Woodrow Wilson and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Government of the U.S.A. is the President, and nobody but the President
—Lord Arthur Balfour

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President Woodrow Wilson took two noteworthy actions which had important consequences for the political future of Palestine and for America’s role in the Middle East. The first was his concurrence in Britain’s issuance of a landmark pro-Zionist statement, now known as the Balfour Declaration, on November 2, 1917. The second was his initiative in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference to conduct what was eventually to be a purely American field inquiry into the political wishes of the peoples comprising the Turkish Empire in the Near East. Recently available records provide the occasion for a fresh reading of the sources and a reexamination of Wilson’s policy in the Arab Near East.

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In April 1917, the Turkish government broke diplomatic relations with the United States, which had just entered the war against its ally, Germany. Despite increasing Allied and domestic pressures for the United States to join in the fight against the Turks, President Wilson maintained a studiously neutral policy toward them for the remainder of the war. He did so, rather tortuously, even as the United States was expanding its military involvement by declaring war against Austria-Hungary in December 1917. Among his privately stated motivations was concern for the welfare of the American Protestant missionaries who were continuing their work in Turkey. This concern was an important consideration in his rejection of proposals, short of a declara-
Henry Churchill King, member of the King-Crane Commission of 1919.

(Courtesy, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio)
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tion of war, for punitive steps against Turkish interests and citizens in the United States.⁶

The bulk of the Allied forces on the Turkish front were provided by the British Empire. On the eve of Britain's conquest of Jerusalem (December 1917), London was considering issuing a pre-Zionist statement which, among other objectives, would have as its goal the stimulating of greater Jewish support in the United States and Russia for the war effort. As part of this consideration, the British War Cabinet wished to be assured that its principal Western allies, France, Italy, and the United States, would accept such a British announcement. Since Paris and Rome earlier in 1917 had given the Zionists statements of sympathy for their cause,⁷ the remaining British diplomatic task in October 1917 was to obtain the concurrence of the American president in the proposed statement.

Wilson's approval was not assured. Already the previous month, he had rejected a similar British proposal, offering the advice that London make no precise or far-reaching commitment to Zionism, at least for the moment.⁸ It was only in response to a more positively formulated, second British request in early October, accompanied this time by a specific proposed text, that Wilson gave his concurrence, presumably judging that the text met his cautionary criteria of September.⁹ Had he not concurred, there is good reason to believe that, in view of the nearly simultaneous occurrence of the Bolshevik Revolution, the British would once again have shelved the proposed statement, this time for good. With Bolshevik Russia's defacto withdrawal from the Allied side, the incentive in London to influence that country's Jews would have been gone, and the declaration almost certainly never made.¹⁰

Wilson's endorsement of the proposed pro-Zionist British statement was in keeping with his personal commitment on the issue to one of his most influential policy advisers, Louis D. Brandeis, who was the official leader of the American Zionists until his appointment in 1916 as a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.¹¹ It was also consistent with the president's deep Christian sentiment favoring the fulfillment of biblical prophecy; for example, Wilson lauded a work whose thesis was that "the revelation of God in Christ cannot be divorced from the earlier revelation on which our Lord built . . . the history of Israel [is] one of the strongest evidences of Christianity." Throughout his life-
Charles R. Crane, member of the King-Crane Commission of 1919.

(Courtesy, Thomas S. Crane, Woods Hole, Mass.)
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time, Wilson regularly addressed biblical societies and expressed warm appreciation of the Jews’ biblical role, the Old Testament, and the continuing spiritual attachment today’s Jews had to a land they no longer directly knew. In 1912, he likened this modern Jewish sentiment to the spiritual feelings motivating European immigrants to come to an unknown America. The president is reported to have said in 1916 that “the Jewish Homeland was one of the two primary achievements that would come out of the war.” And toward the end of his life he said, “To think that I, the son of the manse, should be able to help restore the Holy Land to its people.” In this religious outlook, Wilson, to the Zionists’ good fortune, shared the sentiments which motivated Lloyd George and Balfour in England, the president’s own spiritual home.

