria (Bell, 1996:10-11). Herzl argued that assimilation, long pursued by many Jews, could not protect them from discrimination. Instead, a political solution was necessary, one rooted in the establishment of a Jewish state. Zionism not only drew on the shared historical memory of the Jews' connection to the Land of Israel but also sought to revive the Hebrew

Ethiopian Jews. In India, distinct Jewish communities include the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews. Religiously, Jews may identify as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or Karaite. There are also Messianic Jews, who combine Jewish tradition with elements of Christianity, and secular Jews, who may not adhere strictly to religious practices but still identify culturally or ethnically as Jewish (Ahuvia, 2016).

[3] During 1881-1884, the Russian Empire experienced severe pogroms against Jews, marked by violent riots incited by economic difficulties and exacerbated by state-endorsed propaganda (Bell, 1996:10).

language, traditionally used for religious purposes, as a unifying cultural and national element.

Zionism faced numerous challenges in its early years. Internally, Jews were divided on the viability and desirability of Zionism. Orthodox Jews were often skeptical, viewing the initiative as a premature attempt to reclaim the Promised Land without divine intervention. Assimilationist Jews, especially in Western Europe, feared Zionism would cast doubt on their loyalty to their home countries. Externally, gaining international support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine was complicated by the Ottoman Empire's control of the region. Herzl sought support from world leaders, including the Ottoman Sultan, British officials, and German Kaiser Wilhelm II, but these efforts yielded limited results during his lifetime. He died in 1904, at the age of 44 (Morris, 1999:23-24).

1.2.2. Typology of Zionism

Shortly after its theoretical foundation, Zionism evolved into various ideological streams, which reflected the diverse aspirations, beliefs, and strategies of those engaged in the cause. While unified by their ultimate goal, they diverged in their approaches to culture, politics, religion, and societal organization. Among the most significant streams are Political, Cultural, Religious, Labor, Diaspora, and Revisionist Zionism[4]. The latter is addressed in a separate subparagraph due to its relevance for the following chapters.

Political Zionism sought to address the plight of Jews through tangible political and diplomatic efforts. It was pragmatic, emphasizing the importance of securing international recognition and legal guarantees for a Jewish homeland. This approach recognized that anti-Semitism was a persistent threat to Jewish existence in Europe and that a political solution was necessary.

While Theodor Herzl is the figure most closely associated with Political Zionism, Hungarian physician and sociologist Max Nordau was also a prominent advocate who co-founded the World Zionist Organization (WZO) with Herzl[5] (Morris, 1999:20-21).

[4] Additional types of Zionism have not been included because they are not as relevant as the six types described. The study of Zionism is not the primary focus of this thesis but rather serves to facilitate a deeper understanding of the subsequent chapters, which are the core of this work.

[5] The WZO (simply called Zionist Organization until 1960) was formally established by the First Zionist Congress, but the two authors are the main figures accountable for conceiving and implementing the idea of such an organization (Morris, 1999:22).

The First Zionist Congress, organized by Herzl in 1897, epitomized the essence of Political Zionism. Held in Basel, Switzerland, it sought to establish a structured and united effort to negotiate for a Jewish homeland in Ottoman Palestine. The Congress marked the beginning of organized Zionist diplomacy, with subsequent lobbying efforts targeting key world powers (Morris, 1999:22).

Political Zionists were deeply engaged in practical undertakings, such as negotiations with the Ottoman Empire and later the British government, culminating in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which is addressed in the next paragraph. Although their focus was primarily on diplomacy, they recognized the importance of mobilizing Jewish communities to support the effort financially and politically.

Cultural Zionism, championed by Russian-Jewish writer Ahad Ha'am (pen name of Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg), diverged sharply from the political stream by emphasizing the revival of Jewish culture and spiritual life. Ahad Ha'am was critical of what he perceived as an overly utilitarian focus in Political Zionism, believing that it risked neglecting the cultural and ethical foundations of Jewish identity. He argued that a Jewish homeland should not only be a refuge but also a center for the flourishing of Jewish culture (Morris, 1999:42).

Cultural Zionism viewed the Hebrew language as a cornerstone of the Jewish national revival. Hebrew, which was primarily used in religious contexts, was to be revitalized as a living language for everyday communication, literature, and education. Figures like Russian-Jewish linguist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda led the revival of Hebrew, creating modern vocabulary and promoting its adoption among Jewish communities in Palestine (Morris, 1999:10).

Another focus of Cultural Zionism was education. The movement sought to establish schools and institutions that would foster a shared cultural identity among Jews, emphasizing Jewish history, literature, and ethical values. Cultural Zionists also believed that a Jewish homeland should serve as a moral and spiritual example to the world, embodying ideals of justice, community, and intellectual excellence.

Unlike Political Zionism, which often relied on external powers, Cultural Zionism emphasized self-reliance and grassroots efforts. It encouraged Jews to contribute to the building of a cultural and spiritual center in Palestine, even if they did not emigrate themselves. For Cultural Zionists, the homeland was as much an idea as a physical reality.

Religious Zionism integrated traditional Jewish faith with the aspirations of the Zionist movement. Unlike ultra-Orthodox groups, which initially opposed Zionism as a secular deviation, Religious Zionists saw the movement as aligned with divine prophecy. They believed the return to the Land of Israel was a fulfillment of God's promise to the Jewish people and a necessary step toward ultimate redemption. Religious Zionism placed a strong emphasis on *halakha* (Jewish law) as a guiding principle for the development of Jewish society in the homeland. It sought to harmonize modern nationalism with traditional Jewish values, advocating for the establishment of a state that would reflect both. This stream also engaged in practical settlement efforts: organizations like the Mizrachi[6] promoted agricultural colonies and educational institutions in Palestine that adhered to religious principles (Bell, 1996:23).

Labor Zionism, influenced by socialist ideals, focused on building a Jewish homeland through collective labor and self-reliance. It emerged in response to the socio-economic challenges faced by Jewish immigrants in Palestine and emphasized the dignity of manual labor as a means of creating a just and egalitarian society. Russian-Jewish philosopher Aaron David Gordon, one of Labor Zionism's founders, advocated for the concept of redemption through labor. He believed that working the land was not only a practical necessity but also a spiritual act that reconnected Jews to their ancestral homeland. His philosophy inspired the establishment of kibbutzim and moshavim[7], which became hallmarks of Labor Zionism. Labor Zionists also emphasized social justice and equality. They envisioned a society where resources and opportunities would be shared equitably, and they rejected the class hierarchies that characterized European societies. This vision resonated particularly with young Jewish immigrants who sought a fresh start in the land of their ancestors (Bell, 1996:19).

The Histadrut, a Jewish workers' trade union center founded in Haifa in 1920, played a central role in advancing Labor Zionist goals. It provided support for workers, organized

[6] Mizrachi, founded in 1902, is a Religious Zionist organization that advocated for the integration of Jewish religious principles with Zionist efforts, focusing on establishing agricultural settlements and educational institutions in Palestine (Friesel, 1985:140).

[7] Kibbutzim and moshavim are two types of Jewish agricultural communities. Kibbutzim are collective communities where property and resources are communally owned and duties are shared, reflecting socialist principles. Moshavim, on the other hand, are cooperative villages where residents maintain individual household economies but share in purchasing and marketing efforts, blending cooperative and private aspects. Both were established to strengthen Jewish agricultural presence and economic self-sufficiency in Palestine.

agricultural and industrial projects, and became a powerful political force within the Zionist movement. Labor Zionists were instrumental in laying the foundations for the economic and social infrastructure of what would have eventually become the State of Israel (Bell, 1996:18).

Diaspora Zionism represented the aspirations and contributions of those Jews who did not plan to emigrate to Palestine but strongly supported the Zionist cause from abroad. This stream recognized the global Jewish community's vital role in the movement's success. One of the primary focuses of Diaspora Zionism was fundraising. Organizations like the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which is addressed in the next paragraph, collected donations to purchase land in Palestine and support settlement projects. Diaspora Jews also contributed through cultural and political advocacy, raising awareness and securing support for Zionism in their respective countries (Morris, 1999:23).

Diaspora Zionists often saw themselves as part of a broader Jewish national project, even if they chose to remain in their countries of residence. For many, Zionism was not only about establishing a homeland but also about strengthening Jewish identity and solidarity worldwide. This perspective was particularly significant in the United States, where prominent Zionist leaders like Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis helped galvanize support for the movement among American Jews[8] (Medoff, 1996:36). Additionally, Diaspora Zionism engaged in educational initiatives to instill a sense of connection to the Land of Israel among Jewish communities. Programs promoting the Hebrew language, Jewish history, and Zionist ideology were implemented in schools and community centers. Despite their physical distance, Diaspora Zionists played a significant role in shaping the movement's success. Their financial, political, and moral support was critical in securing the resources and legitimacy needed for Zionist initiatives.

Although these streams addressed different dimensions of the Jewish national question, each one of them contributed to the broader movement's evolution. For this reason, Zionism cannot be identified with a single ideology comprising specific elements; rather, it should be understood as a set of ideologies united by the common goal of establishing a Jewish homeland.

[8] Justice Brandeis and his effort in promoting the Zionist cause are addressed in the fourth chapter.

1.2.3. Jabotinsky's Revision

As anticipated in the previous subparagraph, Zionism's typology is enriched with a sixth stream: *Revisionist Zionism*. This adjunct is particularly significant because it represents the ideological foundation for many extremist and violent Zionist organizations and, later, even for prominent Israeli political leaders.

Revisionist Zionism emerged in the 1920s as a reaction to what its founder, Vladimir Jabotinsky, perceived as the insufficient urgency and pragmatism of the mainstream Zionist movement, particularly its socialist component (largely represented by Labor Zionism). Jabotinsky, a charismatic and influential leader born in Odesa (present-day Ukraine), advocated for a more assertive and uncompromising approach to achieving a Jewish state. At the core of Revisionist Zionism was the belief that the entirety of historical Palestine, including both banks of the Jordan River, was integral to the Jewish homeland. This vision rejected the idea of partition or territorial compromises, setting Revisionists apart from other Zionist streams (Bell, 1996:18).

Jabotinsky's review was deeply shaped by the presence of British authorities in Palestine on behalf of the League of Nations[9], which he viewed as an opportunity that required decisive and immediate action. He strongly opposed the gradualist approach of mainstream Zionist leaders, advocating instead for mass Jewish immigration to Palestine as a means of ensuring Jewish sovereignty. Unlike Labor Zionists, who emphasized socialism and collective values, Revisionist Zionism was grounded in a nationalist, right-wing ideology. Jabotinsky believed in fostering a robust Jewish identity and instilling pride and self-reliance among Jews. This ideological divide created deep tensions within the broader Zionist movement, as Jabotinsky and his followers often clashed with the dominant Labor faction over strategy and priorities[10] (Bell, 1996:19).

A defining feature of Revisionist Zionism was its emphasis on militarism and self-defense, differing from the entire mainstream Zionism, which mainly operated through diplomacy. As a secular ideology, it was free from any religious constraint regarding the use of force, allowing Jabotinsky to famously argue for the necessity of a strong Jewish

[9] The British Mandate in Palestine is addressed in the next paragraph.

[10] Notable examples include disagreements during the Zionist Congresses of the 1920s and 1930s, where debates over issues such as immigration policy and relations with Arab populations highlighted the deep divides between these factions (Bell, 1996:19).

military presence to protect Jewish settlements and assert control over the land[11]. His political philosophy was encapsulated in his 1923 essay *The Iron Wall*, in which he argued that the Arab population could only be convinced that Jewish sovereignty was an inevitable reality through military force. Only with a demonstration of battlefield superiority could a Jewish state be established in Palestine (Morris, 1999:118).

In line with these visions, the Revisionist Zionist Party Hatzohar was established in 1925. The party's formation marked a significant ideological split within the Zionist movement, emphasizing a more militant posture in contrast to the socialist-leaning Labor Zionism. The expansion of Revisionist thought also led to the creation of the New Zionist Organization (NZO) in 1935, after Jabotinsky and his followers broke away from the WZO. This organization was instrumental in advocating for Jewish immigration and the formation of a Jewish army (Morris, 1999:27).

The ideological principles of Revisionist Zionism were highly influential and divisive within the Zionist movement, attracting both admiration and criticism. While its commitment to the establishment of a Jewish state was relentless, its confrontational stance toward both Arab populations and the British authorities was a source of controversy. Despite its polarizing nature, Jabotinsky's movement became a significant force within Zionism, offering an alternative vision of Jewish statehood rooted in a strong nationalist ethos and a belief in the necessity of immediate and uncompromising military action to achieve sovereignty.

1.3. From *Der Judenstaat* to the 1944-48 Jewish insurgency: key events in Mandatory Palestine

1.3.1. The First Aliyah

Although Theodor Herzl's pamphlet was only published in 1896, a consistent wave of Jewish migration to Palestine (then under Ottoman rule) had already begun in 1882. The clear intention to establish a Jewish state had not yet been formulated, but the idea that Jewish migrants could only find a sense of national identity in their historical land

[11] This idea was also embraced – to a lesser extent – by socialist Zionist leaders, who however viewed it as a means to safeguard the objectives of their ideological set. Revisionists, instead, viewed the establishment of an armed organization as the very foundation of their ideology.

accompanied about 35,000 Jews to Ottoman Palestine, joining the 25,000 Jews[12] and about ten times as many Arabs who were already there (Center for Israel Education, 2025; Neuman, 1999:7). The Hungarian journalist and playwright only formalized and popularized that idea, adding a strong political component – the establishment of a state. Hence, the distinction between Practical Zionism and Political Zionism, the latter originating and evolving into the various ramifications outlined in the previous paragraph. Practical Zionism, on the other hand, was the idea of Jewish national revival through immigration to and settlements in the Land of Israel. Because there was no intent to establish a sovereign state, this ideology should rather be referred to as a form of proto-Zionism.

Regardless of the nomenclature, the wave of Jewish migration to Palestine between 1882 and 1903 is widely acknowledged as the beginning of the process that led to the establishment of the State of Israel, and it is known as the First Aliyah (literally meaning *rise*). Migrants mainly fled Russian pogroms and, after arriving at their destination through the Hovevei Zion and Bilu movements[13], they founded several new settlements, including Rishon Lezion and Zikhron Ya'akov (Morris, 1999:18).

1.3.2. The World Zionist Congress

As the Jewish community in Ottoman Palestine grew exponentially and the newly emerged Zionist movement gained momentum, Herzl organized the First Zionist Congress, held in Basel in 1897. This Congress adopted the Basel Program, which outlined the movement's objectives and defined Zionism's primary goal as *establishing for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine* (Deutsch, n.d.). In addition, as noted in the previous paragraph, the WZO was established and tasked with implementing the goals indicated in the Program, under the leadership of its president, Theodor Herzl.

[12] The Jewish population that resided in Palestine before the First Aliyah is known as the Old Yishuv, to distinguish them from those who arrived between 1882 and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, which are referred to as the New Yishuv. The first mainly consisted of religious Jews supported by charity, primarily residing in key cities like Jerusalem and Hebron. Conversely, the New Yishuv, influenced by Zionist ideology, emphasized agricultural development, economic self-sufficiency, and defense, significantly modernizing the community's structure (Morris, 1999:5).

[13] Hovevei Zion, established in 1881, focused on promoting agricultural settlements in Palestine, while Bilu, formed the following year, aimed to create self-sustaining communities (Morris, 1999:18).

The Fifth and Sixth Zionist Congresses, held in Basel in 1901 and 1903, respectively, are also noteworthy. In the 1901 Congress, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) was established to raise money for purchasing land in Palestine. After the launch of the new organization, a blue and white tin charity box was distributed to diaspora Jews across the world, representing a symbol of international solidarity for the Zionist cause and a conspicuous source of revenue for the JNF (Morris, 1999:23).

At the Sixth Zionist Congress, Herzl presented the controversial Uganda Scheme (Morris, 1999:24), proposing a temporary Jewish refuge in British East Africa. Despite heated opposition, especially from Russian Zionists, the Congress approved sending a committee to explore the proposal. This was Herzl's final Congress, as he passed away the following year.

After the first five meetings, which were held annually, the Zionist Congress reduced its frequency to once every second year and since the establishment of the State of Israel, it dropped to once every four years, approximately.

1.3.3. Land Acquisition and the Second Aliyah

Following the establishment of the JNF, Zionists initiated the first large-scale land acquisitions in Palestine. These acquisitions were strategically targeted in areas like the Jezreel and Hula Valley and coastal plains, which were often sparsely populated and considered underutilized. The JNF prioritized reclaiming and cultivating these lands, transforming them into arable farmland through innovative agricultural techniques and significant labor investment. Early kibbutzim, such as Degania Alef, founded in 1910 near the Sea of Galilee, became models of agricultural productivity and self-sufficiency (Morris, 1999:64).

These settlements attracted Jewish migrants eager to participate in the Zionist vision of national revival through labor on the land. This new wave of migration, known as the Second Aliyah (1904-1914), added 35,000 individuals to the Jewish population in Ottoman Palestine, raising the total to 94,000 (DellaPergola, 2003:11). Arab communities were also drawn to the region, as improved agricultural output and economic opportunities created by Jewish settlements stimulated the local economy, and the Arab population increased to 525,000 individuals (DellaPergola, 2003:11). The newly

developed areas became hubs of productivity, with both Jewish and Arab workers contributing to the thriving agricultural sector.

1.3.4. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Balfour Declaration, the British Mandate, and the Third and Fourth Aliyah

At the time, Palestine was still under Ottoman rule. However, as the *sick man of Europe*[14] struggled during the Great War, Britain and France sought to split the empire's territories, anticipating its defeat. This ambition culminated in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, dividing Ottoman lands into directly controlled lands and spheres of influence.

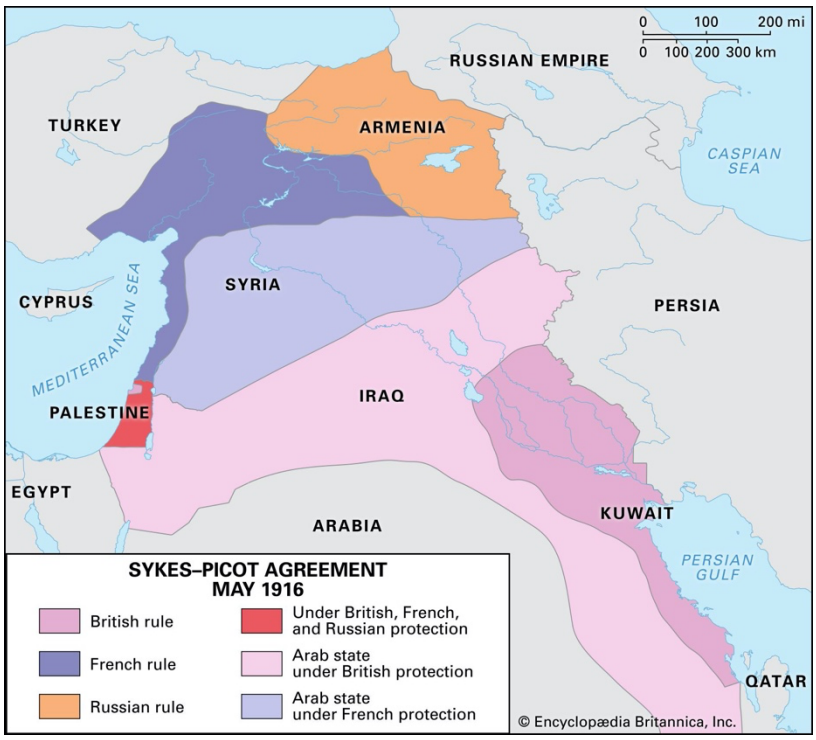

Figure 1. Map of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Source: Encyclopædia Britannica.

France was assigned direct control over present-day Syria and Lebanon and was granted a sphere of influence in Zone A, covering northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. Britain secured direct control over southern Mesopotamia, which included key areas like Basra and Baghdad, while its sphere of influence (Zone B) encompassed Jordan, the Negev Desert, and present-day Iraq. These lands were vital for safeguarding Britain's route to India, its most valuable colony. Control over Mesopotamia secured access to the Persian Gulf, while influence in Zone B protected the approaches to the Suez Canal, ensuring uninterrupted communication and trade with the Indian subcontinent.

Palestine was designated for international administration, reflecting its religious and strategic significance. The arrangement proposed that its governance would be

[14] Expression used at the time to refer to the Ottoman Empire.

determined through consultation among the Allies, including Russia[15] (Morris, 1999:33, Bell, 1996:16).

Amid this context, Britain pursued broader strategic goals in the Middle East, exemplified by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, a pivotal letter from Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a prominent leader of the British Zionist movement. This declaration expressed that *His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people*[16]. The Balfour Declaration's inclusion in official British policy marked a significant departure from the earlier internationalization proposal, setting the stage for deep and enduring tensions in Palestine.

In 1920, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the Great War, the Allied Powers assigned Britain the mandate for Palestine[17]. After two years of *de facto* control, the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine was ratified, legally codifying British authority over the territory (Bell, 1996:16-17).

The mandate granted Britain administrative authority over Palestine, ending centuries of Ottoman rule and placing Britain in a pivotal position to shape the region's future. The new rule was viewed on the one hand as a materialization of the British *favour* expressed in the Balfour Declaration, on the other as an opportunity for a colonial imposition where Britain would manipulate Palestine to serve its strategic interests (Bell, 1996:17).

The sudden shift in Palestine's political landscape created an unprecedented opportunity for diaspora Jews, who seized the moment to initiate a new wave of migration to the region. During the Third Aliyah (1919-1923), approximately 35,000 Jews, predominantly young Zionist pioneers from Eastern Europe, migrated to Mandatory Palestine (Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2024). Many were inspired by socialist and Zionist ideals, seeking to build a new Jewish society through collective agricultural settlements (kibbutzim and moshavim). By 1922, the population included 84,000 Jews and 589,000 Arabs, alongside 71,000 Christians (DellaPergola, 2003:11). However, it wasn't until the Fourth Aliyah that Jewish migration toward Palestine accelerated its pace: in the

[15] Russia was assigned control over parts of eastern Anatolia and the Dardanelles (Bell, 1996:16).

[16] A picture of the original letter, from which this sentence was quoted, is available on the website of the Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question. The link is provided in the references.

[17] Between the end of the war and the establishment of the British Mandate in 1920, the region was administered by the Occupation of Enemy Territory Administration (OETA), which included British, French, and Arab officials managing the transition in territories formerly under Ottoman control (Morris, 1999:88).

following five years, about 70,000 Jews (double than any previous aliyah), particularly from Poland and Hungary, arrived. They were driven by a combination of rising antisemitism in Europe and the 1924 Immigration Act[18], which introduced migration quotas in the United States. Unlike the pioneers of the Third Aliyah, this new wave of migration included a significant number of middle-class immigrants, who established small businesses, trade networks, and urban industries in cities like Tel Aviv and Haifa. By 1931, Palestine was inhabited by 175,000 Jews and 760,000 Arabs (DellaPergola, 2003:11).

1.3.5. Nazism and the Fifth Aliyah

Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933 introduced a regime of institutionalized antisemitism, culminating in widespread persecution, violence, and economic disenfranchisement of Jews. This atmosphere prompted tens of thousands of German Jews to seek refuge, with many turning to Palestine as a viable destination. The increased migration that occurred during this period marked the Fifth Aliyah (1929-1939), which the Haavara Agreement further incentivized. Signed in 1933 between Zionist organizations and Nazi Germany, it played a pivotal role in facilitating the movement of Jewish communities from Germany to Mandatory Palestine. Under this controversial arrangement, German Jews emigrating to Palestine were allowed to transfer a portion of their assets through the purchase of German goods, which were exported to Palestine. This arrangement served mutual interests: it provided Jews an escape route from persecution while boosting Germany's struggling economy through trade (Polkehn, 1976:63).

From 1933 to 1939, more than 160,000 German Jews emigrated to Palestine under the Haavara Agreement, significantly contributing to the Fifth Aliyah (Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2024). This influx brought skilled professionals, intellectuals, and financial capital, profoundly transforming the social and economic landscape of the Jewish community in Palestine. Cities like Tel Aviv experienced rapid urbanization and industrial growth as a result. However, the agreement sparked fierce debate between those who viewed it as a pragmatic solution to save lives and those who considered it a

[18] The 1924 Immigration Act, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, severely restricted immigration by introducing national origin quotas. These quotas disproportionately impacted Eastern and Southern European Jews, who faced shrinking opportunities to immigrate to the United States, historically a favored destination for Jewish refugees.

collaboration with a genocidal regime. Despite the controversy, the Haavara Agreement underscored the increasingly critical role of Palestine as a refuge during this period.

1.3.6. The Great Revolt, the White Paper of 1939, and the Aliyah Bet

Up to this point, the analysis has refrained from addressing the escalating tensions between Jews, Arabs, and British authorities in Mandatory Palestine. This is because the next chapter provides a detailed account of the acts of violence, particularly terrorism, that occurred before 1948. However, a proper reconstruction of the key events that led to the establishment of the State of Israel cannot neglect the Great Revolt of 1936-1939.

Mounting frustration over British rule, rapid Jewish immigration due to Nazi persecution, and land dispossession of Palestinian farmers were at the root of the Arab communities' growing hostility. However, the revolt only broke out as an act of revenge. Izz ad-Din al-Qassam[19], a prominent anti-Zionist leader, had been killed by British forces on November 20, 1935, after leading a small guerrilla group. Five months later, on April 15, 1936, two Jews were killed by Arab gunmen near Tulkarm to avenge their late leader. The day after, Jewish militants killed two Arabs in retaliation (Morris, 1999:126-128). In response to these acts of violence, the Arab National Committee was formed, later evolving into the Arab Higher Committee under the leadership of Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. On April 19, the Committee launched a general strike to demand a halt to Jewish immigration, land sales, and British concessions. The strike escalated into an armed rebellion characterized by coordinated attacks on British forces and Jewish settlements, especially in rural areas. British forces, supported by Zionist paramilitary groups, employed harsh measures, including mass arrests and demolitions, to suppress the revolt (Morris, 1999:129). The revolt culminated in the British issuing the White Paper of 1939, which limited Jewish immigration and land purchases while proposing the establishment of an independent Palestine within ten years, governed jointly by Arabs and Jews. The document marked a shift from the Balfour Declaration and faced strong opposition from Zionists. Even the Arab Higher Committee rejected the White Paper, as it fell short of their ultimate demands for full and immediate independence and a complete halt to Jewish immigration and land purchases. The prospect of continued British control

[19] His name, one of the symbols of the Palestinian armed struggle against the Jewish presence in the region, was later adopted by the military wing of Hamas, the Al-Qassam Brigades.

and a future Jewish political influence was also seen as unacceptable. Nevertheless, the new policy marked the conclusion of the Great Revolt, which resulted in the deaths of over 5,000 Arabs, 300 Jews, and 262 British soldiers (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, 2013).

The White Paper established a quota of 75,000 Jewish immigrants over five years (10,000 annually plus an additional 25,000 for refugees) (Morris, 1999:158). However, growing antisemitism in Germany and the outbreak of World War II represented significant push factors for discriminated Jews to move to Mandatory Palestine, and the new limitations were often breached. This migratory phenomenon took the name of Aliyah Bet (translatable from the Hebrew as *Aliyah B*), which began before 1939 but saw a rapid increase following the publication of the White Paper. Organized by paramilitary Zionist groups, operations involved the use of unseaworthy vessels, often overcrowded and lacking basic necessities, to transport Jewish migrants and concentration camps refugees across the Mediterranean and Black Sea. Many ships were intercepted by British naval forces, and their passengers were detained in internment camps, notably in Cyprus. Key incidents included the journey of the Exodus 1947, which carried over 4,000 refugees but was turned back to Europe, drawing international attention[20] (Morris, 1999:181). Despite these challenges, Aliyah Bet significantly increased the Jewish population in Palestine, which by 1947 had reached 630,000, more than half of the Arabs (1,181,000) (DellaPergola, 2003:11).

One of the most remarkable achievements during this period was the formation of Mossad LeAliyah Bet (*Institution for the Aliyah Bet*), an underground branch of the Haganah tasked with intelligence activities to facilitate illegal migration (Brenner, 1965:20). It was also crucial in the arms procurement efforts in preparation for the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, as detailed in Chapter 3, *Arms Procurement: How Non-State Actors Secured Matériel*.

1.3.7. The Jewish insurgency, Britain's withdrawal from Palestine, the UN Partition Plan, and the Declaration of Independence

The sudden increase of Jewish migrants to Palestine and the restrictions imposed by Britain further exacerbated the tensions between the Yishuv and British authorities. By

[20] This event is narrated in Leon Uris' book *Exodus* (1958), later adapted as a movie by Otto Preminger (1960).

1944, frustration with immigration controls led Jewish paramilitary organizations to launch an insurgency, which continued until 1948, culminating in the establishment of the State of Israel (Morris, 1999:174). These four years were marked by a violent escalation, resulting in the deaths of numerous British officers and a series of terrorist attacks, both within and beyond Mandatory Palestine. British countermeasures, including arrests, curfews, and military campaigns, fueled further resistance and global sympathy for the Zionist cause. Ultimately, the insurgency, coupled with the economic crisis and Britain's loss of interest in the Middle East following the end of the British Raj[21], led to the decision to withdraw from Palestine.

The newly established United Nations[22] was suddenly confronted with the task of addressing a deeply contentious issue that had persisted for over six decades. In an effort to resolve the long-lasting tensions in the region, the United Nations proposed a Partition Plan in Resolution 181, adopted on November 29, 1947[23]. This plan sought to end the British Mandate and divide Palestine into two independent states – one Jewish and one Arab – while designating Jerusalem and its surrounding areas as an international city under UN administration to reflect its religious significance (Morris, 1999:161).

The geographic division was based on population distributions and economic considerations. The Jewish state was allocated approximately 56% of Mandatory Palestine, including the fertile coastal plain, the Galilee, and parts of the Negev Desert. The Arab state was allocated about 43%, encompassing the central highlands, the northern region adjacent to Lebanon, and the southern coastal area near Gaza. The remaining 1%, centered around Jerusalem and Bethlehem, was set under international governance (Morris, 1999:183).

While the Jewish leadership accepted the decision despite reservations, Arab leaders rejected the UN Partition Plan, perceiving it as deeply unjust and disproportionately favoring the Jewish state despite the Arab majority in Palestine. This aspect, particularly, was perceived not just as a political injustice but as a betrayal by the international

[21] The British Raj (1858-1947) was the British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent. Its end in 1947, marked by the partition of India and Pakistan, signaled the decline of British imperial dominance and a reorientation of its priorities (Bell, 1996:187).

[22] The United Nations had been founded only two years before, in October 1945.

[23] The plan was approved with 33 votes, including the US, the Soviet Union, and France. It faced opposition from 13 countries, mainly Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen. There were 10 abstentions, including the UK and India (Morris, 1999:161).

Figure 2. Map of the UN Partition Plan of 1947. Source: United Nations Department of Public Information.

community, which seemed to disregard Arab claims and historical connection to the land. The decision fueled feelings of disenfranchisement and dispossession among Arabs, deepening a sense of alienation and sparking vehement opposition, as it threatened the very fabric of their identity and future in Palestine. The response included protests, acts of violence, and coordinating military preparations, with neighboring Arab states declaring their intent to intervene and prevent the plan's implementation (Morris, 1999:215). The Jewish reservations, instead, regarded the allocation of discontinuous territories and the exclusion of Jerusalem from Jewish sovereignty. Despite these concerns, the Jewish leadership led a pragmatic acceptance of the plan, recognizing it as a historic opportunity to establish a sovereign Jewish state. This strategic acceptance aimed to secure a refuge for Jews post-Holocaust and to gain international legitimacy, with the UN endorsement providing crucial global recognition of their statehood aspirations.

Despite the opposition from the Arab world, the Jewish leadership, empowered by international support and decades of struggle, proceeded to establish their state. On May 14, 1948, Polish Yishuv David Ben-Gurion, head of the Jewish Agency[24], proclaimed the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel in Tel Aviv. The declaration referenced the UN Partition Plan as a legal basis and emphasized the Jewish historical

[24] The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), established in 1929, served as the primary representative body of the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine, coordinating immigration, settlement, and political advocacy efforts toward the establishment of a Jewish state (Morris, 1999:106).

and moral right to statehood (Morris, 1999:215). The British Mandate officially ended that same day, and several countries, including the United States and the Soviet Union, immediately recognized Israel's independence. In response, neighboring Arab states[25] launched a joint military attack, initiating the First Arab-Israeli war (Morris, 1999:215).
Starting from the approval of Resolution 181 and throughout the whole conflict – initially between the Yishuv and Palestinian Arabs, and then, after May 14, between Israelis and Arab states), approximately 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were displaced (Morris, 1999:682). This phenomenon was referred to as *Nakba* (*catastrophe* in Arabic) by the Palestinians and remained a central trauma in their identity as an act of ethnic cleansing. The traditional Israeli narrative often portrayed this exodus as voluntary and influenced by Arab leaders' promises. This view has been challenged by *New Historians* like Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé, who, using declassified documents, argue that the exodus was also due to expulsions and psychological warfare (Pappé, 1997:33). These revelations have sparked debates, reshaping perceptions of the events of 1948 within Israeli society and internationally.
However, the Nakba and the 1948 Arab-Israeli War lie beyond the chronological focus of this thesis and will not be examined.

1.4 Conclusion

As evident from the last paragraph, the historical trajectory leading to the establishment of the State of Israel is a deeply complex narrative. This chapter sought to break down this complexity by proceeding in chronological order, offering an overview of the forces that shaped the path to Israeli statehood. This analysis has provided an essential background to contextualize the subsequent discussion of terrorism and US pressure groups in the chapters that follow.
Firstly, by unpacking the ideological foundations of Zionism – from Theodor Herzl's political vision to the cultural, religious, labor, and diaspora-oriented interpretations,

[25] The Arab League comprised Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia (Morris, 1999:215).

along with Jabotinky's more assertive and militarized stream – the chapter has revealed a movement united in its ultimate goal and diverse in its approaches.

The analysis then shifted to the concrete, exploring Palestine's transformation from an Ottoman backwater to a focal point of international diplomacy. The six waves of Jewish migration (Aliyah) underscored the growing momentum of the Zionist movement, while the Balfour Declaration and the White Paper of 1939 highlighted the metamorphosis of British policies in Palestine. Furthermore, the chapter illustrated the escalating tensions between Jews, Arabs, and British authorities, which created the conditions for the withdrawal of British forces, the UN Partition Plan, and Ben-Gurion's proclamation.

This foundational section serves as a bridge to the more focused discussions in the following chapters. Understanding the historical context of Zionism (especially the Revisionist stream) and Mandatory Palestine is vital to examining the contribution of Jewish militants and US pressure groups in advancing the cause of statehood. With the historical foundation established, the thesis now turns to its core objective. However, the narrative remains within the same time frame, as the events addressed by the research question unfolded alongside the background provided rather than as subsequent developments.

2. THE REVOLUTIONARY PATH: ARMED STRUGGLE FOR A JEWISH STATE

2.1. Introduction

After the necessary overview of the political and demographic background of Mandatory Palestine, the narrative delves into the core of the thesis. Starting from the first Jewish settlements' defense militias, this chapter unfolds along the development of Zionist paramilitary organizations until touching upon the Irgun Zvai Leumi and its activity of resistance to British rule and terrorism. This narrative structure aims to provide the major components of the Yishuv's armed engagement against the Mandate's authorities to investigate one of the thesis' main questions: to what extent did Zionist terrorism contribute to the establishment of Israel? Diplomatic endeavors such as the Balfour Declaration and the 1947 UN Partition Plan are addressed in the previous paragraph, but were they the mere reflection of high-profile politicians' will or the result of a bottom-up process tangled in dissatisfaction with the administration, radicalization, and terrorism?
To address these points, the analysis begins with the first Jewish militias in Palestine and then examines the three paramilitary organizations that, with different roles, dominated the defense scene during the 1944-1948 insurgency. Alongside the Irgun, the Haganah and Lehi were the undisputed protagonists during this period. Despite their ideological and methodological differences, these groups collectively showcased the wide spectrum of components that fueled the Zionist cause. An overview of the main acts of violence in the final years of the British Mandate, such as the assassination of Lord Moyne and the bombing of the King David Hotel, is also provided throughout the narrative. This context is key to detecting the climate perceived by countries' delegations at the UN General Assembly on November 29, 1947.

2.2. Bar-Giora, Hashomer, and the Jewish Legion: The First Jewish Defense Forces

Before delving into the paramilitary organizations that conducted terrorist attacks in the name of the Zionist cause, an overview of the first forms of Zionist armed groups in Palestine is due. The idea to gather militants and arms to form a militia came from the need to protect the settlements that were being developed as Jewish migration to Ottoman Palestine increased. For this reason, the first groups were established when Jewish migrants and settlements were quickly increasing: the Second Aliyah (1904-1914). This wave of settlers faced challenges such as banditry, disputes with Arab neighbors, and indifference from Ottoman authorities. Amid this context of initial tensions between Yishuv, Arabs, and governing authorities, Bar-Giora was founded by Israel Shochat in 1907. Born in 1886 in Russian-ruled Belarus, Shochat immigrated to Palestine during the Second Aliyah. Inspired by the writings of early Zionist thinkers, he believed that Jewish self-defense was crucial to establishing a Jewish homeland, and he also envisaged a need for a model of self-reliance for Jewish settlers (Goldstein, 1995:747). The group's name was chosen to honor Simon Bar-Giora, a Jewish leader of the first-century AD rebellion against Rome (Morris, 1999:53).

Because of the high competence required for membership, it was a highly selective organization, with an initial number of around ten members. The group operated clandestinely, with members undergoing rigorous training in weapon handling, surveillance, and self-defense tactics. Bar-Giora also placed a strong emphasis on understanding the local Arab population, requiring members to learn Arabic and immerse themselves in regional customs (Goldstein, 1995:750). This dual focus on military readiness and cultural integration distinguished Bar-Giora from other Zionist initiatives at the time.

By 1909, the increasing security needs of the expanding Yishuv necessitated the transformation of Bar-Giora into Hashomer (*The Watchman*). This new organization inherited Bar-Giora's foundational principles but significantly expanded its scope and membership. Hashomer became the primary defense organization of Jewish settlements, formalizing the practices and strategies initiated by its predecessor (Goldstein, 1995:746). It maintained selective recruitment, choosing members based on their physical endurance,

ideological commitment, and ability to adapt to challenging conditions. Just like in Bar-Giora, members underwent training both in military tactics and cultural immersion.

Although the two groups never developed into structured organizations, they laid the foundation for future paramilitary activities in Mandatory Palestine, handing over a legacy of commitment to maintaining settlements' security and an innovative approach to defense. Its members believed in fostering a strong connection to the land and community they protected. This philosophy was reflected in their commitment to Jewish labor, which aligned with the broader Zionist goal of establishing a self-sufficient Jewish state (Goldstein, 1995:751).

Following this initial foray into organized Jewish armed efforts, the development of Jewish defense forces entered a distinct phase during World War I. When the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers, some prominent Zionists saw an unprecedented opportunity for Jews to demonstrate their loyalty to the Allies while advancing their cause. They believed that a Jewish military unit fighting alongside the British could serve as both a symbolic and practical step toward the establishment of a Jewish homeland (Bell, 1996:15). Among the proponents of this view was Vladimir Jabotinsky, who, as discussed in the previous chapter, was the architect of Revisionist Zionism. In 1915, he went to Alexandria, Egypt, which had become a hub for Jewish refugees expelled from Ottoman Palestine, and met another prominent Zionist who shared the same view: Joseph Trumpeldor. In 1902, he joined the Russian Imperial Army, where he thrived, distinguishing himself in the Russo-Japanese War. Even after losing his left arm in combat, he remained on the front lines, earning a reputation for extraordinary bravery. By the end of the war, Trumpeldor had risen to the rank of lieutenant – a feat almost unheard of for a Jew in Tsarist Russia (Bell, 1996:17).

After meeting in Alexandria, Jabotinsky and Trumpeldor began organizing volunteers and managed to secure British approval to form a small unit, with the initial scope of serving non-combatant roles, primarily in logistics and support. For this reason, it was called the Zion Mule Corps, and it marked the first organized Jewish military force in nearly two millennia.

The Zion Mule Corps was deployed to Gallipoli, one of the war's most brutal theaters. Their role was limited to transporting supplies, but the unit endured relentless artillery fire and harsh conditions. Though the Zion Mule Corps was disbanded after Gallipoli, its

success paved the way for a larger and more formal Jewish military presence. In 1917, with the tides of the war shifting in favor of the Allies and British forces advancing toward Palestine, Jabotinsky saw an opportunity to advocate for the creation of a formal Jewish military unit. The issuance of the Balfour Declaration in November 1917 bolstered his efforts, and in early 1918, the British War Office approved the formation of the Jewish Legion, consisting of five battalions of the Royal Fusiliers (Fachler, 2003:35-36).

The creation of the Jewish Legion was a milestone for the Zionist movement, as for the first time in modern history Jews from around the world came together to fight under a single banner. The Legion attracted volunteers from a wide array of backgrounds: Jewish immigrants in Britain, idealists from the United States, and veterans of the Zion Mule Corps. Among them were future prime ministers David Ben-Gurion and Levi Eshkol (Fachler, 2003:36).

The Jewish Legion's most significant deployment came during the British campaign to capture the Jordan Valley in 1918. Though its military contributions were modest compared to larger Allied forces, its presence carried immense symbolic weight. The sight of Jewish soldiers fighting for the liberation of Palestine resonated deeply with Jewish communities worldwide and signaled a shift in Jewish identity – from passive victims of history to active participants shaping their destiny (Morris, 1999:77).

Though Trumpeldor left the Legion before its disbandment, his legacy continued to inspire future generations. He returned to Palestine, where he was later killed defending the settlement of Tel Hai in 1920. His final words, *It is good to die for our country* (Kellerman, 1996:373), became a rallying cry for Zionists everywhere. The Jewish Legion was disbanded after World War I, but its impact endured. Many of its veterans joined a new Zionist paramilitary organization, which was a large-scale evolution of Bar-Giora and Hashomer.

2.3. The Haganah: Large-Scale Defense

While the transition from Bar-Giora to Hashomer did not initially signify a major enhancement in Jewish military capabilities in Palestine, the emergence of the first Arab riots against Jews significantly accelerated their development. In particular, in April 1920,

during the Nabi Musa festival[26] in Jerusalem, simmering tensions escalated as Arab crowds, inflamed by nationalist speeches, violently attacked the Jewish population (Morris, 1999:95). This clear manifestation of violence highlighted the need for a larger militia to protect the Yishuv and their settlements. From this necessity, the Haganah (Hebrew for *defense*) was formed a few months later. Unlike its predecessors, the organization aimed to transcend local defense, setting its sights on a coordinated large-scale approach to protecting Jewish settlements from Arab attacks, particularly during the British Mandate's most turbulent periods.

The Haganah was founded under the auspices of the Histadrut, the Jewish trade union in Palestine, which sought to ensure the security of workers and settlements while maintaining broader alignment with Zionist aspirations. The organization arose as part of a continuum, replacing the more localized and elite Hashomer group, whose limited rural focus proved insufficient for addressing the increasingly systematic violence faced by the Yishuv (Ozacky-Lazar and Kabha, 2002:46). Early Haganah leaders such as Eliyahu Golomb and Shaul Avigur envisioned a disciplined force that balanced legal cooperation with British authorities with covert preparations for future contingencies. This duality allowed the organization to operate under the radar while systematically building its capacity (Bauer, 1966:183).

Throughout the 1920s, the Haganah remained loosely organized, reflecting the Yishuv's limited resources and relatively small numbers. However, the organization quickly gained legitimacy and support within the Jewish community, as it provided a unifying platform during periods of escalating tensions. By the mid-1930s, the growing scale and sophistication of Arab uprisings – such as the Great Revolt (1936-1939) – demanded that the Haganah modernize its tactics. Influential leaders like Yitzhak Sadeh introduced mobile Plugot Sadeh (*Field Companies*, more commonly referred to by the abbreviation POSH or FOSH), which employed preemptive and guerrilla tactics to counteract threats more effectively (Bauer, 1966:186). This transformation marked a critical evolution from a reactive militia to a proactive, quasi-military force.