Wilson evidently also shared Brandeis’s view that Zionism offered certain practical advantages to the United States. It provided an alternative destination for the millions of Jews fleeing Eastern Europe; and it was a program which could channel Jewish frustrations into constructive, rather than antisocial or revolutionary endeavors. Finally, Wilson had an exaggerated idea of the size of the “constructed” world Jewish community. He believed that his commitment to “Biblical Freedom” would aid as many as 100 million Jews to resist radicalism. And it is here that Wilson's thought entered the realm of illusion, a dangerous realm to occupy in 1917.

Following the Balfour Declaration’s issuance, and in keeping with his subdued posture toward the Ottoman Empire, Wilson remained silent on Turkey in public pronouncements and at cabinet sessions. For example, in transmitting to the British the president’s approval of the proposed declaration, his close adviser and friend, Colonel Edward House, requested London to keep the fact of his approval confidential. Similarly, Wilson declined to inform the State Department of his position, even ducking an inquiry directed to him in November 1917 by Ambassador Page in London. Because the President lacked candor, Secretary Lansing was compelled, on December 15, 1917, to instruct Page to “investigate discreetly and report fully and promptly to this Department reasons for Balfour’s recent statement relative Jewish state [sic] in Palestine.” Under pressure from Lansing, Wilson did mention having the “impression that we had assented to the British declaration returning Palestine to the Jews”; but he fol-
lowed Lansing’s advice and “very unwillingly” declined to honor a request from the American Zionists that the American government issue a pro-Zionist statement of its own.\textsuperscript{19} Perhaps on the basis of this decision, Lansing remarkably could write the president as late as February 28, 1918, that “this Government has never accepted Mr. Balfour’s pronouncement with reference to the future of Palestine.”\textsuperscript{20} When, on August 31, 1918, Wilson finally released a positive public statement on this subject, it was in the form of a “personal,” nonbinding, letter to Rabbi Stephen Wise, a Zionist leader.\textsuperscript{21}

In conversations during this period of silence, Wilson and House explained to the American Zionists who knew of the president’s role in the issuance of the Balfour Declaration that the United States, as a neutral vis-a-vis Turkey, could not publicly endorse Zionism without giving the Turks legitimate grounds for complaint. Wilson and House also advised them that France and the other Allies must first be brought on board before America could take such a public position. As we have seen, the French and Italians already were on board, and it is a reflection of the limited coordination between British and American Zionists that the latter group in October 1917 was not aware of this.\textsuperscript{22}

There were other presidential considerations underlying the White House’s cautious post-Balfour Declaration approach. A primary one was Wilson’s strong desire to maintain a posture of purity regarding Allied plans for a postwar division of the spoils.\textsuperscript{23} Another was Wilson’s frankly stated concern for the safety of American missionaries remaining in the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{24} That safety could well have been jeopardized by an American announcement of support for a British policy which apparently favored an end to Ottoman control over Palestine. An important influence on the president in the direction of caution was his beloved friend Cleveland Dodge, whose own son and daughter were among the missionaries, the one in Beirut and the other in Constantinople. At key decision-making moments, Dodge was given to writing the president with a plea for prudence regarding U.S.-Turkish relations.\textsuperscript{25}

Dodge’s relationship to, and influence on, President Wilson is an important consideration to this article. A fellow-classmate of Wilson at Princeton, Dodge over the years developed an increasingly intimate friendship with him. The wealthy New Yorker organized supplemen-
tal income arrangements to help maintain Wilson as a professor at Princeton and as governor of New Jersey. During the war, at the president’s request, Dodge paid a salary supplement to Ambassador Page at London. An activist in Protestant missionary causes, Dodge served as president of the board of trustees of Robert College in Constantinople and was a leader of the YMCA, the American Red Cross, and the wartime relief committees for Armenia and the Near East. Two of Wilson’s closest relatives were employed during the war by these organizations, one—the President’s brother-in-law, Stockton Axton—as secretary of the American Red Cross, and the other—son-in-law Francis Sayre—as a YMCA religious worker in Mexico and France. Dodge was a close associate of the Boston-based supervisor of Protestant missionary work in the Near East, Dr. James Barton.26

Thus, at the war’s close, President Wilson was closely associated with, and gave policy support to, the antithetical Zionist and missionary movements in the Near East. Events at the Peace Conference would bring to a climax the latent conflict between these two movements in Wilson’s mind, for their respective goals in Palestine clashed over the question of Arab nationalism. The Zionists inevitably posed an obstacle to that nationalism, whereas the missionaries were closely associated with its very origins. As the first line of the classic history of Arab nationalism states, “The story of the Arab national movement opens in Syria in 1847, with the foundation in Beirut of a modest literary society under American patronage.”27 At the Peace Conference, President Wilson became caught in a considerable dilemma over his very private, ultimately irreconcilable loyalties to both these conflicting popular ambitions in Palestine.

The Arabs of the Near East entered the First World War as centuries-old subjects of the Ottoman Empire. They emerged from it well on the road to that complete political independence which was to be theirs within a generation or so, except for a sliver of coastal area, Palestine.28 As brief as the transition period was, from Turkish rule to British and French and then to the Arabs themselves,29 it has left lasting scars on relations within the region and between it and the West, of which Palestine is only the most visible. Although throughout the war
the United States remained studiously neutral toward the Ottoman Empire, it became deeply involved in the immediate postwar events that were vital to the political reshaping of former Ottoman territory. President Wilson so positioned himself during the war as to assure America a central role in determining peace terms for the Turks. This was achieved through pre-Armistice negotiations in which he secured Allied agreement to base the peace largely on his Fourteen Points, the twelfth of which concerned the Turks. There, in a major break from past, apolitical diplomacy toward Constantinople, Wilson called for the internationalization of the Straits, autonomy for the subject nationalities, and sovereignty for the Turks themselves. The fourteenth point, calling for the creation of an association of nations, gave the president additional leverage at Paris over the fate of the collapsing Turkish Empire, because most of its territory was slated for assignment as mandates under the League of Nations.

In considering the future of the component territories of the former Ottoman Empire, Wilson at the start of the Paris Conference seemed prepared to acquiesce in the strategic requirements of his European allies. As reflected in his statements and actions, the president enthusiastically supported the newly conceived mandates system, which offered a means to satisfy the Allies while seemingly also taking into account the interests of the local populations. League-supervised mandates were a way to justify the postwar territorial acquisitions of the victorious powers without the taint of "imperialism" or "secret treaties." The president apparently soon found the mandates system a sufficient basis for even anticolonialist America to consider accepting new overseas responsibilities, the first in Armenia, as a temporary, unselfish trust in the name of the world organization.

Thus, there was a glimmer of hope at Paris for a happy solution to the spoils-of-war problem in the Near East. But difficulties began to crop up, centering upon ultimate control in Syria. Under the terms of the Sykes-Picot secret agreement on Asia Minor, France was to obtain Lebanon under direct rule and Syria, which would nominally be an independent Arab state, as a sphere of influence. England would have Mesopotamia (Iraq) and, by subsequent amendment, Palestine, which originally had been slated for multilateral administration. The Arabian peninsula would be accorded full political independence, the Hedjaz portion presumably under Emir, soon King, Hussein, and the Nejd portion under Ibn Saud.
The seeds for what was to prove to be a major Anglo-French controversy were planted in the agreement’s provisions regarding Syria; while not necessarily contradicting it, these provisions went beyond the terms of a separate commitment England had entered into the year before in correspondence between her high commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, and Emir Hussein. This agreement, named for the two major participants, anticipated Hussein’s leadership in an Arab rebellion against the Turks. Such a rebellion did begin in June 1916, a bit after the conclusion of the Asia Minor agreement, of which Hussein had no knowledge. In the course of the correspondence (July 1915–March 1916), McMahon “pledged” that if the Arabs, by their own efforts, were to displace the Turks from their lands, England, subject to certain reservations, would support their retaining sovereignty over those liberated territories. The two key reservations were that the territory to the west of “the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo” would be excluded from any Arab independent state in Syria on the grounds that it “cannot be said to be purely Arab”; and that England’s pledge to support Arab independence was limited to those areas where she was “free to act without detriment to the interests of her Ally, France.” Syria was clearly one such French interest.