By the outbreak of World War II, the Haganah had matured into a complex organization with a hierarchical structure, regional command systems, and specialized units, including

[26] The Nabi Musa festival is an annual Muslim pilgrimage to the shrine of Nabi Musa, believed to be the tomb of the prophet Moses, located near Jericho (Morris, 1999:34).

intelligence (SHAI) and arms production divisions. The main units were Hish, Him, and Palmach. Hish (*Field Corps*) served as the regular infantry and comprised the bulk of the Haganah's manpower. Organized into brigades based on geographical distribution, Hish was responsible for routine defense tasks, patrolling, and maintaining security within Jewish communities (Bauer, 1966:202). Him (*Guard Corps*) provided logistical support: it handled all supply chain needs, including the procurement and distribution of arms, ammunition, and other military supplies. This unit ensured that the Haganah's operational forces were well-equipped and able to sustain their activities over prolonged periods. Finally, the Palmach (*Strike Companies*) was the elite strike force. It was formed in 1941 to prepare for the threat of an eventual Axis invasion of Palestine in case of success in the North African campaign. Known for its rigorous training regimes and high mobility, the Palmach specialized in assault operations, sabotage, and reconnaissance missions (Bauer, 1966:197).

The Haganah also integrated women into its ranks, reflecting both practical necessity and progressive ideals, as women took on diverse roles ranging from combat training to intelligence work. However, this practice wasn't new to Yishuv armed organizations, as both Bar-Giora and Hashomer often relied on women for sentry shifts (Bauer, 1966:183). In addition, one of the Haganah's defining characteristics was its deep integration with civilian life. Its members balanced agricultural labor or study with rigorous training, fueling a connection to daily life that not only legitimized the organization among the Yishuv but also ensured widespread community support (Ozacky-Lazar and Kabha, 2002:46).

Although the Haganah had been formed in reaction to Arab riots against the Jews, its intention was not to carry out retaliatory attacks but rather to prevent similar situations and defend in case of necessity. This behavior was promoted by Havlagah (*The Restraint*), Haganah's self-restraint policy. It strictly advocated for avoiding violent retaliation against Arab aggressions, focusing instead on defensive measures and the protection of Jewish communities without escalating conflicts (Bauer, 1966:184). The principle behind Havlagah was to demonstrate a disciplined, responsible approach in the face of provocation, aiming to gain international sympathy for the Zionist cause. The implementation of this policy often involved absorbing attacks without immediate

response, reinforcing defensive positions, and cooperating with British authorities to manage security within legal frameworks.

During World War II, the Haganah adopted a policy of not engaging in armed confrontation against the British authorities in Mandatory Palestine, despite ongoing tensions over British restrictions on Jewish immigration. This decision was part of a strategic alignment with the Allies, recognizing the broader threat posed by the Axis powers, Nazi Germany in particular. Instead of armed resistance, the Haganah focused on supporting the British war effort while simultaneously facilitating the Aliyah Bet, the illegal Jewish immigration. This delicate balancing act involved extensive covert activities to bypass the British White Paper of 1939, which severely limited Jewish immigration at a time of desperate need. The British restrictive migration policy was a wound to the Zionist aspirations, but a rebellion against Britain would have signified an attempt to weaken one of the main opposing forces to Nazism. Ben-Gurion, who was already President of the Jewish Agency at the time, elegantly diverted this dilemma by stating: *We shall fight the White Paper as if there were no war with Germany and we shall fight the Germans as if there were no White Paper* (Brenner, 1965:3). The Haganah organized and coordinated the smuggling of Jews from Europe, using a fleet of clandestinely acquired ships, often through front companies to conceal their true purpose. Once acquired, these vessels were restructured to maximize passenger capacity, sometimes holding many times their intended number. The conditions on these voyages were cramped and dangerous, with minimal hygiene and safety measures. The embarkation of refugees onto these ships was carried out in secret, with departure points frequently changing to avoid detection by British and local authorities. Ports in Italy, France, and other parts of southern Europe served as key hubs for these operations. Haganah's efforts were supported by an extensive network of agents and sympathizers across Europe who helped organize the gathering of refugees, provided false documentation, facilitated their travel to embarkation points, and even shared information on British naval movements. Once sailed, the ships had to avoid detection by British patrols in the Mediterranean. The Royal Navy was tasked with enforcing the immigration restrictions, and they frequently intercepted these refugee ships. When caught, the refugees faced detention – usually in Cyprus – and the ships were confiscated. In these

cases, the Haganah provided legal assistance, and public campaigns were often launched to pressure British authorities to allow the refugees to enter Palestine (Morris, 1999:176). The Haganah's role in providing a safe haven for Holocaust survivors and refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe further enhanced its reputation as the guardian of Zionist aspirations. This effort also aimed at increasing the Jewish population in Palestine as a foundational step toward statehood. By the mid-1940s, the Haganah had firmly established itself as the dominant defense organization in Palestine, and when Israel was founded in 1948, it merged into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

2.4. The Irgun Zvai Leumi: Terrorism for a Jewish State

2.4.1. Origin and Ideology

By 1931 the Fourth Aliyah was over, and Palestine was inhabited by 175,000 Jews and 760,000 Arabs (DellaPergola, 2003:11). Five decades since the beginning of the First Aliyah, less than two from the establishment of the Jewish State, and in the midst of the British Mandate, inherent tensions between Jews and Arabs were on the brink of large-scale escalation. The Arab riots of 1929[27] had been particularly violent, resulting in the deaths of 133 Jews and 116 Arabs (Bell, 1996:7). The Haganah's passive stance – in compliance with the Havlagah policy – became the object of internal discussions. These discrepancies were due to the high level of diversity within this heterogeneous group, whose members ranged from Labor to Revisionist ideologies. Notably, the latter animated many commanders of the Haganah – mainly from Jerusalem – who broke away and founded the Irgun Zvai Leumi be Erez Israel (*National Military Organization in the Land of Israel*, also known by the acronym *Etzel* or *IZL*, but mostly referred to as *Irgun*) in 1931. The new group positioned itself as a more assertive and action-oriented alternative to the Haganah[28]. The original militia had not evolved into a large paramilitary organization yet, and the new group aspired to become one (as the name *National Military Organization* suggests). The Haganah operated within a broad mandate from the Jewish

[27] The 1929 riots, fueled by tensions over the Western Wall and fears of Jewish immigration, saw violent attacks on Jewish communities, including massacres in Hebron and Safed (Bell, 1996:7).
[28] One of the names the Irgun initially went by was *Haganah Bet* (*Haganah B* or *Second Defense*) (Bell, 1996:23).

Agency and enjoyed the resulting widespread support from mainstream Zionism. The Irgun, instead, outrightly refused the Agency's command and sought to define its legitimacy through a philosophy of direct confrontation with both Arab forces and British authorities (Zadka, 1996:100-101).

While the Haganah represented a melting pot of various Zionist streams, primarily with a socialist orientation, the Irgun emerged as the implementation of Revisionist Zionism. The central program of this secular, right-wing stream was built around Jabotinsky's conception of the *iron wall*[29]. As pointed out in the previous chapter[30], this metaphor encapsulated his belief that Jewish settlement in Palestine could only be achieved through strength and an unwavering demonstration of force against Arab resistance. Jabotinsky argued that an agreement with the Arabs was unattainable because they would naturally resist any attempt at dispossession or displacement, seeing Palestine as their exclusive national home. He asserted that only after creating an invulnerable security position could negotiations lead to peace, fundamentally shaping the military and strategic doctrines of the Irgun (Brenner, 1983:67).

Figure 3. Irgun's propaganda poster distributed in Central Europe [1931]. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irgun#/media/File:Irgun_poster_Erez_Jisrael.jpg.

In addition to the unconditional use of force to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, another ideological element distanced the new Revisionist militia from the Haganah. While the latter sought to establish a Jewish state in Palestine – that is, the western side of the Jordan River – the Irgun, in line with the Revisionist beliefs, had wider territorial aspirations: Transjordan (the eastern side) was also to be included in the Jewish state's borders, as clearly deducible from the Irgun's manifesto

[29] The expression *iron wall* refers to the armed force that Jabotinsky deemed necessary for the establishment of a Jewish State: *Zionist colonisation must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population. Which means that it can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population – behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach* (Jabotinsky, 1923).

[30] See Chapter 1, *Background Information on Zionism and Mandatory Palestine*, Section 1.2.3, *Jabotinsky's Revision*.

shown in Figure 3 (Brenner, 1983:67). Although the Irgun embraced a secular ideology, the origin of this ambition traces back to the land granted by God to Abraham's descendants in the Book of Genesis, as stated in the previous chapter[31]. Despite the biblical claim, the British policy over the geographic extent of the Zionist cause was made clear in 1922. A British memorandum approved by the League of Nations excluded Transjordan from the provisions of the Mandate concerning the establishment of a Jewish national home[32]. While mainstream Zionists such as Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann[33] accepted the policy to maintain good relations with the British, Revisionists refused to compromise. They condemned the policy as an example of Britain's duplicity and imperialist interests taking precedence over Zionist aspirations (Brenner, 1999:100).

2.4.2. Betar: A Qualified Recruitment Pool

The Irgun quickly evolved into a structured and articulated force. The organization was led by the High Command (based in Tel Aviv), which directed overall strategy, political objectives, and interactions with other Jewish groups and the British authorities. At the operational level, the Irgun was divided into districts, each with a commander responsible for overseeing activities within specific geographic areas. The core of the Irgun's structure was its cells, which operated semi-independently to maintain secrecy. These cells typically comprised small groups of fighters who carried out armed operations against British and Arab targets (Bell, 1996:111).

Because of its concrete approach to defense, the Irgun was soon well-viewed by many members of the Yishuv who perceived security as a primary need in their day-to-day lives. As a consequence, the Revisionist group became deeply grounded in various communities, mixing aspects of civil and military nature. The Irgun could rely on civilians

[31] See Chapter 1, *Background Information on Zionism and Mandatory Palestine*, Section 1.2.1, *The Jewish State*.

[32] Transjordan was part of the larger area covered by the Mandate for Palestine. However, the region lacked formal governance and was marked by tribal autonomy and sporadic unrest. In 1921, Britain appointed Emir Abdullah to administer the area as a provisional arrangement. This decision effectively established *de facto* Arab control, intending to stabilize the region and secure Arab support. The Transjordan Memorandum formalized this arrangement, establishing Transjordan as a distinct political entity under Abdullah's leadership, separate from the provisions for a Jewish national home west of the Jordan River (Morris, 1999:100).

[33] Chaim Weizmann was a chemist, former WZO President, and the first President of Israel (Morris, 1999:169).

in multiple aspects, but its strict recruitment standards made it difficult to involve ordinary people in the organization. Therefore, most of the new group's staff came from Betar, a Revisionist Zionist youth organization founded by Jabotinsky in 1923 and named after Joseph Trumpeldor[34]. Betar emphasized Jewish nationalism, self-defense, and military readiness. It aimed to prepare young Jews for leadership roles in the fight for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Betar embraced individualism and Revisionist ideals, advocating for Jewish sovereignty on both sides of the Jordan River. The movement organized camps, educational programs, and community events, creating a robust network of young Zionists. With a strong presence in Europe, it cultivated discipline, loyalty, and a militant ethos among Jewish youth, fostering a deep commitment to Zionist objectives. When the Irgun broke away from the Haganah, Betar became a prestigious recruitment pool. Youth trained in Betar camps across Europe often joined the Irgun upon immigrating to Palestine, strengthening its ranks with individuals firmly dedicated to the cause. The young members were accustomed to following orders and maintaining secrecy, traits essential for success in underground activities (Brenner, 1983:69).

Within Mandatory Palestine, The Irgun's recruitment efforts targeted urban, middle-class Jews, particularly those in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa. Unlike the socialist-oriented Haganah, which was closely aligned with kibbutzim and agricultural communities, the Irgun appealed to nationalist individuals disenchanted with the socialist ethos of mainstream Zionism (Bell, 1996:108).

2.4.3. Lehi: A Heinous Ally

The self-restraint policy was not the only reason for the split within the Haganah, from which the Irgun emerged. The new group was a much more radical one, with a higher political cohesion that bore the ideals of Jabotinsky's Revisionist Movement. However, the Irgun leadership soon came to terms with the complex task of managing a paramilitary organization and outlining its strategy. The term *Havlagah* came back at the center of discussions among former Haganah members, with some considering it a viable option in certain circumstances and others repudiating it as the main obstacle to Zionist ambitions.

[34] The name Betar is an altered acronym of *Brit Trumpeldor*, meaning *Trumpeldor Alliance* (Bell, 1996:19).

With the advent of World War II, the Irgun decided to halt its military effort against British authorities, not to burden the anti-Nazi campaign. Avraham Stern, political leader of the Irgun born in Poland, vehemently opposed the ceasefire. Stern argued that British policies, particularly the White Paper of 1939, posed a greater threat to Jewish aspirations than Nazi Germany at the time. His position directly opposed that of the Irgun's leadership, who believed cooperation with Britain could eventually secure Jewish support and protection (Brenner, 1965:2-4). This ideological rift led Stern and a minority faction to break away from the Irgun in 1940, forming Lehi[35], acronym of *Lohamei Herut Israel* (*Fighters for the Freedom of Israel*, often abbreviated as *F.F.I.*), also referred to as the Stern Gang. Unlike the Irgun, which saw Arabs as its primary obstacle, Lehi identified the British as the principal enemy, framing them as colonial occupiers impeding Jewish statehood (Brenner, 1965:4). Stern's worldview was uncompromising. He was prepared to seek assistance from any source – including fascist regimes – to achieve Jewish sovereignty (Morris, 1999:174). This pragmatism, combined with his radicalism, further distanced Lehi from the Irgun, whose leadership remained cautiously optimistic about collaboration with pro-Zionist elements within the British establishment. While the Irgun sought to negotiate more favorable terms within the British Mandate framework, Stern envisioned a complete British withdrawal from Palestine as the first step toward establishing a Jewish state.

Lehi's radical stance and operational strategies alienated it from mainstream Jewish organizations and even from the broader Jewish community in Palestine, and its reliance on robberies to fund operations and its assassination campaigns against British officials and collaborators garnered widespread condemnation (Brenner, 1965:6). Despite internal disagreements and setbacks, including the death of Avraham Stern at the hands of British police in 1942, Lehi persisted. It reorganized under new leadership, shifting from a centralized command to a collective leadership model to mitigate risks associated with authoritarian control (Brenner, 1965:7).

[35] Initially, Stern called the group *Irgun Zvai Leumi be-Israel* (*National Military Organization of Israel*), highlighting the same commitment shown by the Irgun to creating a large paramilitary organization for an eventual Jewish state (Brenner, 1965:4).

2.4.4. Tehomi and Raziel: The First Irgun

The first Commander of the Irgun was Avraham Tehomi. He was born in Odesa in 1903 and joined the Haganah upon his arrival in Palestine. In 1924, he authored one of the first – if not the first – Zionist political assassinations in Mandatory Palestine. The name of his victim was Jacob Israel de Haan, a Dutch poet, writer, and journalist who advocated for coexistence with the Arab population and supported the idea of negotiating directly with Arab leaders to ensure the safety and religious autonomy of Jewish communities in the region (Giebels, 2014:111-112). In 1931, Tehomi was one of the members who broke away from the Haganah to form the Irgun and became its first Chief Commander. Under his leadership, the Irgun mirrored the organizational structure of the Haganah, focusing on settlement defense. During the Great Revolt of 1936-1939, Tehomi's moderate stance led him to advocate for restraint and propose unifying the Irgun with the Haganah to form a single Jewish military force. His efforts culminated in a 1937 referendum, resulting in a split within the Irgun, with Tehomi and about half of its members rejoining the Haganah (Bell, 1996:35). This ideological divide marked a turning point, as the remaining Irgun members, loyal to Revisionist ideals, adopted a more militant and independent approach. Until then, the Chief Commander's office was subject to the Supervisory Committee, of which Jabotinsky was a member. However, after the 1937 referendum, the collegiate body was dismantled and Jabotinsky became the Supreme Commander.

Amid the Great Revolt, attacks from one side or the other could quickly destabilize the opponent and its strategy. This was the case of the attack carried out near Jerusalem by an Arab armed group on five Jewish workers, who all died. Jabotinsky found himself before the first critical decision as the Supreme Commander, and he determined the end of the Havlagah, the self-restraint policy. On November 14, 1937, a day that would remain known as *Black Sunday*, the Irgun launched simultaneous attacks that killed ten Arabs. David Raziel, the prominent figure within the Irgun who coordinated the operation, defined the new policy as *active defense* (Bell, 1996:39).

The following year, Raziel became Head of the Irgun. Under his leadership, the Revisionist group carried out its deadliest attack before the Jewish insurgency. On July 25, 1938, the Irgun operatives concealed an explosive device inside a pickled cucumber jar and placed it in the Haifa marketplace, a bustling area frequented by Arabs. The device was timed to detonate during a peak hour, ensuring the presence of a large crowd. Thirty-

nine Arabs died. Within the Jewish community, reactions were mixed. While most of the right-wing component of the Yishuv supported the Irgun's approach as a necessary response to Arab aggressions, the Jewish Agency and the Haganah harshly condemned the attack (Morris, 1999:147; Bell, 1996:42). Regardless of the variety of opinions within Zionists, the bombing sent shockwaves through Haifa, a focal point of tensions between Arabs and Jews during the Mandate period. The immediate consequence was intensified anger and hostility among the Arab population, leading to further violence and reprisals against the Jews. It deepened the cycle of violence that marked the Great Revolt.

The end of the revolt was quickly followed by the onset of World War II, less than four months later. Jabotinsky ordered Raziel to avoid confrontations with the British, in alignment with Ben-Gurion and other mainstream Zionist leaders (Bell, 1996:42). Surprisingly, Raziel obeyed[36]. This shift away from the revolutionary spirit that had defined the Irgun since its inception stemmed primarily from three factors: the oft-mentioned stance of solidarity against Nazism (following the logic of *the enemy of my enemy is my friend*), a newfound harmony after the turmoil of the Great Revolt, and the belief that appearing conciliatory to the international audience could aid the establishment of a Jewish state. The convergence of these elements ultimately appeased the fiercely independent Irgun despite the much-maligned White Paper. As described in the previous subparagraph, this policy change caused the 1940 scission with Lehi, which never ceased operations against British authorities. Raziel, instead, went as far as helping the British in the war against the Nazi regime.

In April 1941, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, the Prime Minister of Iraq, led a coup that sought to align Iraq with the Axis powers, challenging British influence in the region. This move prompted the British to intervene. Raziel participated in a mission under British command aimed at destroying oil refineries in Habbaniya, which subsequently evolved into an intelligence operation. On May 20, while traveling in a British military vehicle, Raziel's convoy came under attack by a plane of the Luftwaffe, the German air force (Bell,

[36] Throughout my research, I was struck by how often I encountered accounts of Irgun leadership ignoring their Supreme Commander's orders. Jabotinsky's frequent absences due to his trips – undertaken for various purposes, including meetings with influential political leaders, fundraising efforts, and gathering instructions for military tactics from other paramilitary organizations – undoubtedly contributed to this quasi-anarchical practice. Additionally, recurring arrests of Irgun commanders by British authorities exacerbated the situation, fueling a climate of continuous leadership changes, unstable policies, and impermanence.

1996:68). His death left a significant operational leadership void in the Irgun, which added to the lack of spiritual guidance followed by Jabotinsky's death in New York on August 3, 1940, at the age of 59 (Brenner, 1983:90).

Raziel's involvement in World War II was one of the many examples of small-scale collaboration between the Yishuv and the British in the war effort. However, as Britain faced a growing manpower shortage, it sought broader and more organized recruitment from Mandatory Palestine, forming separate Jewish and Arab battalions. Initially tasked with guarding installations and escorting convoys, these units were later merged into the Palestine Regiment in 1942. Though the British aimed for equal Jewish and Arab enlistment, Jewish recruitment soon dominated. Deployed to Egypt and Cyrenaica (Eastern Libya), regiment members saw limited combat but engaged in heavy fighting in Benghazi (Penkower, 2011:352-353). As Zionist leaders pushed for a distinct Jewish force, British resistance softened. By 1944, under mounting Zionist pressure and in response to the Holocaust, Britain approved the Jewish Brigade, a fully Jewish combat unit formed from the Palestine Regiment's Jewish battalions. Deployed to Italy, it fought in key battles along the Senio River, earning distinction within the British Eighth Army. After the war, Brigade members played a critical role in smuggling Holocaust survivors to Palestine and hunting Nazi war criminals (Penkower, 2011:361).

2.4.5. Begin and the Insurgency: The Decisive Years

Yaakov Meridor, a Polish Irgunist and former member of Betar, was with Raziel on the Iraqi mission. Upon his return, he assumed control of the Irgun. His two years of command were not particularly significant in the definition of the Irgun's identity and evolution in the struggle for a Jewish state. His most impactful decision was to appoint Menachem Begin as his successor, although it remains unclear whether the choice was his own or imposed by other commanders (Bell, 1996:56).

The new Head of Irgun and future Prime Minister of Israel guided the group from 1943 until its dismantling in 1948 following the establishment of the Jewish state. Menachem Begin was born in Brest (then part of the Russian Empire, later falling under the Second Polish Republic in the interwar period, and becoming part of Belarus thereafter) in 1913 and made a career climbing the ranks of Betar. During World War II, Begin joined Anders' Army (the Polish Armed Forces in the East) and arrived in Palestine for military

purposes in 1942 through the Persian Corridor[37]. There, he left the army, joined the Irgun, and became its leader by the end of 1943, just a year after his arrival (Bell, 1996:57).

With Begin's leadership, the ceasefire with the British was revoked. The continued application of the White Paper's provision despite the desperate situation of Jewish refugees during the war was deemed unacceptable. On February 1, 1944, the Irgun joined Lehi in their confrontations with the British, which had continued uninterrupted throughout the war (Morris, 1999:174). The first open attack occurred on February 12, targeting the British Immigration Department in Jerusalem. On February 27, the Irgun targeted the income tax offices in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv (Bell, 1996:113-114). These first two attacks were conducted on Saturday, when the offices were empty, ensuring there were no casualties while making a significant political statement. In addition, prior warnings were issued near the buildings, demonstrating a tactic designed to minimize human harm while maximizing the mediatic impact.