With the McMahon pledge in mind, the British late in the war saw to it that, in fact, the Arab army, under the British-guided leadership of Hussein’s son, Emir Feisal, was assigned by the Allied force to be the first to occupy Damascus on the heels of the fleeing Turkish forces. Syria thereby qualified for direct Arab rule, at least according to Arab interpretations. This set the stage at Paris for a confrontation between France, whose loyalty was to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and Arabs motivated by England, who feared that France meant to assume inordinate control over Syria. One should add to the elements behind this confrontation the continuing deep sense of colonial rivalry between England and France, the clash in religious interests between Protestant England and Catholic France, historically nurtured since the Crusades, and England’s strategic preoccupations with French strongholds in the Near East which could conceivably threaten the vital approaches to her Indian Empire. It is clear that the ingredients were present at Paris to jeopardize the survival of Allied unity even before the essential conditions for a stable peace were set in place. At the Peace Conference the French were unwilling to agree to Syria’s inde-
pendence, if it was to be under the rule of the pro-British Hussein/Feisal family. On the other hand, the English were doing all they could to help solidify Feisal’s Damascus claim, although they simultaneously curbed his appetite for Lebanon by encouraging him to reach an accommodation with the French premier, Clemenceau. There were reasonably good prospects at the conference’s start for achieving such an accommodation, via a formula whereby Feisal would disavow political links with his father and implicitly with the British as well, while France would accept a leading, but purely indirect advisory role in Syria.39

As this triangular tension was building during the early stages of the Peace Conference, leading representatives of the American Protestant missionary movement arrived in Paris to push for a strategy which they had developed regarding Syria. President Wilson arranged for one of these representatives, Dr. Howard Bliss, the president of the Syrian Protestant College at Beirut, to present this strategy formally to the conference’s Council of Ten on February 13, 1919. Dr. Bliss had been called to Paris by Cleveland Dodge to join forces there with Dr. James Barton.40 Noting to the council that he was “born on Mount Lebanon,” Dr. Bliss proposed, “on behalf of the people of Syria,” that the council should organize a commission of inquiry to go “at once” to Syria in order “to give an opportunity to the people of Syria—including the Lebanon—to express in a perfectly candid way their policies and aspirations, namely, as to what form of government they desired and as to what power, if any, should be their Mandatory Protecting Power.”41

In an earlier presentation to the council, on February 6, Feisal, as head of an Arab delegation recognized by the conference to form the “new state” of the Hedjaz,42 called for such a commission of inquiry as part of his appeal for “the independence of his people . . . [and] their right to choose their own mandatory.” The emir, in recognition of its “universal character,” set Palestine aside for “the mutual consideration of all interested parties.” He specifically excepted Palestine from his call “for the independence of the Arab areas.”43

The day after Bliss’s appearance, President Wilson left Paris for a month-long trip back to the United States which was connected to the close of the congressional session. He returned to Paris on March 14. In the interim, several important Arab-related developments oc-
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occurred: first, Cleveland Dodge saw the president, and "reviewed his goals for America with Wilson," undoubtedly urging him to adopt the course of action being proposed by Bliss and Feisal and company; second, a group of American Zionists elicited from Wilson a widely publicized endorsement of the idea of a "Jewish commonwealth in Palestine"; third, Colonel House, standing in for the president at the Council of Ten, and taking a line that would contribute to his downfall with Wilson soon thereafter, gave encouragement to a Feisal-Clemenceau accommodation over Syria which eventually took the form of a first draft agreement in April and a second one in December; and, finally, Clemenceau and the English prime minister, Lloyd George intensified their disagreement over the Syrian question, and their relationship had all but ceased to exist at about the time of Wilson's return.

On March 20, 1919, Wilson submitted to the council his major proposal for dealing with the Syrian problem.

It may not be his business, but if the question was made his business, owing to the fact that it was brought here before the Conference, the only way to deal with it was to discover the desires of the population... The U.S. of A. did not want anything in Turkey... Lately, however, it had been put to him that he must approach his own people on this matter, and he intended to try, although it would mean some very good talking on his part... The fittest men that could be obtained should be selected to form an Inter Allied Commission to go to Syria, extending their inquiries, if they led them beyond the confines of Syria... to come back and tell the Conference what they found... in order to find the most scientific basis for a settlement.

At Clemenceau's request, Wilson agreed at that meeting to broaden the commission's geographical scope to include all the ex-Ottoman territories, including Palestine.

Wilson's commission proposal, by setting in motion a series of events whose repercussions were deep and long-lasting, had an important effect on the Turkish Empire, now near collapse, and on relations among the states represented at Paris. The proposal for a commission
affected all the principles set forth at Versailles. Feisal, who was then at the height of his reputation as an authentic Arab hero, began to hedge on the deals he had been cutting with the French and Zionist delegations at Paris.\textsuperscript{48} The English, concerned with protecting the Suez Canal in an unstable region, viewed the American initiative as a possible way to block the French, thereby placing as much of the Arab region as possible into the friendly hands of Feisal and, possibly, the Americans themselves.\textsuperscript{49} The French remained determined to obtain what they considered as their historical and treaty rights in Syria and Lebanon, the majority of whose population were non-Protestant Christians. Finally, the Zionists, who were seeking to reinforce their gains under the Balfour Declaration, feared that the proposed commission’s emphasis on national self-determination would effectively cut them out of Palestine. Seen in this light, Wilson’s proposal could only have been received at the conference as a bombshell—a welcome one by the missionary-supported Arabs and the ambivalent British, and a most unwelcome one by the French and the Zionists.

It is hard to see what traditional concepts of national interest were to be served by the president’s commission. The whole plan would require an American follow-up in terms of extensive military and financial costs; if Wilson was correct during the war, that Americans would not favor fighting against Turkey merely for the purpose of handing over the Middle East to the Allies,\textsuperscript{50} then surely he would have been equally correct to assume at Paris that the Americans had not changed. They would still be unwilling to invest resources and effort simply to block the spoils-minded British and French. By the very language he used on March 20, the president seemed to recognize the tenuous connection between America’s interests and the Syrian problem: “It may not be his business, but if the question was made his business . . .”\textsuperscript{51}

Wilson could not have failed to realize that his proposed commission would merely confirm what already was widely accepted as fact at Paris, namely, that the Syrians, short of immediate independence, would greatly prefer the Americans over all other candidates as mandatory power. In other words, sending a commission inherently committed the United States to substantial additional responsibilities in the region.

It is difficult to avoid concluding from this that the president, by the
time of his return to Paris, had decided to adopt the missionary strategy. The reasons why he did so are open to debate. Nevertheless, it seems clear from the evidence that they went beyond the more traditional considerations of American statecraft and had to do in significant part with the president’s idiosyncratic views of the role of the United States in world affairs. Wilson expressly saw that role as including the expansion of Protestant influence throughout the world. He believed that “America was born a Christian nation,” and that she should help “Christianize the world.” Curbing “Romish” influence was an integral element in this belief. Wilson’s biographer has written that his paramount motivation in foreign policy was “the ambition to do justly, to advance the cause of international peace, and to give other peoples the blessing of democracy and Christianity.”

Wilson’s Near East initiative at Paris was consistent with this outlook and also with his announced dislike of the secret Allied agreements on Asia Minor. From his very first detailed hearing of those agreements during Balfour’s 1917 visit to Washington, they symbolized for the president the evils of Old World diplomacy. This dislike emerged most vividly in Wilson’s private communication with the State Department on November 28, 1917: "Arrangements must be made at the Conference which closes the war with regard to Constantinople . . . . I suppose that peace could be made only at terms which preclude any radical changes of control over Constantinople and the Straits. The only advantage to be gained would be to prevent the bargains of the Allies with regard to Asia Minor from being carried out [emphasis added]." The president was simply unable to associate himself with those Allied agreements, leaving him no alternative but to suggest a different course of action, like the one he proposed on March 20.

President Wilson’s willingness to support America’s entrance into the Near East was likely made easier by Wilson’s earlier agreement at the Council of Ten to seek Senate approval of an American-administered mandate in Armenia. Thus, he was already embarked on a policy of American involvement in the Near East. What is perhaps more surprising was his belief that the conference would not endorse immediate political independence for Syria, although it had already legitimized Hussein’s less-developed Hedjaz as a new state with full right of participation in peace-making activities. In un-Wilsonian fashion,
the president told the Supreme Council that such an option should be excluded by his proposed inquiry to Syria, even though the population itself might want it, because “he did not think that these peoples could be left entirely to themselves.” Therefore, there remained for the commission only to examine less-volatile political questions, such as which great power the Arabs wanted to rule over them, and what should be the political boundaries of the mandated areas.