Menachem Begin attached great importance to the publicity effect of his organization's attacks: since he took the leadership, Irgun's actions were often paired with propagandistic messages, disseminated through posters, leaflets, and clandestine radio broadcasts, in Hebrew, Arabic, and English (Zadka, 1996:102). During the insurgency, ideological goals such as national freedom and the right to Jewish immigration were brought to the public attention, while framing the struggle as a fight for justice against British oppression. Begin's focus on propaganda by connecting each military action with a clear ideological justification further enhanced Irgun's appeal among segments of the Jewish community[38]. A critical aspect of this campaign was the exploitation of Holocaust survivors' plight, particularly through *boat propaganda*[39] (Zadka, 1996:106), which labeled British immigration restrictions as a continuation of Nazi policies, a narrative that resonated strongly with international audiences, especially in the United States. Captured members of the Irgun often used their trials as platforms for political statements, comparing their struggle to other independence movements, such as Ireland's fight

[37] The Persian Corridor was a vital supply route during World War II, used by the Allies to transport military aid to the Soviet Union via Iran.

[38] The Irgun wasn't alone in undertaking propaganda efforts. During the Jewish insurgency (1944-1948), Lehi also published a newspaper where they often addressed their violent actions. Ironically, the periodical was called *Haamas*, which in Hebrew translates to *The Deed*. Hamas, the Palestinian terrorist organization, is instead an Arabic acronym for *Islamic Resistance Movement* (Bell, 1996:119).

[39] The expression refers to the exploitation of events in which British authorities intercepted and confiscated ships illegally bringing Jewish refugees to Palestine.

against British rule, which further solidified their image as martyrs for Jewish liberation (Zadka, 1996:111-112). Propaganda was also directed at British soldiers to undermine their morale by highlighting the futility of their presence in Palestine. These messages adopted a personal tone, distinguishing between the soldiers and the government, claiming that the former were only instruments of their hypocritical politicians (Zadka, 1996:107).

One of the most decisive moments in the Jewish insurgency came on November 6, 1944, and not at the hands of the Irgun. In Cairo, Egypt, Lehi members Eliyahu Bet-Zuri and Eliyahu Hakim (respectively 22 and 19 years old) approached a car as it was about to enter a driveway. In the car was Lord Moyne, the British Minister Resident in the Middle East, a dear friend of Prime Minister Winston Churchill (Morris, 1999:171). One of the assailants distracted the chauffeur by asking a question, allowing the other to open the car door and shoot Lord Moyne and his driver. After the shooting, the two Lehi militants attempted to flee but were quickly captured following a brief chase. The British authorities conducted a trial, and both assassins were found guilty and subsequently executed by hanging in March 1945 (Bell, 1996:93). This high-profile killing led to severe repercussions from the British authorities, including intensified efforts to crack down on Zionist militant activities.

However, the most transformative consequence of this terrorist attack stemmed from Ben-Gurion's outright condemnation, which resulted in a collaboration between the Haganah and British authorities to repress the insurgency. During the phase known as the *Hunting Season*, the Haganah systematically tracked down, arrested, and handed over members of the Irgun and Lehi to British authorities, while also sharing intelligence with them (Paul, Clarke, Grill, and Dunigan, 2013:5). This period of internal strife significantly weakened the Irgun, leading to a temporary cessation of their militant activities.

Accounts vary regarding the reasons that led the Haganah to engage in this phase of what could be called a quasi-*Zionist civil war*. Some argue that the Haganah feared that its role as the leading paramilitary force would be threatened by right-wing terrorist groups as they were gathering increasing support among the Yishuv – also because of Begin's propaganda (Paul et al., 2013:5). Others hold that the Jewish Agency firmly believed that a good relationship with the British was instrumental for the Zionist cause (Aronson, 1998:207).

While both perspectives offer plausible explanations, the subsequent events further complicate the analysis of the underlying reasons for this decision. After World War II, the Zionist leadership was expecting the British government to make significant moves toward establishing a Jewish homeland. However, these expectations were unmet as the British continued to enforce the restrictive 1939 White Paper, limiting Jewish immigration and land purchases. Disillusioned and disappointed, the Haganah, which had experienced severe internal strife due to the policy of the Hunting Season, secretly joined the Irgun and Lehi in the insurgency. In October 1945 they formed the United Resistance Movement (often referred to as *Tenuat Hameri*, an abbreviation of the full name *Tenuat Hameri Ha'ivri*, which means *Jewish Rebellion Movement*) to contrast British rule. They agreed to a central command structure, though each group maintained operational independence in carrying out agreed-upon missions (Paul et al., 2013:6). Numbers alone can show the extent of Haganah's contribution to the insurgency in terms of armed members: 300 from Lehi, 1,500 Irgunists, and 40,000 from the Haganah (Hassan, 2001:869).

On the night between October 30 and November 1, an extensive coordinated assault was carried out by Palmach units along with Irgun and Lehi forces. This operation involved the disruption of the railway network and key infrastructures. The Haganah attacked the Palestine Railway, the Irgun the Lydda railway station, and Lehi the oil refinery of Haifa. These strikes, which resulted in casualties on both sides, became known as the *Night of the Trains* and marked the operational inauguration of the coalition (Bell, 1996:145). By 1946, operations of the United Resistance Movement had intensified, culminating in the *Night of the Bridges*. On the night of June 16-17, a series of coordinated sabotage operations destroyed eleven bridges linking Mandatory Palestine to neighboring countries. These bridges were crucial for the movement of British military forces and supplies (Morris, 1999:176).

As a reaction to the increasing violence, on Saturday, June 29, 1946, British authorities launched Operation Agatha, a large-scale cordon and search operation. It involved 10,000 British troops executing arrests of the insurgents and seizing documents and weaponry. The Yishuv referred to that operation as *Black Sabbath*, a Saturday that lasted for two weeks (Paul et al., 2013:7; Morris, 1999:179). During this time, the British authorities raided the Jewish Agency headquarters in Jerusalem and seized documents implicating

its involvement in the insurgency. They were stored in the British Mandate Secretariat and Army Headquarters, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The United Resistance Movement planned to destroy the evidence by attacking the hotel.

During the preparation of the attack, disagreements on timing and modality led the Haganah to halt the operation. However, the Irgun, which always claimed its independence from the mainstream Zionist leadership, decided to carry out the attack anyway. On July 22, 1946, Irgunists disguised as workers and carrying explosives in milk cans infiltrated the hotel. The bombs were strategically placed in the basement, targeting the structural columns supporting the wing occupied by British authorities (Bell, 1996; 168-170). Despite warnings allegedly issued to minimize casualties[40], which were ignored or acted upon too late, the detonation killed 91 people and injured 49 (Brenner, 1965:27; Paul et al., 2013:7).

While the Haganah might have changed its mind about the importance of maintaining good relations with the British, the denial of indiscriminate attacks involving a large number of civilians remained firm. The tragedy experienced by the Jewish people during World War II could have at least resulted in a global sense of sympathy, which Zionist leaders sought to harness in pursuit of their longstanding goal of statehood. Therefore, Zionist leaders needed to maintain a favorable reputation among the international audience. An indiscriminate attack where several civilians were killed did not match the Jewish Agency's plan to achieve independence. Beyond strategic calculations, the mere sense of repugnance for such an act of violence led Ben-Gurion, the Agency, and other Zionist leaders to harshly condemn the attack and the Irgun. Consequently, the Haganah left the coalition, effectively dissolving the short-lived United Resistance Movement, which lasted less than a year. However, the mainstream paramilitary organization did not resume the Hunting Season and adopted a passive stance toward the subsequent activities of the Irgun and Lehi, definitively distancing itself from the British.

The King David Hotel attack was one of the deadliest of the insurgency and is often considered the most symbolic one, as it showcased the capacity of Zionist terrorism to challenge British authority. This event significantly escalated tensions, leading to further British counterinsurgency efforts as well as further Zionist terrorist attacks, which are

[40] Since the Irgun began to focus on the mediatic impact of their actions under Begin's command, it was a usual practice for the group to warn about their attacks to limit civilian casualties (Bell, 1996:175).

addressed in Appendix 1. Such acts not only showed the growing capabilities and determination of the Zionist paramilitary organizations but also placed substantial pressure on the British authorities, both locally and internationally. The increasing frequency and severity of these attacks highlighted the British failure to maintain order and governance in Palestine, undermining their moral and administrative authority and compelling them to seek a resolution beyond unilateral British efforts. Consequently, Britain's referral of the Palestine question to the newly established United Nations in 1947 was significantly influenced by the urgent need to address the security challenges posed by Zionist terrorism. This move was intended to offload the colonial burden amidst declining British imperial power and the escalating Jewish-Arab conflict, setting the stage for international intervention in the form of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), which ultimately recommended the partition of Palestine into independent Jewish and Arab states, as discussed in the previous chapter. Four years after Begin's group ended the ceasefire with the British, the Jewish insurgency proved a success, resulting in the establishment of the State of Israel. Fifty-eight years after Theodor Herzl theorized Zionism, its definitional objective was achieved. The name of the pamphlet containing the foundation of the movement (*Der Jundestaat*) had transformed into a Jewish state.

Following the declaration of independence on May 14, 1948, the provisional government led by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion sought to ensure a cohesive defense strategy by unifying all paramilitary organizations under the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF, also known by the Hebrew acronym *Tzahal*). This merger was not merely a functional integration of forces but also a symbolic act of unifying diverse militant ideologies under a single national banner. The process was fraught with challenges, particularly due to ideological differences and mutual distrust between the Irgun and the Haganah. The most representative episode of this period of merging and transition was the *Altalena* Affair[41], which occurred in June 1948. The *Altalena*, a ship carrying arms and fighters for the Irgun, arrived off the coast of Israel. The provisional government demanded that the arms be handed over to the IDF. However, the Irgun, led by Begin, sought to retain a portion of the weapons for its own units. The standoff escalated into a violent confrontation when

[41] This episode is further analyzed in Chapter 3, *Arms Procurement: How Non-State Actors Secured Matériel*, Section 3.3, *France: Behind the 'Altalena' Affair*.

IDF forces, under orders from Ben-Gurion, shelled the *Altalena*, resulting in the deaths of several Irgun members and the destruction of the ship (Bell, 1996:326). This incident underscored the deep divisions within the nascent Israeli armed forces, which in turn arose from the highly polarized nature of Zionism. Despite the tensions, the incorporation of the Irgun into the IDF was eventually achieved, contributing to establishing a centralized and effective military structure for the hard-won State of Israel.

The end of the fight for a Jewish state forced Menachem Begin to rethink the future of the Irgun, leading to its dissolution and transformation into a political entity. In June 1948, Begin formally established Herut (Hebrew for *freedom*), distinct from Hatzohar[42], the older Revisionist party founded by Jabotinsky. The new party positioned itself as a staunch opponent of territorial concessions, advocating for Israel's sovereignty over both sides of the Jordan River. Despite its ideological fervor, Herut initially struggled to gain traction and to challenge the dominance of Mapai, the Labor Zionist party led by Ben-Gurion (Morris, 1999:276). Herut's fortunes shifted in 1973, when it merged with smaller right-wing factions to form Likud. This coalition strengthened the right-wing opposition, culminating in the 1977 electoral victory, where Begin became Israel's first right-wing Prime Minister (Morris, 1999:335).

2.5. Conclusion

Beginning with the pragmatic need to defend Jewish settlements in Ottoman Palestine, the chapter traces the increasing complexity of reasons for the formation of Zionist militias. As the demands for defense grew more articulated, these groups evolved with more sophisticated structure and organization. Early militias such as Bar-Giora and Hashomer showcased how the first threats to the Yishuv's security gave rise to simple yet effective defense measures. The increasing Jewish and Arab migration, however, heightened the clashes between the communities, highlighting the need for a larger militia covering the entire territory. The Haganah was formed to satisfy this demand, but the

[42] See Chapter 1, *Background Information on Zionism and Mandatory Palestine*, Section 1.2.3, *Jabotinsky's Revision*.

wide spectrum of Zionist streams involved resulted in an internal crisis, ultimately giving rise to the Irgun.

The revolutionary soul that animated the Revisionist armed group suffered a few setbacks, such as the 1937 referendum for reunification with the Haganah and the adoption of a ceasefire towards the British at the beginning of World War II, from which Lehi emerged. These setbacks highlighted the complexity of views even within an apparently cohesive right-wing group, which was formed to offer a pragmatic defense system but soon confronted wider challenges. In the Irgun's process of maturity, its leadership became aware of the political charge contained in violence and its consequences. Calling a halt to operations against the British during World War II showed the first signs of this process, entailing the realization that violence was not the goal but only a means of the Zionist cause. Begin's resort to propaganda and symbolic attacks rather than indiscriminate retaliatory actions further contributed to the maturity of the Irgun.

This refinement of methods and strategies enabled the Irgun to lead the Jewish insurgency, even prompting the moderate Haganah to join the struggle against British rule under the United Resistance Movement. The growing hostility and acts of terrorism such as the bombing of the King David Hotel effectively eroded British authority, culminating in the withdrawal of their administration and the referral of the Palestine question to the UN. A percentage of the contribution of terrorism to the success of the Zionist cause is impossible to calculate. However, after examining the heightened tensions in Mandatory Palestine during its final years, it can reasonably be argued that terrorism played a crucial role in bringing the Mandate to an end, enabling the United Nations to assume control of the contested region and adopt Resolution 181.

3. ARMS PROCUREMENT: HOW NON-STATE ACTORS SECURED MATÉRIEL

3.1. Introduction

The attacks executed by the Irgun are among the most violent episodes of the British Mandate. The atrocities committed and the terror spread across the region and beyond demonstrated where the commitment to a cause can lead, especially when bearing arms. As the table in Figure 4 reports, Zionist paramilitary organizations were significantly armed, a fact that also becomes evident from the attacks detailed in the previous chapter. However, the question arises: how could non-state actors secure enough war materials to fight against the British? Israel was only an idea before 1948 and thus could not engage in formal agreements with sympathetic states. Nor was any state willing to allow an arms manufacturer operating in its territory to sign a legal contract with the Zionist leadership. Even more intriguing is how the Yishuv developed an arsenal robust enough to succeed in the subsequent war against a coalition of neighboring Arab states. The answer likely lies not in transparent trade but in underground operations, which are the focus of this chapter.

Alongside the Irgun's efforts to secure arms, the Haganah's more complex operations are also noteworthy. But while the Haganah was a highly organized group with approximately 40,000 members, the Irgun's accomplishments in arms procurement are particularly striking given its significantly smaller size of just 1,500 members by October 1945 (Hassan, 2001:869). After the Partition Plan, these operations became even more remarkable because of the arms embargo imposed by the United States in December 1947, followed by the United Nations at the outbreak of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (Frank, H., Klíma, Z., and Goldstein, 2017:129).

This chapter delves into these operations, revealing a story not only of weapons but also of networks, intelligence, and subterfuge. Whether leveraging surplus military equipment from the aftermath of World War II, utilizing covert sea and air routes, or founding front companies, the Zionist leadership demonstrated exceptional adaptability. In this exercise of international networking, the widespread Jewish diaspora came in handy, revealing a

global system of enterprising individuals willing to breach their countries' laws to arm the Zionist cause.

	Rifles	Sub-Machine Guns	Light Machine Guns	Medium Machine Guns	3-Inch Mortars	2-Inch Mortars	Pistols	Hand Grenades
Haganah[5]	10,662	3,662	775	157	84	670	3,830	53,751
Jewish Settlement Police[6]	6,840 (legal weapons)		48					
Etzel[7]	180	110	30		2		230	Hundreds
Lehi[8]	25	20	7		4		Small Quantity	Small Quantity
TOTAL	**17,707**	**3,792**	**860**	**157**	**90**	**670**	**4,060**	**54,000**

Figure 4. Weapons possessed by the Yishuv[43] by November 1947, six months before the establishment of Israel. Source: Frank, Klíma, and Goldstein (2017:126).

3.2 The UK: British Arsenals Raids and the First Sherman Tank

During World War II, the British forces were heavily engaged in the North African campaign (1940-1943). The overarching goal for the British was to control the Mediterranean Sea routes, which were vital for maintaining supply chains and securing naval dominance, critical for the broader Allied war effort.

Given the importance of logistical support in such a vital military theater, the British forces identified Palestine as a strategic location for storing war materials (Giusti, 2024:4). Palestine's proximity to the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, an essential maritime link between the British Empire in the East and its homeland, positioned it as a pivotal logistical hub. Consequently, extensive military storage facilities were set up throughout Palestine, making it a key rear base to launch and support operations not only in North Africa but also across the Eastern Mediterranean.

[43] The table lists the three paramilitary organizations discussed in detail in the previous chapter – the Haganah, the Irgun (referred to by its Hebrew acronym, Etzel), and Lehi – along with the Jewish Settlement Police (JSP). The latter was a division of the Notrim, a British-established auxiliary police force created in Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s. Officially tasked with safeguarding Jewish settlements against attacks, the JSP was part of British efforts to maintain order during the Great Revolt (1936-1939). Although formally under British authority, the JSP operated under the de facto control of the Haganah, serving as a critical component of its defense network. Members received weapons and training from the British, which the Haganah utilized to bolster its paramilitary infrastructure and, later, the IDF (Bell, 1996:33).

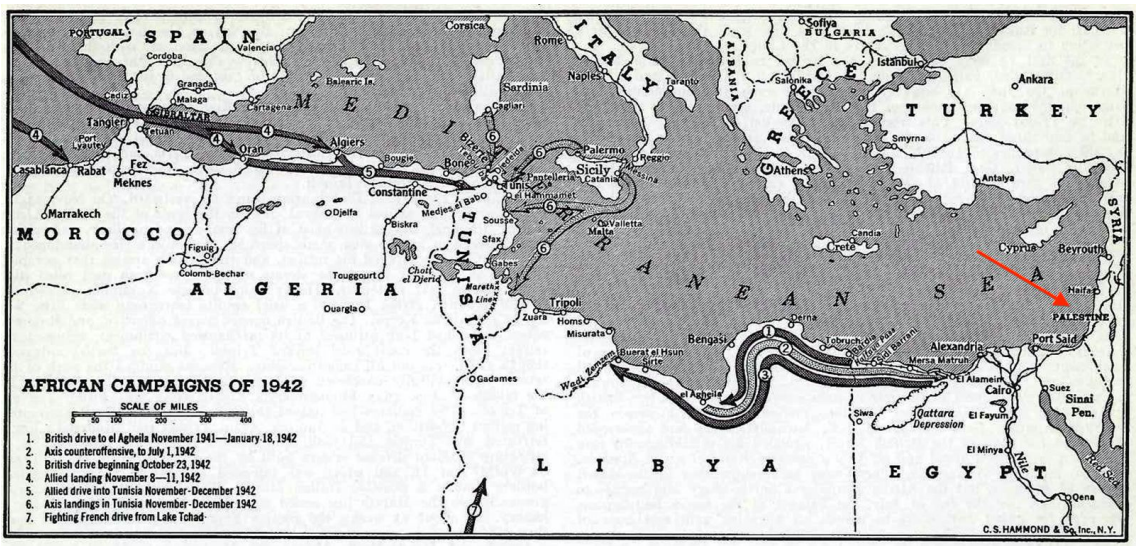

Figure 5. Map of the military operations of the North African campaign in 1942, showing Palestine's strategic location. Source: Encyclopædia Britannica.

However, the British decision to amass large quantities of military supplies in Palestine led to unintended and far-reaching consequences. The accumulation of arms provided Zionist paramilitary organizations with opportunities to access these weapons. These groups, founding their region filled with war materials, strategically utilized the proximity to British arms to enhance their military capabilities, preparing themselves for conflicts against both the British and various Arab factions (Morris, 1999:174). Weaponry thefts did not occur during the North African campaign because the Irgun only rose against the British on February 1, 1944, when the North African campaign was already over. However, many of the arms depots placed by the British army were not removed immediately, as they continued to be useful for supplying the troops in Mandatory Palestine.

One of the first raids on British arms after the beginning of the Jewish insurgency occurred on August 23, 1944. The Irgun carried out coordinated arms raids on the British Criminal Investigation Department (CID) barracks at Jaffa, Abu Kabir, and Neve Sha'anan. These raids were meticulously planned and executed to procure weapons for their newly initiated insurgency. The Irgunists managed to infiltrate the barracks, overpower the guards, and seize a total of fourteen rifles (Bell, 1996:120). However, the most significant attacks occurred after the war, in the period of the United Resistance Movement (October 1945 – August 1946).

On March 7, 1946, fourteen Irgunists disguised as British airborne soldiers managed to infiltrate a British armory at the Sarafand (present-day Tzrifin) base and overpower the

guards. They seized a substantial cache of weapons, including rifles, machine guns, and ammunition, which were then transported to secret locations across Palestine (Bell, 1996:159). The success of this raid not only provided the Irgun with much-needed arms but also demonstrated their growing operational capabilities and boldness in confronting British forces. The weapons acquired in this raid were later used in various operations against British targets, including attacks on military installations and infrastructure. The widespread support for the Zionist cause among the Jewish population in Palestine further facilitated the smuggling and concealment of weapons. The raid on Sarafand significantly boosted the Irgun's arsenal and morale, contributing to their continued efforts to challenge British rule in Palestine during the subsequent two years of insurgency.

Following the enthusiasm generated by the Sarafand base raid, the Irgun launched another attack on the Ramat Gan police station on April 23, 1946. After seizing a substantial cache of weapons, the raid developed into a fierce firefight, resulting in the deaths of two Irgun fighters. Two days later, Lehi carried out a brutal attack on a car park in Tel Aviv against the British 6th Airborne Division. The attackers, under heavy covering fire, broke into the car park, shot soldiers at close range, and looted the arms racks. They then laid mines to cover their retreat, resulting in the deaths of seven British soldiers (Bell, 1996:160-161).

A final example of the illegal procurement of weapons by Zionist paramilitary organizations from British forces is provided by the intriguing case of Eliyahu Hakim. As detailed in the previous chapter, Hakim, along with his Lehi comrade Eliyahu Bet-Zuri, was responsible for the assassination of Lord Moyne on November 6, 1944, which precipitated the initiation of the Hunting Season by the Haganah. Concerned about his involvement with the radical nationalist group, Hakim's parents persuaded him to enlist in the British Army, which then stationed him in Cairo, a pivotal center for British military operations and intelligence activities during the North African campaign. Despite his military engagement, Hakim remained actively involved with Lehi. Utilizing his position within the British Army, he facilitated the smuggling of weapons into Palestine, exploiting his access to military resources and information. Eventually, he left the British Army, committing himself entirely to the nationalist cause. Hakim's assignment to assassinate Lord Moyne was not merely due to his operational expertise and familiarity with British protocols but also reflected a broader strategy employed by Lehi and the

Irgun (Bell, 1996:93). These groups frequently leveraged insights gained by their members' experience in the British system to challenge the Mandate authorities.

These operations not only equipped the Zionist paramilitary organizations with necessary military resources but also exposed the vulnerabilities of British military logistics in Palestine. The ability of Zionist groups to repeatedly access and seize British arms significantly undermined British authority and their ability to maintain control over the region.

While the Irgun and Lehi are well documented for procuring arms through raids on British military bases, the Haganah enjoyed more favorable relations with the Mandate's administration. Violence against the British by the Jewish Agency-controlled group was limited to its participation in the brief period of the United Resistance Movement, after which it reverted to a passive stance. This moderation did not hinder the Haganah from acquiring British weapons. On the contrary, the group often leveraged its better relations to secure arms deals with British soldiers – under their superiors' radar, of course. It was the case of *Meir*, the first Israeli Sherman tank (Giusti, 2024:4).

In 1947, when the British were set to leave the region, preventing their war materials from falling into Jewish or Arab hands became a concern for the expiring administration. Transporting all the matériel back to the UK was a costly operation, and after World War II the demand had severely decreased, devaluing the revenue of an eventual sale once back in the country of origin. The US, for example, found it more convenient to leave its weaponry in Europe and sell it to local governments at a reduced price (Segreto, 2001:37). This however wasn't a viable option for the British, as the mounting tensions between the Yishuv and the Arabs constituted a delicate situation where it was better not to interfere, especially now that they were leaving. Therefore, the most convenient solution to this tangled scenario was to destroy those war materials that could not be efficiently transported back to the UK. Tanks were undoubtedly among these, and the British decided to dispose of them by pushing them off Mount Carmel, near Haifa (Giusti, 2024:4).

Some British operators, secretly from their superiors, found it even more convenient to cede a tank to the Haganah, unknowingly imitating the US practice of selling remnants of war to the locals. On May 14, 1948, while the Yishuv was celebrating the birth of Israel, the Haganah secured its first Sherman tank, an M4A2. However, it was anything but functional, as it lacked many of its most fundamental components, including the ring

to rotate the turret, rendering the tank virtually inoperable. After just two weeks of repairs, the tank was ready for deployment and was named *Meir*, after the newborn son of the repair crew's leader (Giusti, 2024:4-5).

While the procurement of the M4A2 Sherman was a sporadic event, the tanks that followed came in a more organized and large-scale operation. The raging war against the Arab League required the newly established Jewish state to seek more tanks from abroad. That's when the Mossad LeAliyah Bet[44] came into play. Thanks to its operators in Italy, it managed to secure 30 Shermans through undercover naval shipments between November 1948 and January 1949, laying the foundation for the Israeli Armored Corps, which paraded in the country's streets every May 14 for the following two decades (Giusti, 2024:6-7).

3.3. France: Behind the *Altalena* Affair

The previous chapter briefly addresses the open-fire confrontation between the Irgunists and members of the newly formed IDF. It also noted that the catalyst for the conflict between these two groups, which had been allies fighting for the same cause just months earlier, was a ship loaded with arms. Given this chapter's focus on arms procurement, this episode demands a thorough analysis.

The name of the ship was *Altalena* and it was commissioned by the Irgun to transport arms, ammunition, and fighters during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The ship's voyage, which began in France, was not just a logistical operation but also a deeply political endeavor that brought tensions between the Irgun and the IDF into stark relief. In particular, it revealed the intricacies of international arms procurement during wartime, the role of clandestine alliances, and the struggle to establish a unified national defense structure in the midst of an existential conflict.

[44] As described in Chapter 1, *Background Information on Zionism and Mandatory Palestine*, Section 1.3.6, *The Great Revolt, the White Paper of 1939, and the Aliyah Bet*, Mossad le-Aliya Bet was a branch of the Haganah whose purpose was to facilitate illegal Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine (Aliyah Bet), defying British restrictions. Active primarily in the 1930s and 1940s, it later supported Haganah operations, including arms smuggling and logistics during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, leveraging its expertise in covert international activities for missions like the *Nora* Affair, discussed in this chapter in Section 3.4, *Czechoslovakia: A Hub for Procurement*.

The *Altalena*'s mission began with a secretive agreement between Georges Bidault[45], the French Foreign Minister, and the Irgun. At a time when international arms embargoes severely restricted weapons transfers to the Middle East, France played a crucial role in enabling Zionist factions to acquire arms. Bidault personally authorized the delivery of weapons to the Irgun. This decision, shrouded in secrecy, stemmed from France's strategic interests in the region, which included countering British influence, safeguarding French cultural and religious assets in Jerusalem, and leveraging Zionist successes to weaken pan-Arab movements that posed a threat to French colonies in North Africa (Zamir, 2010:18). Bidault's decision-making was emblematic of France's broader double policy in the region, where formal diplomatic caution was paired with covert support for Zionist military efforts (Zamir, 2010:24). The clandestine nature of the *Altalena* operation reflected both the opportunities and risks inherent in arms procurement during Israel's formative years. For France, supporting the Irgun presented a chance to advance its strategic goals without direct confrontation with Britain, its historic rival in the Middle East. The Irgun's anti-British activities, including high-profile attacks on British targets, had already won the favor of elements within the French government and military. The Irgun's propaganda efforts in France further emphasized the alignment of their struggle with French interests, drawing parallels between the Irgun's fight against British rule and the French Resistance during World War II. These efforts positioned the Irgun as a dynamic force deserving of French support, even at the risk of alienating the larger Zionist establishment represented by the Jewish Agency (Zamir, 2010:27).

The *Altalena* departed from Port-de-Bouc on June 11, 1948, carrying arms and ammunition valued at millions of dollars, as well as 900 fighters – many Holocaust survivors – eager to join the war effort. The cargo, financed by Zionist supporters in the diaspora and facilitated by French intelligence and military networks, was seen by the Irgun as critical to their operations, especially in Jerusalem. There, Irgun forces operated independently from the Haganah-controlled IDF, seeking to retain their autonomy in the emerging state. To this end, the Irgun demanded that one-fifth of the *Altalena*'s arms be allocated to their fighters in Jerusalem. This allocation became a key point of contention with the interim Israeli government, which was working to consolidate all armed forces under the authority of the IDF (Zamir, 2010:25-26).

[45] For the French, the mission was codenamed *Opération Bid*, derived from Bidault (Zamir, 2010:18).

The *Altalena*'s arrival off the coast of Tel Aviv on June 20, 1948, marked the culmination of its journey but also the beginning of a violent and deeply divisive episode. Upon learning of the ship's imminent arrival, the Israeli interim government, led by David Ben-Gurion, demanded that the Irgun surrender the weapons aboard the ship to the IDF. Ben-Gurion viewed the Irgun's independent arms procurement as a direct challenge to state authority and a potential threat to the unity of Israel's military forces. His insistence on the primacy of the IDF stemmed from his broader vision of a centralized and cohesive state apparatus, unbound by rival factions with separate military capabilities. To the Irgun, however, the weapons represented a vital resource for their fighters and a guarantee of their ability to operate as an independent force, particularly in the contested city of Jerusalem (Zamir, 2010:18-19). Negotiations between the Irgun and the government quickly broke down, as both sides remained firm in their positions. The government, cautious of any signs of defiance, demanded the unconditional transfer of the *Altalena*'s cargo to the IDF, while the Irgun sought assurances that a portion of the arms would be allocated to their forces. The confrontation escalated dramatically when Ben-Gurion ordered IDF forces to open fire on the ship. The ensuing battle resulted in the sinking of the *Altalena* and the loss of three members of the IDF and sixteen Irgunists (Bell, 1996:326).

The *Altalena* Affair had far-reaching implications for the development of Israel's defense and political systems. In the short term, it solidified the primacy of the IDF as the sole military authority in the state, effectively ending the Irgun's aspirations for autonomy. Ben-Gurion's decisive actions, though controversial, underscored his commitment to state unity and the centralization of power. For the Irgun, the affair marked a painful setback but also a proof of maturity, as its leader Menachem Begin chose to avoid further escalation, thereby preventing the outbreak of a civil war[46] (Hassan, 2001:868).

For France, the *Altalena* Affair was a double-edged sword. While the operation reinforced its role as a key supporter of Zionist military efforts, the internal Israeli conflict that ensued highlighted the unpredictability of its allies. French officials, who had overestimated the Irgun's political and military strength, were left to contend with the fallout of a failed operation that threatened to expose their covert involvement.

[46] This non-retaliatory policy wasn't new for Begin: even during the Hunting Season, he chose not to respond violently to the Haganah. Regarding this moderate stance, Begin wrote in his book *The Revolt* (1951:152): *Not logic, but instinct said imperatively: "No; not civil war. Not that at any price"*.

Nevertheless, the affair did not deter France from continuing its covert support for Israel, as evidenced by subsequent arms shipments and intelligence-sharing agreements (Zamir, 2010:22-23).

A final remark on the event that nearly sparked a civil war in Israel is dedicated to a photo. This image, capturing the incident, stands out as particularly evocative among all the images I have encountered in my research covering the period from the early 1880s to 1948. It shows the *Altalena* emitting a black cloud of smoke just a few meters off the coast, where passers-by, on foot and with bicycles, stopped to watch. Further away, an individual appears to be reading calmly on a bench. This photo encapsulates decades of tensions among Zionist factions, the struggle for legitimacy and authority, and the escalation of violence in Palestine – from the first militias in the early 1900s to the formation of large paramilitary groups and the broader conflict with neighboring states. Yet, amidst this potential precursor to civil war in the newly established Jewish state, civilians leisurely pause with their bicycles to observe the *Altalena* and the enormous black cloud of smoke.

Figure 6. 'Altalena' burning off the coast of Tel Aviv (1948). Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altalena_Affair#/media/File:Altalena_off_Tel-Aviv_beach.jpg.

3.4. Czechoslovakia: A Hub for Procurement

After Britain decided to refer the Palestine question to the United Nations, the Zionist leadership quickly recognized the looming prospect of new conflicts. The Irgun and Lehi had been engaged in an insurgency since 1944, during which the Haganah briefly collaborated with them under the United Resistance Movement. However, as the British prepared to withdraw from Palestine and the foundations of a Jewish state were being laid, the focus of the Jewish defense organizations shifted towards the surrounding Arab states, anticipating future confrontations.

In the critical months leading up to the establishment of Israel, the Haganah recognized that the weapons used to defend Jewish settlements and resist British control would be insufficient for a large-scale war with Arab neighbors. Its weapons procurement efforts were varied, but during this final phase of the British Mandate, Czechoslovakia emerged as particularly strategic. Transitioning into a Soviet satellite state, it aligned with anti-imperialist objectives, particularly against British dominance in the Middle East. This ideological position resonated with supporting the Jewish struggle for statehood, seen as a blow to British influence. Economically, Czechoslovakia faced acute foreign currency shortages and viewed arms sales as a lucrative opportunity to stabilize its finances. The pragmatic alignment of ideological goals and economic necessity, coupled with accessible relationships forged by Haganah operatives, made Czechoslovakia an indispensable partner for the Zionist cause (Frank, Klíma, and Goldstein, 2017:130).

In September 1947, David Ben-Gurion tasked Dr. Uriel Otto Felix, brother of a Haganah deputy district commander with ties to key Czechoslovak officials, to initiate contacts. Felix's connections, including those with Bedřich Reicin, a senior military counterintelligence official, and Dr. Otto Fischl, a finance ministry official, proved instrumental in navigating the bureaucratic landscape. Concurrently, George Uiberall, a future Israeli politician, was dispatched with broad authority and substantial funds to negotiate arms purchases. Uiberall's resourcefulness became apparent when he arrived in Europe with a list of weaponry and instructions to secure large quantities quickly, signaling the urgency of the situation (Frank et al., 2017:131).

The breakthrough came in January 1948 when negotiations with the Zbrojovka Brno arms manufacturer led to the signing of the first contract. The agreement included 4,500

Mauser rifles, 200 MG 34 machine guns, and over five million rounds of ammunition – a critical boost to the Haganah's arsenal. Securing government approval for the sale, however, required extraordinary measures. Uiberall and Felix navigated Czechoslovakia's political terrain, persuading figures like Jan Masaryk, the foreign minister, to support the deal. Masaryk's endorsement, bolstered by a desire to undermine British imperial interests in the Middle East, was crucial. To circumvent international scrutiny, Uiberall posed as an Ethiopian government representative, complete with forged documentation, further highlighting the ingenuity of the Haganah's operatives (Frank et al., 2017:134-135).

Logistics posed the next formidable challenge. Czechoslovakia, a landlocked nation, lacked direct access to seaports, necessitating creative solutions. Initial plans to ship the arms via Belgium or Poland encountered delays and diplomatic obstacles, prompting the team to turn to the Danube River as a transportation route. In February 1948, the first shipment was transported from Brno to Bratislava by train, loaded onto a cargo boat, and sent down the Danube to Yugoslavia. Shayke Dan, a member of the Haganah working in Yugoslavia, played a critical role in securing the cooperation of local authorities for the transit. The shipment reached the Yugoslav port of Šibenik in early March, where it was prepared for sea transit to Palestine. The operation demonstrated remarkable coordination, with each stage meticulously planned and executed despite significant risks (Frank et al., 2017:135).

The impact of these efforts was transformative. By early 1948, the Haganah's improved armament allowed it to transition from a defensive posture to offensive operations. Key actions, such as breaking the siege on Jerusalem and securing strategic corridors, became feasible with the newly acquired firepower. The procurement also underpinned the implementation of *Plan D*, the Haganah's strategy to establish territorial continuity in preparation for the anticipated invasion by Arab states (Frank et al., 2017:127). The infusion of weapons and training from Czechoslovakia was critical in leveling the playing field and ensuring the survival of the nascent State of Israel. However, this operation was not without its share of drama and risk. The clandestine nature of the arms deals, combined with the logistical hurdles of transporting large quantities of weapons across borders under international scrutiny, required exceptional determination and creativity.

Another example of the ingenuity of the Haganah's leadership is provided by the *Nora* Affair, one of the most fascinating accounts of arms smuggling I found throughout my research. In February 1948, Uiberall and his team were tasked with the critical mission of securing a reliable means to deliver weapons urgently needed by the Jewish forces. Recognizing the political sensitivities and constant surveillance they faced, the team devised a sophisticated plan to use the cargo ship *Nora*, a vessel purchased in March 1948 through the efforts of Jewish businessman Efraim Ilin, who was enlisted to ensure the operation's success. The plan to use the *Nora* hinged on meticulous secrecy. The ship was disguised as a merchant vessel carrying a cargo of onions and potatoes, with the weapons concealed in its hold (Frank et al., 2017:137-138). The operation faced its first major hurdle when the Italian[47] crew, learning of their destination in Communist Yugoslavia, staged a mutiny. Efraim Ilin intervened and delivered an impassioned speech, invoking Italy's storied history of resistance and liberty, and appealed to the crew's sense of solidarity with persecuted people fighting for their survival. His plea convinced the sailors, allowing the ship to proceed to the Yugoslav port of Šibenik.

Upon arrival on March 19, the operation encountered further delays. The sight of crates packed with rifles, machine guns, and over five million bullets alarmed the crew once again. The situation was managed by Mossad le-Aliya Bet operative Benjamin Yerushalmi, who offered financial bonuses and assurances about the mission's critical importance. Meanwhile, the Yugoslav guards, briefed on the operation's significance, played a pivotal role in maintaining secrecy. In a calculated act of misdirection, they staged the spillage of screws from a crate to reinforce the impression that the shipment was entirely innocent (Frank et al., 2017:141).

The *Nora* finally departed Šibenik on March 21, embarking on a treacherous journey through British-patrolled waters. Operating under strict radio silence, the ship encountered a severe storm, forcing it to seek refuge in Cyprus. Eventually, the ship evaded the suspicion of British destroyers enforcing the maritime blockade and arrived off the coast of Tel Aviv on April 1. The unloading process was conducted under the

[47] The decision to employ an Italian crew for the *Nora* was largely due to Efraim Ilin's involvement in Italy, where the ship was purchased and prepared for its mission. As a businessman based in Milan with strong local connections, Ilin facilitated the acquisition and outfitting of the ship in Venice, making it natural to rely on local sailors. Hiring an Italian crew was not only practical, given their availability and expertise in Mediterranean shipping, but it also reinforced *Nora*'s cover as a legitimate merchant vessel, reducing the risk of suspicion during inspections or encounters with authorities (Frank et al., 2017:138).

cover of darkness. The weapons were swiftly distributed to the Haganah's forces engaged in the critical Operation Nachshon, the first major offensive by the Haganah during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War aimed at breaking the siege of Jerusalem and securing supply routes to the city. The impact of the *Nora* shipment was immediate and transformative. The arms allowed the Haganah to launch an offensive that broke the siege of Jerusalem, securing vital supply routes to the city. Beyond its strategic significance, the arrival of the weapons boosted morale among the fighters. Eyewitnesses recounted how soldiers, many of whom had never before held modern rifles, kissed their newly acquired weapons, deeply moved by the reinforcement (Frank et al., 2017:144-145).

The *Nora* Affair and the larger Haganah's success in securing arms from Czechoslovakia was a turning point in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. It not only ensured the defense of Jewish settlements but also enabled the Haganah to shift the tide of the conflict in its favor. By leveraging Czechoslovakia's unique position, the Jewish leadership demonstrated the resourcefulness and resilience that would come to define the early years of the Israeli state. This extraordinary effort, fraught with challenges and triumphs, remains a testament to the determination and ingenuity of those who fought for Israel's survival.

3.5. The Air Force Before Israel

So far, this analysis has explored several methods by which Zionist paramilitary organizations acquired weapons to oppose both the Arabs and the British during the Mandate, and to prepare for the large-scale confrontation with Arab countries following Israeli independence. However, the groups' efforts to arm themselves extended beyond traditional weapons, to include any assets that might be needed in a conflict, such as aircraft. While Lehi was too small to develop military aviation, the Haganah and Irgun were able to build a significant air force starting from the years of the Great Revolt (1936-1939). Both organizations, operating under the watchful eyes of the British Mandate authorities, laid the foundation for what would later become the Israeli Air Force (also known as *Kheil HaAvir*). Their efforts, though pursued separately, shared the goal of enhancing mobility, reconnaissance capabilities, and logistical support for their operations, while covertly preparing for the challenges of future statehood.

The Haganah's aviation efforts were primarily channeled through the Aviron Aviation Company, established in 1936 under the auspices of the Jewish Agency (Bailey, 2021). Although officially a civilian airline, Aviron operated as a covert training and operational hub for the Haganah. Its training facilities were strategically dispersed across the kibbutzim, with pilot instruction occurring at Kibbutz Degania Alef and aircraft maintenance at Kibbutz Afikim. This decentralization provided a layer of secrecy, shielding their activities from British authorities.

In parallel, the Irgun launched its aviation efforts through the establishment of the Palestine Flying Service in 1937. Like Aviron, this entity officially served as a civilian airline while secretly training pilots for the Irgun's operational needs. Remarkably, the British authorities, unaware of the organization's true purpose, allowed the airline to operate a flight school at Lydda Airport. In a symbolic and ironic moment, the British High Commissioner himself awarded pilot licenses to the first graduating class in 1939 (Bailey, 2020).

World War II presented challenges for the Haganah's aviation aspirations, as Aviron faced heightened scrutiny from British authorities. Nonetheless, the global conflict provided an opportunity for some Haganah members to gain professional aviation training through the Royal Air Force (RAF). By 1943, 22 Yishuv had earned their wings, although they joined the RAF too late to acquire substantial combat experience. These pilots returned with valuable skills, which would later become instrumental in the rapid expansion of Israel's military aviation capabilities during and after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Key figures such as Modi Alon and Ezer Weizman (future President of Israel), who trained with the RAF, would later take leading roles in Israel's nascent air force (Bailey, 2021).

By the time the Sherut Avir (*Air Service*) was formally established as the Haganah in November 1947, the organization had developed a robust infrastructure for pilot training and aviation operations. Drawing on the resources of Aviron and the experience of RAF-trained pilots, the Sherut Avir quickly evolved into a critical component of the Haganah's defense strategy. Meanwhile, the Irgun's Palestine Flying Service contributed personnel to this growing aviation effort. Despite its smaller scale, Irgun's aviation initiative provided a valuable resource of trained pilots who later integrated into Israel's broader military aviation operations (Beiley, 2021).

The legacy of these efforts culminated in the establishment of the Israeli Air Force on May 28, 1948, shortly after the declaration of Israeli independence. The Kheil HaAvir represented the synthesis of the Haganah and Irgun's aviation programs, combining their personnel[48], training methodologies, and operational innovations. Both groups' ability to circumvent British restrictions and adapt civilian aviation infrastructure for military purposes was crucial in laying the foundation for a professional and effective air force. The new Israeli Air Force's early successes in halting enemy advances and providing logistical support during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War can be directly attributed to the groundwork laid by these paramilitary organizations.

Despite the early aviation developments by the Haganah and the Irgun, establishing an air force capable of confronting neighboring states posed a significant challenge for the Zionist leadership. As in the previous paragraph, Czechoslovakia's strategic role was also crucial in addressing this challenge. On March 31, 1948, a C-54 Skymaster aircraft, leased from an American company, transported military hardware from Prague to an airstrip near Be'er Tuvia. This shipment, part of a plan called Operation Balak, included critical supplies that were immediately deployed in Operation Nachshon. However, pressure from the US government limited further flights by the Skymaster's original operators, forcing Israeli procurement teams to explore alternative routes (Frank et al., 2017:140; Markovitzky, 2007:25). Ajaccio's airstrip in Corsica became a key logistical hub after the Prague-Be'er Tuvia route was compromised. Armaments were flown from Brno, Czechoslovakia, to Ajaccio by a Swedish private company and subsequently transported to Israel using other chartered aircraft. This stopover was crucial for sustaining the airlift and ensuring the continuous flow of supplies, including explosives, ammunition, and fighter plane components essential for Israel's military efforts (Markovitzky, 2007:25). Overseas volunteers, known as Machal, significantly contributed to the success of Operation Balak. Experienced pilots, many of whom were World War II veterans, played critical roles in flying these high-stakes missions. Their expertise ensured the success of

[48] The integration of Irgunists into Israel's formal armed forces after independence was fraught with difficulties, stemming from ideological tensions and lingering mistrust between former paramilitary factions. Members of the Irgun often faced skepticism and resistance from colleagues within the Haganah and its successor institutions, including the Sherut Avir (later the Israeli Air Force). Binyamin Kahane's experience illustrates these challenges. Although he had trained as a pilot through the Irgun's Palestine Flying Service, his background as an Irgun operative complicated his acceptance within the Sherut Avir. Admitted as a pilot in April 1948, Kahane faced persistent marginalization, being reassigned to various posts before eventually becoming a flight instructor (Bailey, 2021).

more than 100 flights, including some that delivered dismantled Messerschmidt fighter planes and spare parts essential for combat readiness (Markovitzky, 2007:25).

Throughout the various efforts to acquire as many military aircraft as possible, Adolph Al Schwimmer emerged as arguably the most influential figure. As a former US Army Air Force (USAAF) flight engineer, Schwimmer was uniquely positioned to recognize the strategic importance of surplus World War II aircraft in building Israel's air force. In 1947, Schwimmer actively worked to acquire and repurpose these aircraft, circumventing US restrictions[49]. His initiative led to the purchase of several critical aircraft types, including Constellations and C-46 transport planes, which were disguised under civilian aviation credentials and operated through companies such as Schwimmer Aviation and Service Airways (World Machal, 2025; Markovitzky, 2007:24).

One of Schwimmer's most notable achievements was the acquisition of B-17 Flying Fortress bombers. These heavy bombers, known for their long-range capabilities and significant payloads, were instrumental in Israel's ability to respond to Egyptian air raids in the 1948 war. Schwimmer secured three airworthy B-17s from surplus American stocks. These planes, originally modified for commercial use, required retrofitting with bomb racks and other military equipment, which was done in Zatec, Czechoslovakia. The bombers successfully arrived in Israel by June 1948 (Leone, 2014). Upon their arrival, the B-17s were immediately deployed in retaliatory operations. Their first mission targeted Egyptian airbases and strategic sites, including Cairo, El Arish, and Gaza. These raids demonstrated Israel's newfound ability to project airpower far beyond its borders (World Machal, 2025). The bombers played a key role in halting the advance of Egyptian forces, providing much-needed support to Israeli ground troops. The psychological impact of these missions also reinforced Israel's determination to defend its sovereignty during the war.

Schwimmer's efforts were not limited to logistical procurement. He also established networks to navigate regulatory obstacles, such as the US government's tightening of export policies, which aimed to restrict the sale and transfer of equipment to the Middle East. April 15, 1948, marked the point after which all aircraft and associated parts required State Department clearance for export. Recognizing the improbability of

[49] In December 1947, United States President Harry Truman invoked the Neutrality Acts, which prohibited the export of arms and munitions to belligerents (Calhoun, 2007:23-24).

obtaining licenses for military use, Schwimmer expedited the transport of planes before the restriction took effect. By operating through intermediaries and employing creative legal structures, such as registering aircraft under Panamanian civilian companies, Schwimmer ensured the planes left US soil in time (World Machal, 2025).

Beyond procurement, Schwimmer laid the foundation for the Israel Aircraft Industry (IAI), which would become a cornerstone of the country's defense sector. His contributions extended to training programs that developed local expertise in aircraft maintenance and operation. Many of the mechanics and engineers trained under Schwimmer subsequently held leadership positions within the Kheil HaAvir and the broader defense industry (Markovitzky, 2007, 23-25).

Schwimmer's strategic vision and tireless efforts were crucial in transforming Israel's military aviation from a nascent force into a formidable component of its defense strategy. His ability to navigate complex logistical, political, and operational challenges set a precedent for the resourcefulness and resilience that would come to define the Israeli Air Force in the years to follow.

3.6. USA: The Sonneborn Group and the War Assets Administration

As the analysis of the innumerable and ingenious ways in which Zionist paramilitary organizations secured weaponry progresses, the growing involvement of the US Jewish diaspora in arming the Zionist cause becomes increasingly clear. While the role of US organizations advocating for the Jewish state are extensively addressed in the next chapter, this final paragraph highlights the efforts of US private individuals, as anticipated by the figure of Al Schwimmer.

At the heart of Haganah's arms procurement efforts in the United States was Rudolf Sonneborn, a wealthy American businessman whose connections and leadership proved pivotal. On July 1, 1945, Sonneborn hosted a critical meeting at his New York penthouse, bringing together influential Jewish Americans, including Henry Montor, head of the United Jewish Appeal, and David Ben-Gurion. This gathering marked the inception of the so-called Sonneborn Group, an elite cohort of prominent and resourceful individuals committed to arming the Haganah. With members spanning professions from law to

industry, the group functioned as the operational and financial backbone of a vast arms procurement network, operating under the guise of the Sonneborn Institute, an organization officially focused on aiding European Jews (Calhoun, 2007:24).

A cornerstone of the group's strategy was its exploitation of the War Assets Administration (WAA), an agency tasked with liquidating surplus US military equipment after World War II. In 1945, US matériel was scattered across Europe, and it became evident that selling it at retail would have required a substantial economic, political, and military effort[50] (Segreto, 2001:37; Alegi and Calò, 2017:57). Therefore, a block sale to local governments was devised to maximize economic revenues while reducing organizational efforts. The matériel was categorized into two groups: waste or salvage and surplus. The former referred to completely or partially destroyed assets and no longer functional for their original purpose. The latter referred to assets either in good condition or partially damaged, but still functional for their intended use (Segreto, 2001:57).

The sale to local governments was neither the only nor the primary channel to dispose of war remnants: the entities prioritized for receiving these assets were US government agencies and representations (Segreto, 2001:59). Consequently, the WAA took precedence over US war surplus, securing a wide range of matériel. Its inventory, which included items from small arms to aircraft, was sold as scrap and often neutralized only superficially due to the high volume of materials being decommissioned. The Sonneborn Group seized upon this opportunity, transforming what was officially *junk* into an arsenal for the Haganah. Sam Sloan, a scrap metal dealer with deep expertise, mobilized a network of Jewish-American scrap dealers to inspect depots nationwide. These dealers documented the extent of deactivation efforts at various facilities, identifying stockpiles where weapons could be reassembled from partially damaged parts. Sloan's team coordinated the purchase of these materials, ensuring that the network could reliably source the components necessary for a functional arsenal. This method not only circumvented the challenges posed by neutralization but also exploited the WAA's decentralized and uneven oversight (Calhoun, 2007:25-26).

The Sonneborn Group's logistical operations were further refined through a command structure headquartered at the Hotel Fourteen in New York. Here, Teddy Kollek, future

[50] Establishing US sorting centers in Europe to sell matériel at retail would have involved many American soldiers, who were more urgently needed in the Pacific Theater (Segreto, 2001:37).

mayor of Jerusalem, oversaw the coordination of shipments, often using dummy corporations to mask the arms' true destinations. Nahum Bernstein, a prominent lawyer, played a critical role in establishing these entities, including the Machinery Processing and Converting Company, which was ostensibly engaged in converting military equipment for civilian use. Another example of these dummy corporations was the Oved Trading Company, which allowed the network to purchase explosives under the guise of mining supplies. These companies not only shielded the operation from scrutiny but also provided a coating of legality that enabled it to function with remarkable efficiency (Calhoun, 2007:26-27).

Despite the network's sophistication, it did not escape the attention of US authorities, including the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)[51]. In a memorandum titled *Clandestine Air Transport Operations* and dated May 28, 1947, Rear Admiral Roscoe Henry Hillenkoetter, soon to become the CIA's first director, alerted the Secretary of Defense to suspected Zionist arms smuggling operations. Hillenkoetter described how Service Airways, a front company associated with the Haganah, was using surplus C-46 transport planes to transport arms from Czechoslovakia to Palestine. He further noted that the crews operating these flights had been observed wearing US Army Air Corps uniforms, misleading officials in Italy and Switzerland into believing the missions were US-authorized operations. This intelligence raised concerns within the CIA about the potential diplomatic fallout, particularly as it implicated American citizens in covert arms trafficking in violation of the Neutrality Acts (Calhoun, 2007: 22-23). Despite these revelations, the CIA and other US agencies struggled to penetrate the layers of secrecy surrounding the Sonneborn Group's operations, often uncovering only fragments of the network.

The scale of the operation necessitated a reliance on organized crime and sympathizer dockworkers to facilitate shipments from US ports. Criminal figures like Jewish mobsters Abner *Longy* Zwillman and Meyer Lansky[52] provided critical logistical support, using their control over docks in Newark and New York to secure the movement of arms. These connections proved indispensable during crises such as the 1948 Newark Pier incident,

[51] The CIA was established under the 1947 National Security Act as a means to centralize intelligence gathering during the early stages of the Cold War.

[52] Both were prominent members of the National Crime Syndicate, a loosely organized alliance of criminal groups in the United States, composed primarily of Italian-American and Jewish-American organizations (Calhoun, 2007:28).

where the accidental exposure of TNT in a mislabeled crate risked derailing the operation. However, the influence of crime leaders helped contain the fallout and maintain the network's operational momentum (Calhoun, 2007:28-29). The Sonneborn Group's ability to adapt also extended to instances of outright theft. Nathan Liff, a scrap dealer working for the Haganah, orchestrated the illicit replacement of decommissioned machine guns with functional weapons at a WAA depot in Hawaii, taking advantage of a guard's absence. These arms were subsequently smuggled to California and routed to Palestine (Calhoun, 2007:26).

The Haganah's reach also extended internationally through strategic partnerships with Latin American governments. Nicaragua's dictator Anastasio Somoza García provided diplomatic cover by issuing passports and letters of credit that ostensibly legitimized arms purchases for his National Guard. These transactions were, in fact, a cover, with the arms redirected to Palestine. Panama's President facilitated similar operations, allowing the use of Panamanian airlines to transport planes and equipment under the guise of national exports, as mentioned in the previous paragraph (Calhoun, 2007:27).

The CIA's limited ability to act against the network reflected the intricacy of the operations and its compartmentalized structure. The Haganah's operatives, aided by their extensive use of front companies, strategic alliances, and subterfuge, maintained a step ahead of law enforcement and intelligence agencies. This resilience ensured that by May 1948, the Haganah had received a substantial arsenal, setting the stage for Israel's independence and subsequent survival during its formative conflicts.

3.7. Conclusion

The success of Zionist paramilitary organizations in acquiring arms during the British Mandate and in the initial stages of Israeli statehood demonstrates a remarkable blend of resourcefulness, adaptability, and determination. Despite operating under significant constraints these groups secured the matériel necessary to challenge British forces first and the Arab states later. Key to these operations were innovative strategies and extensive networks. From leveraging surplus military equipment in post-war Europe to forming clandestine alliances with sympathetic individuals and governments, Zionist leaders

showcased a sophisticated understanding of international logistics and political strategies. The contributions of the Jewish diaspora, particularly in the United States, proved indispensable, enabling the procurement of vital supplies through covert transportation and even outright theft. Figures like Adolph Schwimmer and organizations such as the Sonneborn Group were instrumental in these activities and epitomized the ingenuity required to navigate legal and logistical barriers. However, underground operations did not always conclude with the arrival of arms shipments, as demonstrated by the Irgun's attempt to secure the weapons contained in the *Altalena* without informing the newly established IDF. This incident posed significant risks for Israel, which, amid a war with the Arab states, came perilously close to a civil war. The Israeli provisional government proved its strength by punishing the Irgun's disobedience while preventing the confrontation from escalating into a broader conflict.

Finally, operations such as the procurement of the first Sherman tank from the withdrawing British and the Czechoslovak arms deals highlight the wide variety of these efforts, ranging from securing a single tank near Haifa to large-scale acquisitions across Europe, the US, and even Latin America. These efforts not only provided essential resources for immediate military needs but also established the foundation for Israel's defense industry, which would become a cornerstone of its national security.

4. THE PRESSURE PATH: LOBBYING AND ADVOCACY IN THE UNITED STATES

4.1. Introduction

The Irgun's military activity and its arms procurement efforts are in some respects deplorable and in others fascinating. While its contribution to Israel's independence is established, a well-structured paramilitary organization cannot rely solely on violent actions; it must also integrate within an influential political network. In the 1940s, the Revisionist group identified the United States as the most influential political network to advance its cause.

So far, the analysis has depicted Britain as the primary actor in Palestine. Indeed, this was still the case in the 1940s, with its Mandate positioning it at the forefront of public attention. However, despite Britain's control of the territory, Zionists redirected their political efforts across the Atlantic in pursuit of their goals. Why did the United States become more strategically important than the Mandate's administrator? This chapter begins by examining the factors that led to this transatlantic shift. It then traces how Zionist advocacy and lobbying endeavors in the United States took shape, highlighting the emergence of organizations, their methods, and the ideological differences that defined their approach.

After an overview of the key mainstream organizations, the analysis moves to the role played by Revisionist Zionist organizations. As in Palestine and Europe, the two ideologically opposed factions demonstrated their differences through their respective approaches and methods. The chapter highlights the competing strategies at play, showing the effects of quiet diplomacy on the one hand and bold public confrontation on the other. The role of individual actors – from Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis to Hillel Kook and the Bergson Group – further illustrates the diverse approaches within the movement and the internal divisions that shaped its trajectory. Through this examination, the chapter explores how Zionist efforts in the United States evolved into a decisive force, demonstrating that the struggle for Jewish statehood was not confined to Palestine and

Europe but extended into the arenas of international politics, public persuasion, and ideological contestation.

4.2. From the UK to the US: The Shift in Zionist Support

Although the 1917 Balfour Declaration significantly advanced Zionist aspirations, it marked the peak of relations with the British, which thereafter began to deteriorate. From the outset of the Mandate, a significant disparity emerged between the position statement conveyed in the letter and the actual administration of a region. The British were tasked with a delicate balancing act, required to accommodate the demands of both Jewish and Arab communities. The 1922 Transjordan Memorandum[53], which excluded the eastern side of the Jordan River from the Jewish national home, marked an initial fracture in Zionist-British relations. Toward the end of the 1920s and throughout the 1930s, Arab opposition to Jewish migration culminated in violent uprisings such as the 1929 riots and the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. British officials, seeking to maintain control over their colonial holdings in the Middle East, increasingly sought to appease Arab leaders by restricting Jewish settlement. The *coup de grace* was inflicted by the 1939 White Paper, which demonstrated Britain's unwillingness to support Zionist aspirations at a critical moment in Jewish history, as Nazi persecution intensified across Europe.

As Britain's position in the world weakened, the United States rose as the dominant global superpower. While the former struggled with colonial uprisings, economic difficulties, and the looming threat of war, the latter was expanding its economic and political influence, making it a natural alternative for Zionist advocacy (Friesel, 1985:134). Moreover, during the 1920s and 1930s, the American Jewish community experienced significant growth and changes in its demographic standing: by the early 1940s, there were approximately 4.5 million Jews in the United States (Jewish Virtual Library). However, Jews in the United States faced significant discrimination, including restrictions in universities, professions, and high-end residential communities. Universities imposed limits on the number of Jewish applicants, some professional fields

[53] See Chapter 2, *The Revolutionary Path: Armed Struggle for a Jewish State*, Section 2.4.1, *Origin and Ideology*.

hired fewer Jewish individuals, and elite housing areas excluded Jews from purchasing homes or staying in certain accommodations. However, despite these challenges, because of its widespread presence and assimilation, the American Jewish community was significantly wealthier and more influential than its British counterpart. Unlike British Jewry, which was relatively conservative and cautious in its Zionist commitments, American Jews had greater political freedom and financial resources, allowing them to play a more assertive role in shaping policy (Bierbrier, 1970:87). Zionist leaders recognized that Washington, rather than London, would be the decisive arena for securing international recognition of Jewish statehood. By the early 1940s, American Zionist organizations had begun directly lobbying US officials, a strategy that would soon yield concrete results.

A major factor in the success of Zionist efforts in the United States was the emergence of a politically sophisticated and well-connected leadership. Among the most influential figures was Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis[54], who played a crucial role in redefining the relationship between American identity and Zionism. Brandeis, who became involved in Zionism in the early 1910s, framed Jewish nationalism in a way that resonated with American democratic values (Friesel, 1985:136). Unlike European Zionists, who often emphasized the urgency of creating a Jewish state as a response to antisemitism, Brandeis argued that Zionism was an expression of Jewish self-determination, fully in line with American ideals of freedom and democracy. His position helped to counter accusations of dual loyalty, which had historically made some American Jews hesitant to support the movement (Bierbrier, 1970:88).

The definitive moment in the reorientation of Zionist diplomacy was the Biltmore Conference of May 1942, held in New York City. This gathering of Zionist leaders, activists, and representatives from major Jewish organizations was a direct response to Britain's growing opposition to Zionist aspirations. At Biltmore, Zionist leaders abandoned any ambiguity regarding their ultimate goal and for the first time publicly demanded the establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth, rather than a vague *Jewish national home* (Levitats, 1943:207). This was a bold and unprecedented shift that set the stage for full-scale political lobbying in the United States. The Biltmore Conference also marked a major power shift within the Zionist movement itself. The European-based

[54] The role of Louis Brandeis is further explored in the next paragraph.

leadership, led by Chaim Weizmann, was increasingly overshadowed by American Zionist figures, most notably Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, who emerged as a dominant voice advocating for direct political action. Silver's approach differed sharply from Weizmann's: whereas Weizmann favored behind-the-scenes diplomacy, Silver believed in public political mobilization. His assertive lobbying style ensured that Zionist demands would become a major issue in US politics during and after the war (Bierbrier, 1970:85). By the end of World War II, it was evident that Britain was no longer the key power in determining the fate of Palestine. British officials, increasingly focused on postwar recovery and decolonization, had neither the resources nor the political will to support Jewish statehood (Bierbrier, 1970:90). As also evident from the previous chapter, the Zionist movement, recognizing this reality, had successfully pivoted toward the United States, where a powerful Jewish community, influential political leaders, and strategic lobbying efforts created a new center for Zionism.

4.3. US Mainstream Zionist Organizations

The shift from Europe to the United States was driven not only by external political changes but also by the growing organizational capacity of American Zionism itself. Unlike its European counterpart, which had often been fragmented along ideological and national lines, American Zionism developed strong institutions capable of effective lobbying, mass mobilization, and financial fundraising. At the heart of this transformation was one of the most influential Zionist organizations in the United States: the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA). Founded in 1897, the ZOA served as the official American branch of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). Initially, its role was primarily educational and philanthropic, working to raise awareness about the Zionist movement among American Jews and securing funds for Jewish settlement in Palestine (Halpern, 1979:17). However, as the global Zionist strategy shifted toward political advocacy, the ZOA evolved into a powerful lobbying body, influencing US policymakers and shaping the debate on Jewish statehood.

The rise of Louis Brandeis within the organization marked a crucial turning point. His influence within the Democratic Party and among progressive intellectuals helped elevate

Zionism beyond the confines of the Jewish community, making it a topic of broader political relevance (Friesel, 1985:138). Under his leadership, the ZOA expanded its membership base, fundraising capacity, and political influence. One of his key achievements was securing the endorsement of President Woodrow Wilson for the Balfour Declaration in 1917, setting a precedent for future US support for Zionism (Bierbrier, 1970:88). Brandeis also prioritized economic initiatives, advocating for Jewish investment in Palestine's agricultural and industrial sectors. He believed that a Jewish state should be built through practical development rather than diplomatic concessions, a vision that influenced the ZOA's fundraising campaigns and shaped American support for Zionist projects (Halpern, 1979:21). However, Brandeis' tenure was not without controversy. A major ideological rift emerged between him and Chaim Weizmann, then president of the WZO, over the best strategy for achieving Jewish statehood. Brandeis advocated for a gradualist approach, emphasizing economic development and non-confrontational diplomacy, while Weizmann pushed for more aggressive political action. This conflict led to Brandeis' resignation from ZOA leadership in 1921, marking a shift in the organization's strategy and direction (Bierbrier, 1970:90).

Even after Brandeis' departure, the ZOA remained the largest and most influential Zionist organization in the United States. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it focused on public education and advocacy, working to ensure that the Zionist cause remained relevant to American Jews and influential in US politics (Halpern, 1979:24). The rise of antisemitism in Europe and escalating tensions in Palestine reinforced the urgency of its mission. In response to Britain's increasingly restrictive policies on Jewish immigration and land purchases in Palestine, the ZOA stepped up its political lobbying efforts. It organized letter-writing campaigns, petitions, and meetings with US government officials to pressure the Roosevelt administration into opposing the 1939 White Paper. However, these efforts had limited success, as the US government was still reluctant to directly challenge British international policy (Halpern, 1979:27).

In the final years before Israel's independence, the ZOA played a crucial role in lobbying US officials and securing financial support for the Jewish cause. It coordinated efforts with other Jewish organizations to ensure that President Harry Truman received pressure from multiple fronts in favor of recognizing Israel (Friesel, 1985:147). The ZOA also worked closely with Hollywood figures and media outlets, leveraging their influence to

generate public sympathy for the Zionist cause, a strategy commonly employed by multiple Zionist organizations, as evident in the following paragraph. Prominent Jewish screenwriters, producers, and journalists helped craft a narrative that positioned Zionism as a moral and humanitarian necessity.

While the ZOA was established by the WZO to advance the Zionist cause in the United States, other organizations emerged from the initiative and resourcefulness of individuals like Henrietta Szold. A Jewish intellectual, educator, and social reformer, she had long been concerned with the plight of Jews in Palestine. In 1909, Szold visited Ottoman Palestine and was deeply troubled by the lack of medical infrastructure available to both Jewish settlers and local Arab populations. The journey was a turning point for her, convincing her that providing medical aid was the most effective way American Jews – particularly women – could contribute to the Zionist project. Upon returning to the United States, she established Hadassah[55] in 1912 (Levitats, 1943:209).

Hadassah's early activities focused on raising funds for medical supplies, dispatching nurses to Palestine, and promoting public health initiatives. One of its most important early achievements was the creation of the Hadassah Medical Organization (HMO) in 1918. The organization sent two American nurses, Rose Kaplan and Rae Landy, to establish the first Hadassah clinic in Jerusalem, which provided free medical services to both Jewish and Arab communities (Friesel, 1985:144). This approach not only advanced Jewish health and welfare but also bolstered the Zionist image as a force for humanitarian progress, countering anti-Zionist propaganda that framed Jewish settlement as disruptive (Levitats, 1943:211). Hadassah's most ambitious project was the establishment of the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem in 1939, which became the largest and most advanced medical facility in the region. This hospital was not merely a place of treatment: it was a symbol of Jewish permanence in Palestine, demonstrating the Zionist commitment to building infrastructure and social services. By the 1940s, Hadassah had built a network of clinics, child welfare stations, and public health initiatives, laying the foundation for what would later become Israel's healthcare system (Halpern, 1979:24).

Hadassah's influence extended far beyond its work in Palestine. In the United States, the organization mobilized Jewish women on an unprecedented scale, building a membership

[55] Hadassah was named after the Hebrew name of Queen Esther, a Jewish heroine from the biblical Book of Esther who saved her people from a massacre in ancient Persia (Bierbrier, 1970:92).

that exceeded 300,000 by the 1940s, making it one of the largest women's organizations in the country (Levitats, 1943:212). Despite its focus on philanthropy and social services, Hadassah was also deeply involved in Zionist political advocacy. Henrietta Szold was an active participant in Zionist Congresses and frequently met with US officials to discuss Jewish immigration policies. During the British Mandate period, Hadassah publicly condemned the British government's restrictions on Jewish immigration and played a major role in pressuring the US government to support Zionist objectives (Friesel, 1985:149).

Six years after Hadassah was established, the American Jewish Congress (AJC) was formed (1918). Initially positioning itself as a representative body for American Jews, it advocated for Jewish rights on both domestic and international fronts. While it was not explicitly founded as a Zionist organization, the rise of Rabbi Stephen Wise as its leader in the 1920s ensured that it would play a major role in American Zionist advocacy. Wise, a dynamic orator and political strategist, transformed the AJC into a formidable force for Zionist lobbying, using legal arguments and civil rights advocacy to push for US support of a Jewish homeland (Bierbrier, 1970:98). During the interwar period, the AJC focused primarily on combating antisemitism in the United States and advocating for Jewish refugee resettlement. However, as Nazi persecution of Jews escalated in the 1930s, the organization shifted its focus toward pressing for a large-scale solution to the Jewish question (Friesel, 1985:151). Wise personally led delegations to Washington, urging the Roosevelt administration to support Jewish statehood in Palestine and to increase Jewish immigration quotas to the United States (Levitats, 1943:215).

The AJC's strategies differed from the ZOA's more confrontational political activism. Rather than relying on mass protests and media campaigns, the AJC focused on legal advocacy, policy research, and elite political lobbying. It submitted formal petitions to the League of Nations, arguing that Jewish rights in Palestine were enshrined in international law and that British policy had violated the spirit of the Balfour Declaration (Halpern, 1979:29). In the 1940s, the AJC's advocacy efforts intensified. The organization worked closely with the Department of State and the United Nations to ensure that Jewish claims to Palestine were recognized in postwar negotiations (Bierbrier, 1970:100).

The ZOA, Hadassah, and AJC were just a few of the many organizations operating in the United States to advance the Zionist cause. Though their nature and methods differed, they all shared a defining trait: they were part of the mainstream Zionist movement, associated with a leadership that belonged to the broad and moderate spectrum of Zionists predominantly characterized by socialist views.

4.4. US Revisionist Zionist Organizations

4.4.1. Hillel Kook and the Bergson Group

As detailed in the first two chapters, Zionism was not a monolithic movement, but a common goal pursued by diverse ideologies. While so-called *mainstream* Zionism encompassed a wide range of factions, the focus of this thesis lies beyond these boundaries. As discussed earlier, the Irgun starkly contrasted with moderate, socialist-oriented groups. Its activities in Mandatory Palestine were carried out by right-wing militants who rejected the Haganah's compromising methods. Seemingly, its lobbying and advocacy efforts in the United States involved individuals who employed more radical and direct tactics than those of the organizations described in the previous paragraph. Among these individuals, the most significant figure was Hillel Kook, known in the United States as Peter Bergson.

Hillel Kook was born in 1915 in Lithuania and migrated to Palestine as a child. His family had a strong religious and intellectual background: his uncle, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine. However, instead of following a rabbinical path, Hillel Kook was drawn to nationalist activism and became involved in the Irgun (Penkower, 2011:333). Between 1937 and 1939, he operated in Poland under the guidance of Avraham Stern[56], purchasing arms and coordinating with local Zionist groups. This period reinforced his belief in militant activism and the necessity of challenging British rule through decisive, rather than diplomatic, action (Penkower, 1981:282).

[56] At the time, Stern was still a member of the Irgun, as the split from which Lehi originated occurred in 1940.

With the outbreak of World War II, Kook's activities in Europe came to a halt, and he was forced to reconsider his approach. Following Jabotinsky's advice, he moved to the United States to advocate for Zionist objectives through public engagement rather than clandestine operations. To be more effective in an American context, he adopted the alias *Peter Bergson*, a name that distanced him from his religious heritage and allowed him to present himself as a secular political activist (Kaplan, 2005:90). The decision to move to the United States reflected a strategic shift. Kook recognized that securing American support would be crucial for the future of Zionism. He also understood that mainstream Zionist organizations in the US were slow-moving and constrained by diplomatic caution. Instead, Kook and his associates sought to apply methods of direct political agitation, borrowing from American advertising, Hollywood-style publicity campaigns, and high-profile lobbying (Baumel, 1995:80).

Upon his arrival, Kook gathered a small group of committed activists, many of whom were fellow Irgun members who had fled Europe. This collective became known informally as the *Bergson Group* (Wyman, 2001:4). Unlike mainstream Zionist organizations, which often operated through diplomatic channels and elite networking, the Bergson Group pursued a strategy of mass mobilization. They understood that the American public had little awareness of Jewish affairs in Palestine and that their challenge was to make Zionism a public issue (Baumel, 1995:80). To achieve this, Kook and his team employed tactics that were unconventional at the time. They staged dramatic events, placed provocative advertisements in major newspapers, and courted high-profile celebrities and politicians. The group's approach marked a significant break from the Zionist establishment in America, which viewed their methods as reckless. Leaders such as Rabbi Stephen Wise and other prominent Zionist figures saw Kook's strategies as a direct challenge to their authority. The Bergson Group's willingness to criticize both European and American institutions alienated them from mainstream Jewish organizations, yet it also earned them significant public attention (Kaplan, 2005:92; Penkower, 1981:285).

At a time when Menachem Begin was emphasizing the importance of propaganda in the Irgun's activities in Palestine, Kook likewise recognized the influence of American media in shaping political outcomes. Rather than relying on closed-door discussions with political elites, he sought to bring Zionist issues into the public arena. He and his

associates wrote articles, produced radio broadcasts, and organized public demonstrations designed to capture the attention of ordinary Americans (Penkower, 1981:285). Their advertising campaigns used striking headlines and emotional appeals to draw attention to the Jewish struggle. The group's use of media was inspired by American advertising and propaganda techniques. They understood that the average American was unfamiliar with the complexities of British rule in Palestine or the plight of European Jewry, so they simplified their message into clear, emotionally compelling narratives (Baumel, 1995:83).

From the outset, Kook's activities in the United States were met with resistance from mainstream Zionist groups. They saw his aggressive tactics as disruptive and feared that they would provoke an antisemitic backlash. Stephen Wise and other prominent figures viewed the Bergson Group as a movement that was undermining carefully cultivated relationships with American politicians (Baumel, 1995:84; Kaplan, 2005:97). Despite this opposition, Kook and his allies continued their work, refusing to be absorbed into existing Zionist structures. They believed that the traditional leadership had failed to act decisively, and they positioned themselves as the vanguard of a new, more urgent Zionist movement. This created ongoing friction, as mainstream Zionist leaders sought to discredit the Bergson Group, sometimes even attempting to have them investigated by the US government under suspicions of foreign interference (Penkower, 2011:336).

The following subparagraphs address the Bergson Group's efforts in the United States throughout the 1940s, implemented by five organizations with distinct methods and natures, all sharing the common goal of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine.

4.4.2. The American Friends of a Jewish Palestine

The first major organization established by the Bergson Group was the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine. Founded in 1939, it aimed to raise funds for the Irgun and support its effort in the Aliyah Bet. Although it would later be overshadowed by other groups created by Hillel Kook and his associates, it played a crucial foundational role in shaping the American-based Revisionist Zionist movement and its strategies. The idea for the organization emerged in early 1939 when a small delegation of Irgun representatives,

including Robert Briscoe[57], Chaim Lubinski, and Colonel John Patterson[58], arrived in New York with letters of introduction from Jabotinsky. Their primary goal was to secure financial support for the Irgun's operations, particularly in organizing the illegal transport of Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe to Palestine. The publication of the White Paper in May 1939 provided a sense of urgency, and within one month, the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine was officially established. The group quickly transitioned from a fundraising effort to a political advocacy body, publicly championing Jewish immigration and resistance to British rule (Penkower, 1981:282-283).

One of the most defining moments in the organization's history came in early 1940. The Irgun had arranged for a transport ship, the *Sakariya*, to carry 2,175 Jewish refugees stranded on small steamers and barges in the Danube River due to the Nazi occupation (Penkower, 1981:283). The American Friends of a Jewish Palestine actively engaged in fundraising and logistics to charter the *Sakariya*, demonstrating significant dedication and capability in mobilizing resources. Their efforts included securing financial backing and coordinating the challenging logistics involved in moving a large number of refugees across hostile territories to Palestine. Despite the well-organized preparation, the mission faced severe challenges upon reaching its culmination. British authorities intercepted the *Sakariya* miles from Palestinian territorial waters, detaining the passengers and imprisoning the organizer, Eri Jabotinsky, son of Vladimir Jabotinsky (Penkower, 2011:362).

The American Friends of a Jewish Palestine also proved its abilities in the field of public relations, as it soon understood the importance of visibility and strategic messaging in the American public sphere. The organization worked to cultivate relations with influential figures who could amplify their message and secure additional financial backing. Their events attracted journalists and political commentators, increasing awareness of Jewish immigration issues in Palestine (Wyman, 2001:4). The organization also planned public lectures and private meetings where speakers detailed the challenges faced by European Jews and the need for immediate action. The approach was methodical: they emphasized the humanitarian urgency while reinforcing the Zionist ideal of Jewish self-determination.

[57] Robert Briscoe was an Irish politician and the first Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin, serving two terms in 1956 and 1961. He was also a prominent member of the Irish Republican Army and had strong links to prominent Revisionist Zionists such as Jabotinsky and Begin (Bell, 1996:40).

[58] Patterson had been the commander of the Jewish Legion during World War I (Fachler, 2003:35).

These efforts proved to be particularly effective in engaging previously uninvolved segments of the American Jewish community (Wyman, 2001:5).

Despite operating for only a brief period, the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine established a precedent for how Zionist activism could be conducted in the United States. The organization's ability to mobilize support proved that there was a considerable portion of American society – both Jewish and non-Jewish – that was receptive to a more activist form of Zionism. This realization led to a shift in strategy among Irgun representatives in the United States. By mid-1940, it became evident that advocating solely for immigration was no longer sufficient. This led to the transformation of the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine into a broader political movement that would later evolve into the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews (Kaplan, 2005:92).

4.4.3. The Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews

On December 4, 1941, a major conference was held at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., where over 250 representatives from across the United States gathered to launch the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews. The event was staged beneath the grouped flags of all Allied nations, a symbolic gesture underscoring the legitimacy of their demand. Pierre Van Paassen, a well-known foreign correspondent and Zionist activist, addressed the audience, stressing that the Middle East was destined to be a decisive battlefield in the war and that a Jewish army could play a pivotal role in securing the region for the Allies. Meanwhile, Colonel John Henry Patterson declared that Britain was failing to utilize a vast manpower resource by not enlisting Palestinian Jews in the war effort. In a particularly forceful statement, Samuel Harden Church, the president of the Carnegie Institute, not only called for the creation of a Jewish army but also argued that the Jewish people should be permitted to re-establish a government in Jerusalem, implying that military action would be a steppingstone toward Jewish statehood (Penkower, 2011:346-347). Three days after the conference, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor catapulted the United States into World War II. This dramatic shift gave the Committee's cause renewed urgency, as American policymakers sought to mobilize all available manpower against the Axis. Recognizing the momentum, the Committee's leadership swiftly moved to capitalize on the changing political climate.

Van Paassen, now formally elected as chairman of the Committee for a Jewish Army, announced an ambitious four-point program to be implemented immediately. It focused on mobilizing public opinion, registering Jewish volunteers for the proposed army, establishing training centers for officers and enlisted men, and launching a nationwide fundraising campaign. At the same time, Patterson emphasized that the creation of a Jewish army in Palestine could allow the redeployment of British and Australian troops from the Middle East to the Pacific theater, where they were desperately needed to counter the Japanese (Penkower, 2011:348).

The Committee for a Jewish Army continued the tradition of media campaigns set by the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine. On January 5, 1942, Hillel Kook placed a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* with the striking headline: *JEWS FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO FIGHT* (Penkower, 2011:347). The advertisement, which cost the Committee $2,000, quoted President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, both of whom had called for an international struggle against tyranny, and challenged why Jews were still being denied the opportunity to actively participate in the war effort. It concluded with an appeal for the creation of a 200,000-strong Jewish Army composed of Yishuv, stateless Jews from Europe, and Jewish volunteers from third countries to fight alongside the Allies. This advertisement was unprecedented in its directness and scale, forcing the issue of Jewish military service into the American political discourse. The Committee's strategy of engaging the public through newspapers, radio broadcasts, and public rallies proved remarkably effective. Major Jewish and non-Jewish figures began endorsing the initiative, and within weeks, the campaign garnered the attention of prominent members of Congress and the Roosevelt administration (Penkower, 2011:348).

The Committee's media blitz was complemented by aggressive lobbying efforts. Throughout 1942, Senators Claude Pepper (Florida) and Styles Bridges (New Hampshire) emerged as key advocates, sending messages of support to the Committee. Secretary of War Henry Stimson personally conveyed his best wishes for the campaign's success, a significant boost to the Committee's credibility. Meanwhile, Congressman Andrew Somers (New York) took the initiative to introduce a resolution calling for the formation of a Jewish Army in Palestine, arguing that such a force was not only morally justified but militarily necessary (Penkower, 1981:286). The Committee also leveraged high-

profile events to sustain public interest. On July 21, 1942, a massive rally was held at Madison Square Garden, attended by thousands of supporters. The event featured impassioned speeches from military officers, legislators, and Jewish activists, all demanding immediate action from the Roosevelt administration and the British government (Penkower, 2011:352). British officials, however, remained deeply resistant to the proposal, fearing that an armed Jewish force could later be turned against British rule in Palestine. They also feared that granting such a request would provoke Arab unrest and further complicate Britain's already weak hold on Palestine. British diplomats dismissed the proposal as unnecessary, holding that existing British and Allied forces were sufficient to combat the Axis powers in the Middle East (Penkower, 2011:353).

Faced with this resistance, the Committee escalated its lobbying efforts. Senator Edwin Johnson (Colorado) became one of the most outspoken advocates of the Jewish Army proposal, declaring in a Senate speech that the Jewish people deserved to fight as a nation, rather than as scattered individuals serving in different Allied armies. The Committee intensified its public appeals, publishing new advertisements that not only focused on the military argument but also highlighted the moral urgency of allowing Jews to take up arms against the Nazi regime. This shift in messaging helped to draw additional public support, but it was still not enough to overcome British opposition (Penkower, 2011:355).

Although the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews did not achieve its ultimate goal of securing Allied recognition for an independent Jewish fighting force, it succeeded in transforming Jewish military service into a major political issue. The British government eventually relented in 1944, allowing for the formation of the Jewish Brigade[59], a partial concession to the demands of the Committee. However, since late 1942, the Bergson Group had begun reassessing its priorities. With mounting evidence of mass extermination in Nazi-occupied Europe, it was evident that military efforts alone would not suffice. The group's focus shifted from securing a Jewish fighting force to urgent rescue efforts, seeking immediate action to save Jewish lives from annihilation.

[59] See Chapter 2, *The Revolutionary Path: Armed Struggle for a Jewish* State, Section 2.4.4, *Tehomi and Raziel: The First Irgun*.

4.4.4. The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe

In April 1943, American and British officials held a conference in Hamilton, Bermuda, to discuss the refugee crisis, but produced no concrete plans to save Jews under Nazi rule. Frustrated by this lack of action, Hillel Kook and his associates organized a counter-conference in July 1943 at the Hotel Commodore in New York City, which brought together politicians, journalists, and intellectuals to demand immediate governmental intervention. Among the leading figures were playwright Ben Hecht, journalist Max Lerner, novelist Louis Bromfield, and Congressman Andrew Somers, along with Norwegian Nobel laureate Sigrid Undset (Morton, 1973:5). The outcome of this event was the decision to shift the Bergson Group's primary focus toward pressuring the Roosevelt administration to take direct action to aid European Jews. To this end, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe was formed (Penkower, 1981:290).

The Emergency Committee employed a bold and confrontational publicity campaign to force the Roosevelt administration to address the ongoing genocide. Throughout August and September 1943, thanks to the support of prominent media personalities[60], it significantly increased the frequency of its full-page newspaper advertisements, some of which used stark and emotionally charged language. One of the most famous instances was an advertisement featuring a poem by Ben Hecht, which opened with the chilling lines:

Four Million Jews waiting for Death.
Oh hang and burn-quiet Jew!
Don't be bothersome; save your breath -
The world is busy with other news[61] (Kaplan, 2005:92).

The Committee's most dramatic action came in October 1943, during the Yom Kippur, when it organized a march of 400 Orthodox rabbis to the steps of the Capitol and the White House. The demonstrators urged President Roosevelt to take direct action to rescue the surviving Jewish population in Europe. The event was unprecedented, as it was the first time a large group of Jewish religious leaders had staged such a direct political demonstration in the United States. While the rabbis were received by Vice President

[60] William Randolph Hearst, the influential media magnate, personally ordered his chain of thirty-four newspapers to print a series of editorials advocating for the Committee's rescue efforts (Baumel, 1995:88).
[61] The poem was published in *The New York Times* on September 14, 1943 (Kaplan, 2005:92).

Henry Wallace and some members of Congress, Roosevelt declined to meet them, a decision that sparked significant criticism within the Jewish community (Wyman, 2001:5).

The Emergency Committee's greatest achievement was helping to pressure the Roosevelt administration into establishing the War Refugee Board in January 1944. The establishment came after a scandal erupted within the government, revealing that the Department of State had deliberately obstructed efforts to rescue Jews. Treasury Department officials, led by Henry Morgenthau Jr., compiled a damning report titled *Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of the Jews*, which detailed how the Department of State had suppressed information about the Holocaust and blocked rescue efforts. Morgenthau presented this report to Roosevelt, who, faced with mounting congressional and public pressure, issued an executive order to create the War Refugee Board[62] (Wyman, 2001:6). However, it received minimal support from his administration, faced resistance from other government agencies, and was largely left to function with private funding and limited resources. Despite these difficulties and the establishment late in the war, it made significant contributions, helping to save an estimated 200,000 Jews and 20,000 non-Jews (Wyman, 2001:6).

As revealed by Hillel Kook, the War Refugee Board also played a crucial role in helping his organizations transfer money to the Irgun in Palestine. The Board's officials, who had grown sympathetic to Kook's cause, discreetly advised him on a legal way to send funds abroad. They explained that many businessmen were using a government permit system to move large sums of money to Switzerland and were making significant financial gains in the process. These officials warned Kook that this system was about to be shut down due to widespread use and suggested that he apply for a permit while he still could. Following the advice, Kook's group formally applied for and secured government authorization to transfer $250,000 abroad. However, lacking immediate access to these funds, he and his partners had to rely on external borrowing to facilitate the transaction. Once the necessary capital was acquired, the transfer enabled them to provide financial support to the Irgun, which had been persistently requesting assistance. Kook later

[62] The War Refugee Board functioned as an emergency US executive agency aimed at rescuing and aiding victims of Nazi persecution during the final years of World War II. Despite limited resources and bureaucratic challenges, it coordinated efforts with diplomats, resistance groups, and humanitarian organizations to facilitate escape routes, provide financial and logistical support, and secure temporary refuge for those at risk (Wyman, 2001:7-8).

described this operation as the most significant financial transaction undertaken by his group (Wyman, 2001:16-17).

4.4.5. The Hebrew Committee of National Liberation

As the Bergson Group's efforts intensified and achieved important results, internal tensions with the Revisionist command in Palestine emerged. While the Irgun, under Begin's leadership, prioritized armed struggle against the British in Palestine, Kook believed in diplomatic and public relations campaigns to garner American support for Jewish independence. His preference for symbolic, high-profile actions contrasted with the Irgun's covert, militant approach. This fundamental disagreement intensified as Kook redirected funds away from the Irgun's military operations and towards public advocacy efforts in the United States (Kaplan, 2005:88). In May 1944, after increasing clashes with the Irgun leadership, Kook and his allies took a radical step and declared themselves a Hebrew nation in exile. To officialize this sentiment, they founded the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation. This organization was not just another Zionist advocacy group: it was structured as a quasi-governmental body, with its headquarters in Washington, D.C., functioning as an unofficial embassy (Morton, 1973:5). The Hebrew Committee's manifesto, published shortly after its founding, claimed that the Jews of Palestine and European refugees were a distinct national entity, separate from diaspora Jewry, and therefore entitled to self-determination and representation on the world stage (Kaplan, 2005:93). This marked a clear break from both the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency, which sought to represent global Jewry through a collective Zionist framework. The Committee also explicitly denied the authority of American and European Zionist leaders to make decisions regarding Palestine, asserting that only the Jews in Palestine and those fleeing Europe had that right (Morton, 1973:6).

The creation of this rebellious organization infuriated the Irgun leadership, who saw it as a dangerous distraction from their military campaign. Kook's refusal to allocate American funds to the Irgun's armed struggle was particularly contentious. He argued that the money raised in the United States should go towards illegal immigration efforts rather than violent resistance. This refusal deepened suspicions that Kook was acting independently of the Irgun's command in Palestine, effectively severing his ties with Begin's leadership (Baumel, 1995:86). A clear example of Begin's hostility towards

Kook is encapsulated in a 1946 letter, in which the Irgun's leader admonished his American counterpart, urging him to focus on arms procurement rather than political theatrics. Begin also objected to Kook's terminology, particularly his insistence on referring to the future Jewish state as the *Free Palestine State* rather than the *Free State of Eretz Israel*. Begin believed this linguistic choice risked disassociating the Jewish claim from the land's biblical and historical heritage (Kaplan, 2005:87). Beyond the Irgun, mainstream Zionist organizations were equally hostile to the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation. The Jewish Agency viewed it as an attempt to usurp their authority. Public campaigns were launched against Kook, accusing him of splitting American Jewish support at a crucial moment for Zionist lobbying efforts. The World Jewish Congress[63] even lobbied the US government to investigate the Committee as a potential foreign agent, fearing that its claims of nationhood could complicate American diplomatic relations (Penkower, 1981:300).

Despite its estrangement from Begin's leadership, the Hebrew Committee played a crucial role in securing material support for the Irgun in the turmoil months leading up to the establishment of the State of Israel. The most significant example is its central role in the logistical efforts that facilitated the oft-mentioned *Altalena* Affair[64]. French archival documents revealed that Kook was the key figure in establishing contact with French officials regarding this operation. On March 20, 1948, a delegation from the Hebrew Committee formally presented the case for French support to representatives of Foreign Minister Georges Bidault, who viewed the Irgun favorably thanks to the Committee's persuasive narrative (Zamir, 2010:24). Kook's media strategy was central to securing this support: using tactics previously employed in the United States, he framed the Irgun's struggle as a continuation of the French Resistance, appealing to nationalist and anti-British sentiment in France. This was particularly effective among conservative Catholic circles and right-wing politicians who feared British dominance in the Middle East. Kook emphasized the need for a secular Hebrew state rather than a religious Jewish one, arguing that such a framework would be more aligned with Western democratic principles and less threatening to France's Catholic interests. His rhetoric reassured French officials that

[63] Established in 1936, the World Jewish Congress is an international organization that advocates for the rights and security of Jewish communities across the globe (Penkower, 1981:281).

[64] See Chapter 3, Arms Procurement: How Non-State Actors Secured Matériel, Section 3.3, *France: Behind the 'Altalena' Affair*.

a future state led by the Irgun would protect religious institutions while maintaining a strong nationalist identity. French Defense Ministry reports suggested that the Hebrew Committee's efforts led to informal agreements between Bidault and the Irgun. Though the details remain uncertain, the Committee's role was decisive in facilitating the procurement and voyage of the *Altalena*, formerly an American vessel (Zamir, 2010:26-27).

After Israel's independence, the Committee's refusal to coordinate with mainstream Zionist diplomacy left it sidelined. Furthermore, funding dried up as major donors aligned with more established Zionist organizations. By the end of 1948, the rebellious Committee had effectively dissolved (Morton, 1973:7).

4.4.6. The American League for a Free Palestine

While the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation was a manifestation of Hillel Kook's ideological independence from the Irgun, raising awareness of the Zionist cause in the United States and pressuring the government remained a priority. Simultaneously with the foundation of the Hebrew Committee, the Bergson Group created the American League for a Free Palestine (ALFP) to pursue these objectives and to fund the Committee. With the intensification of the demands for a Jewish state and the beginning of the Jewish insurgency in Mandatory Palestine, the group sought to increase its influence through institutionalization. The appointment of Senator Guy Gillette as president of the ALFP in August 1945 marked a significant turning point in the Bergson Group's trajectory. Gillette, a Democratic senator from Iowa, was one of the most vocal congressional supporters of Zionism, and his involvement provided the ALFP with political legitimacy and access to legislative influence. Unlike many of his colleagues, who hesitated to take a firm stance on the future of Palestine due to diplomatic considerations, Gillette viewed the establishment of a Jewish state as both a humanitarian necessity and a matter of international justice (Morton, 1973:5).

The ALFP built on the success of the previous organizations and placed much of its efforts on mass media and cultural production. Recognizing the power of spectacle and popular culture, the League engaged in highly visible advertising campaigns and produced theatrical performances that framed Zionism as an issue of global justice and postwar reconstruction (Kaplan, 2005:92). One of the most influential cultural initiatives

undertaken by the ALFP was the Broadway play *A Flag is Born*, written by Ben Hecht and first staged in 1946. Unlike conventional political advocacy, which relied on formal lobbying and editorial writing, the ALFP sought to shape public sentiment through emotive storytelling. The play, which starred twenty-two-year-old Marlon Brando, presented a dramatic and highly charged narrative that linked the horrors of the Holocaust with the urgent need for Jewish statehood. It depicted Holocaust survivors attempting to reach Palestine, only to be blocked by British authorities enforcing the White Paper's immigration restrictions. The production had a profound impact, not only in terms of raising funds for the Hebrew Committee's initiatives but also in influencing public perception of Britain's policies in Palestine. The play toured across the United States, reaching audiences who might not have otherwise engaged with the political struggles of the Zionist movement (Kaplan, 2005:92).

By combining the emotive power of mass media with direct political engagement, the League successfully broadened its appeal beyond traditional Zionist circles, reaching a diverse audience that included members of Congress, intellectuals, and the general American public. Its use of drama and storytelling as a means of political persuasion demonstrated a keen understanding of how public sentiment could be mobilized in favor of Jewish statehood.

4.4.7. Decline and Dissolution

By 1948, the establishment of the State of Israel fundamentally made the continued existence of organizations such as the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation and the American League for a Free Palestine unnecessary. These groups had been formed to pressure the US government and mobilize public opinion in favor of Jewish statehood, but once that goal was achieved, their activities lost their rationale. By September 1948, Hillel Kook officially declared the disbandment of the Irgun Delegation in the United States (the Bergson Group). The movement had successfully influenced the public and political discourse but no longer had a specific cause to advocate for in the United States (Baumel, 1995:85).

Following the disbandment of the Bergson Group, Hillel Kook returned to Israel and was elected to the first Knesset as a member of Herut[65]. However, his political career in Israel was short-lived, as ideological differences with Begin led him to step away from parliamentary politics after the first Knesset's dissolution (Kaplan, 2005:93). After 1948, Kook developed a radically different view of Zionism's role. In interviews from 1982 and 1983, Kook explicitly identified himself as a post-Zionist, stating that *The exile ended on May 14, 1948* (Kaplan, 2005:94). He later went further, describing himself as an anti-Zionist, arguing that the mission of Zionism had been fulfilled with the creation of the state. Unlike mainstream Israeli leaders, who saw Zionism as an ongoing project aimed at unifying all Jews within the Jewish homeland, Kook believed that Zionism had been solely a liberation movement, meant to free Jews from their exilic condition by establishing a sovereign state. Once this goal was achieved, Zionism had no further function.

4.5 Conclusion

With its activity in the United States, the Irgun demonstrated its maturity as an organization. The paramilitary activity undoubtedly contributed to the Zionist project, but its ability to untangle the clutter of international politics added a necessary component to the fight for a Jewish state. To appreciate the wide reach and complexity of the Revisionist Zionist organization, it is essential to understand the reason that led some of its members to move to the United States. The analysis in this chapter begins with this aim, revealing how Britain, throughout its Mandate, gradually lost its grip on Zionist factions and how its power to influence the future of the region diminished. British policies, particularly the 1939 White Paper, demonstrated an increasing reluctance to support Jewish aspirations, while the American political landscape offered new possibilities. The presence of a large and politically engaged Jewish community, combined with the growing global influence of the United States, made Washington the most effective place to mobilize support for Zionist goals.

[65] See Chapter 2, *The Revolutionary Path: Armed Struggle for a Jewish State*, Section 2.4.5, *Begin and the Insurgency: The Decisive Years*.

In the fifty years that preceded the establishment of Israel, a wide network of organizations emerged in the United States, each employing different methods to advance the Zionist cause. Some, like the Zionist Organization of America and Hadassah, worked within established political and social structures, prioritizing diplomacy, philanthropy, and institutional engagement. Others, such as the ones created by the Bergson Group, adopted a more confrontational and publicity-driven approach, using impactful mass media campaigns, political advertisements, and public demonstrations to pressure the US government into action. This divergence in strategy led to tensions within the broader movement, as mainstream and Revisionist Zionists debated the most effective means of securing international support.

Despite internal divisions, these efforts collectively made Zionist aspirations a significant issue in the American political discourse. From lobbying key policymakers to shaping public sentiment through cultural productions, activists and organizations managed to position Jewish statehood as a moral and strategic necessity. The impact of these efforts is evident in the increasing willingness of American leaders to engage with and eventually support Zionist objectives. By successfully mobilizing political and public support in the United States, Hillel Kook, the Bergson Group, and their several organizations showed that the fate of nations is often decided not only on battlefields or in diplomatic meetings but also in the corridors of power, the pages of newspapers, and the minds of the public.

CONCLUSION

Throughout its terrorist operations, weapons acquisition, and lobbying campaigns, the Irgun demonstrated remarkable versatility and an innovative approach, despite its relatively small membership and the substantial opposition it faced. This three-tiered analysis highlights the role of the Revisionist Zionist organization, which is often overlooked in discussions about Israel's independence. The tendency to minimize the Irgun's role likely stems from the assumption that a small, independent, revolutionary group could only be a secondary force in the broader historical context. Many authors emphasize formal negotiations and the role played by the Jewish Agency while underestimating the insurgency's impact. However, the Irgun's activities significantly pressured British authorities, forcing them to reconsider their continued presence in Palestine. Its high-profile attacks, combined with strategic propaganda, demonstrated the growing instability of British rule and heightened the urgency of a resolution. In the United States, the Bergson Group sought to shape public opinion by presenting the Zionist struggle as both a national liberation movement and a humanitarian cause in the wake of the Holocaust. These efforts secured not only political backing but also military and financial support. Indeed, as the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation's involvement in the *Altalena* Affair testifies, Hillel Kook's lobbying activity extended beyond public advocacy. Moreover, in an interview with American historian David Wyman, Kook provided a compelling account of how his group channeled financial aid to the Irgun with the assistance of sympathizers within the War Refugee Board, revealing the diverse and unconventional methods employed to support Revisionist Zionist efforts from the United States.

In light of the Irgun's wide range of activities explored in this thesis, the first hypothesis presented in the introduction – that the literature overestimates the role of political superstructures in Israel's creation – is partially confirmed. While extensive academic research exists on the Irgun, its prominence in scholarly discussions does not reflect its perceived influence. Outside of specialized studies dedicated to the organization, its role is rarely acknowledged in broader works on Israel's independence. An exception to this

trend is *Righteous Victims* by Benny Morris, who deserves recognition for highlighting the Irgun's contribution.

The second hypothesis – that official decisions regarding the fate of the Zionist cause were often a consequence of bottom-up processes, such as the Irgun's activity – is also confirmed. Throughout this thesis, the comparison between small-scale revolutionary initiatives and institutionalized mainstream activities remains a central theme. This analysis is carried out by examining the ideological differences between Revisionist and Labor Zionism, the contrasting roles played by the Haganah and the Irgun, and, later, the divergent strategies employed by mainstream Zionist organizations in the United States as opposed to those founded by the Bergson group. Although both factions contributed significantly to the eventual establishment of the Jewish state, it is evident that the Revisionist Zionists frequently anticipated their counterparts in terms of strategies and methods, influencing broader Zionist decision-making even when their contributions were initially dismissed or marginalized. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is seen in the military vision articulated by Jabotinsky. As early as 1923, Jabotinsky argued for the necessity of a well-organized Zionist military presence capable of enforcing Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. At that time, the newly established Haganah was only tasked with protecting Jewish settlements from Arab attacks rather than asserting military superiority. Jabotinsky's perspective, which advocated for a superior Jewish force capable of achieving political and territorial objectives, was initially dismissed by the mainstream Zionist leadership. However, as tensions with both the Arab population and the British authorities escalated over the following decades, the need for a stronger, more organized military force became increasingly evident. The Jewish Agency eventually recognized the necessity of reinforcing the Haganah, allowing it to develop into a highly trained, well-equipped paramilitary organization. By the time of its formal integration into the IDF in 1948, the Haganah had evolved to such an extent that the newly established Jewish state was able to succeed in the full-scale war against the neighboring Arab countries.

A similar pattern can be observed in the shifting strategies toward British rule in Palestine. Initially, the Haganah maintained a relatively moderate stance, believing that collaboration with the British administration would have been the best way to achieve Zionist aspirations. This position was also adopted by the Irgun at the onset of World War

II, as the organization recognized the strategic necessity of standing by the Allies in their fight against the Axis Powers. However, Lehi, the smallest and most extremist of the three militant Zionist organizations, never halted its campaign against British rule, viewing the Mandate's administration as the main obstacle to Jewish sovereignty. This radical stance, initially met with skepticism even among Revisionist circles, ultimately proved to be influential. In early 1944, the Irgun abandoned its earlier policy of cooperation and declared an open insurgency against British rule – a move that marked a significant shift in Zionist strategy. By 1945, even the Haganah joined in coordinated efforts against the British, demonstrating the extent to which revolutionary militancy had shaped the overall trajectory of the Zionist leadership.

The significance of these right-wing militias is further underscored by their long-term impact on Israeli politics, as their leaders later emerged as key figures in the political establishment of the new state. Menachem Begin served as Prime Minister of Israel from 1977 to 1983, leading the country's first right-wing government under Likud. Similarly, Yitzhak Shamir, Lehi's leader after Stern's death, held the office of Prime Minister from 1983 to 1984 and again from 1986 to 1992. The rise of these figures to the highest levels of political leadership showed the lasting influence of the Revisionist and militant strands of Zionism, which ultimately helped shape Israel's multifaceted political identity.

While the contributions of the Haganah and the Jewish Agency to the establishment of the Jewish state remain undeniable, this research makes it clear that bottom-up forces, embodied by independent paramilitary organizations like the Irgun and Lehi, played an equally critical role in shaping the Zionist cause. Their impact is evident not only in their direct violent engagements but also in their ability to influence the broader Zionist leadership into adopting more aggressive and confrontational strategies when diplomatic efforts alone proved insufficient. However, due to the intertwined nature of the various actors involved, it remains difficult to assess which faction played the most significant role in compelling Britain to withdraw from Palestine. The interplay between diplomatic efforts, political maneuvering, and terrorist attacks creates a tangled picture in which no single actor can claim full responsibility for the eventual British decision to refer the Palestine question to the United Nations. Further research, particularly by examining British archival sources, could provide valuable insights into the perceptions and deliberations of British officials at the time. Such an investigation could help clarify the

extent to which Revisionist Zionist activities, as opposed to international diplomatic negotiations, influenced Britain's ultimate decision to relinquish its mandate over Palestine.

The findings of this thesis underscore the need to view the Zionist movement as a dynamic and multifaceted struggle in which both institutionalized political actors and grassroots militant organizations played indispensable roles. Figures like David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann are rightly credited with achieving crucial diplomatic successes, but the contributions of leaders such as Vladimir Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin must also be recognized as essential to the establishment of the State of Israel. Therefore, while the diplomatic achievements of Zionist leaders undoubtedly played a fundamental role, the activity of a relatively small, right-wing terrorist organization challenges the narrative that the Israeli Declaration of Independence was largely a diplomatic victory.

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APPENDIX: TERRORISM OR RESISTANCE?

In response to the Jewish Agency's accusations, Begin once wrote: *The Irgun is not a 'terrorist' organization. It does not commit acts of violence for the sake of violence. Its aims are political – the freeing of Palestine from foreign domination* (Zadka, 1996:93).

Throughout this thesis, the Irgun is consistently referred to as a terrorist organization. Upon encountering this label, some might perceive it as arising from a political judgment and argue instead that the acts of violence carried out by the Revisionist Zionist group were, though deplorable, in the name of a *just cause*: the establishment of Israel. When heinous acts of violence are justified for a legitimate political objective, they are often labeled as acts of resistance. Consequently, it could be contended that fighting for a national identity, particularly for a people who endured severe discrimination and genocide, constituted a legitimate political objective, thus rendering such acts of violence as armed resistance rather than terrorism. However, while the attribution of value to a political plan like Zionism remains subjective, the definition of terrorism does not.

In a fascinating attempt to define terrorism, British researcher Anthony Richards (2014) gatheres key concepts elaborated by some of the most distinguished scholars in the field, including Bruce Hoffman, Alex Peter Schmid, Martha Crenshaw, Brian Michael Jenkins, and Igor Primoratz. After posing the problem of the lack of a universal definition, he investigates the main traits of a terrorist act. The core of his analysis revolves around the root of the word, arguing that *terrorism* fundamentally means *to terrorize*. While this observation might sound trivial, it serves as a crucial starting point for understanding the phenomenon. Richards argues that, as in all acts of violence, fear is a central component. However, while fear is typically a consequence of violence, in terrorism, it is the primary objective. As American scholar Brian Michael Jenkins observes, *[f]ear is the intended effect, not the byproduct, of terrorism* (quoted in Richards, 2014:222).

The next logical step is to ask: *Who is the target of terrorism?* In other words, *Who is being terrorized?* Swiss scholar Alex Peter Schmid argues that in terrorism, the *direct victim of violence (or threat thereof) is different from the ultimate target (audience)* (quoted in Richards, 2014:226). Who, then, is the ultimate target of a terrorist attack? The most comprehensive answer offered by Richards' literature review is that of American

political analyst Bruce Hoffman, who asserts that *[terrorism] is meant to instil fear within, and thereby intimidate, a wider 'target audience' that might include a rival ethnic or religious group, an entire country, a national government or political party, or public opinion in general* (quoted in Richards, 2014:222).

After these considerations, Richards defines terrorism as *the use of violence or the threat of violence with the primary purpose of generating a psychological impact beyond the immediate victims or object of attack for a political motive* (Richards, 2014:230). From this definition, another component of terrorism emerges: *a political motive*. This expression does not imply a principle of subjectivity in determining what constitutes a terrorist attack. Indeed, the definition does not refer to a *morally unjustified* political motive – otherwise, the term *terrorism* would always be subjective – but rather any political motive, whether agreeable or not. Following this logic, terrorism is a method of violence rather than a pejorative label attributed to a violent act or organization (Richards, 2014:217). This distinction is essential because, as American author H. H. A. Cooper brilliantly argues, *[we] can no longer afford the fiction that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. Fighting for freedom may well be his or her purpose, but if the mission is undertaken through the employment of terrorist means, a terrorist he or she must remain*.

In light of Richards' definition and Cooper's remark, it is evident that terrorism and resistance are not mutually exclusive. Having established this, the focus now returns to the Irgun and the rationale for its designation as a terrorist organization throughout this thesis. While the assessment of its role as *freedom fighter* is left to individual judgement, the following attacks carried out during the Jewish insurgency substantiate the label used. The King David Hotel bombing is extensively covered in this text[66]. As previously argued, the plan was initially conceived by the Haganah to eliminate evidence of its involvement in the United Resistance Movement. However, after disagreements with the Irgun and Lehi over the operation, the Haganah decided to cancel it. The Irgun ultimately carried out the attack, causing ninety-one deaths. It is unlikely that the objective was to destroy the evidence of the Haganah's involvement in the insurgency. The Irgun, which had explicitly declared the insurgency in February 1944, had no interest in protecting the

[66] See Chapter 2, *The Revolutionary Path: Armed Struggle for a Jewish State*, Section 2.4.5, *Begin and the Insurgency: The Decisive* Years.

Haganah's reputation in the eyes of the British. Nor was it concerned with maintaining the Haganah on its side, as the attack – predictably – led the socialist-oriented organization to condemn the Irgun and sever the alliance.

The following two examples are not analyzed in the thesis but are worth mentioning – not only to highlight the Irgun's terrorist nature but also due to their significant impact at the time and their lasting historical resonance, particularly the latter. On October 22, 1946, the Irgun carried out a bomb attack on the British Embassy in Rome by planting explosives outside the building. While the explosion caused significant structural damage, it resulted in no fatalities (Bell, 1996:181). A year and a half later, on April 9, 1948 – only a month before the Israeli Declaration of Independence – the Irgun and Lehi attacked the Arab village of Deir Yassin near Jerusalem. They used explosives to force entry into homes and engaged in hand-to-hand combat within the village, whose population – approximately 600 – was largely caught by surprise. Despite the Arab resistance being stronger than anticipated, the village suffered over one hundred casualties, though the exact number remains unknown. Reports of the massacre contributed to fear and panic among Palestinians, influencing subsequent displacement (the Nakba) during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (Morris, 1999:207-209).

What these three acts of violence share is the absence of a direct practical interest, which leaves room for a wider objective: instilling fear in the larger enemy factions – the British administration and the Arabs. In conventional acts of violence, as homicides or battlefield killings, there is typically a tangible benefit for the perpetrator, whether it be financial gain, revenge, or military advancement. In the three cases analyzed, however, the direct victims were not the ultimate target of the attacks, as ninety-one people in a hotel, over one hundred in a village, and an embassy's walls in Rome could not represent an obstacle to Jewish statehood. The purpose was to reach and terrorize a wider *target audience* to pressure governments and public opinion into indulging the Zionist cause. Begin himself unknowingly admitted the Irgun's terrorist nature when he wrote that the aim behind its violence was political. In light of Richards' definition, Begin's claim that the Irgun was not a terrorist organization because its aims were political appears contradictory. However, at the time Begin made this assertion, neither Richards nor his definition existed.

In conclusion, defining terrorism based on the perceived morality of its underlying ideology makes it dangerously subjective – an empty label shaped by individual judgement and political alignment. Instead, terrorism should be understood as a method of violence to advance a political cause, whether regarded as just or unjust. The Irgun was, therefore, a terrorist organization – arguably one of the most effective of the past century.