In full keeping with this reconstruction of events was Wilson’s selection of appointees for the two American members of the proposed Inter-Allied Commission: Henry C. King and Charles R. Crane. The former was the president of Oberlin College, a Congregational minister, professional preacher, and, from 1918 until his appointment by Wilson, the director of religious works in France for the YMCA.57 Crane, who was the dominant, more influential member, was a wealthy Protestant businessman, a missionary activist, and a Republican Party stalwart who became an early financial supporter of Wilson’s presidential ambitions, and a personal friend of the Wilsons. Crane was president of the board of trustees of the Constantinople Women’s College and treasurer of the Dodge-led wartime relief committees in the Near East, chaired by Cleveland Dodge.

Equally important, especially in view of the commission’s focus on Palestine (see below), is that Crane was a vocal anti-Semite whose views on the subject were well known to the president. For example, he wrote to Wilson on February 10, 1913, that, aside from Brandeis, “all of the other important Jews are first Jews and then Americans and do not hesitate to sacrifice real American interests at any time for what they conceive to be Jewish ones.” Crane was also instrumental in convincing Wilson in May 1917 to drop the planned inclusion of a Jew on the “Root Commission” to Russia, of which he was a member. From Russia Crane sent official telegrams to the White House, channeled there by his son, Richard, who was Lansing’s private secretary. Those telegrams placed a heavy blame on the Jews in Russia for weakening the Provisional Government and its war effort. The president had a high regard for Crane’s knowledge of Russian affairs and had sought during 1913 and 1914 to recruit him as ambassador there. Crane did have ambassadorial ambitions, having been appointed as President Taft’s minister to China, but Taft “recalled” him before he could leave for that post, because of his “inability to curb his tongue in public and
his headstrong desire to shape rather than execute policy.” Interestingly, Crane eventually did go to China as Wilson’s minister. Later in his life, Charles Crane urged American officials to “let Hitler have his way,” and finally, in the 1930’s, was an effective promoter of American diplomatic and commercial relations with the Arab world.58

King and Crane were lauded at the time by Wilson as being particularly qualified for their assignment, because they were “absolutely disinterested,” lacked “previous contact with Syria,” and “knew nothing about it.”59 Whatever one thinks of Wilson’s idealistic criteria, one point is clear: King and Crane were not “absolutely disinterested.” It is impossible to ignore their connection to and sympathy with the work and goals of the American missionary establishment in the Near East, which, at that time, was directed by their friend and colleague, Dr. James Barton. Their very selection, coupled with the circumscribed nature of their inquiry, indicates that the president clearly hoped they would favor an active American role in the area; and in late May, when Wilson finally sent the King-Crane Commission appointees into the field, without Allied participation, there could have been no doubt regarding the verdict they would reach. As will be demonstrated, that verdict was duly submitted at Paris on August 28, 1919.60

What implications did Wilson’s “missionary diplomacy” have for Palestine? There is reason to assume that Wilson did not originally intend to include that area within the scope of the proposed commission’s responsibilities. Before and after making his commission proposal, Wilson displayed a positive attitude toward the establishment of a Zionist program in Palestine under British auspices.61 His focus, like that of Bliss and Feisal in February, was on the Arab lands where France believed she had a claim. On March 20 however, when Clemenceau logically opposed the president’s initiative as being inherently anti-French in design, Wilson, as we have seen, at once acceded to the French premier’s request and expanded the commission’s geographical scope to include all of the ex-Ottoman lands in Asia, Arab and non-Arab. Despite this amendment, Wilson still seems to have assumed that Palestine would not figure significantly in the commis-
sion's work. For example, the Zionist delegation's Felix Frankfurter felt able to state, in an April 14 letter to House, that, "In view of your assurances and that of the President [emphasis added], which you were good enough to convey to me, the Zionist Organization feels secure that Palestine is outside the terms of reference of the Syrian Commission."62

As late as May 22, Commissioner King wrote House that, "the Commission should still go, at least to Syria [emphasis added] . . . . it is the clear and united judgment of both the British and American Commissioners that the assigning of mandates, at least in the Arabic-speaking portions of the Turkish Empire, should be suspended in the meantime since France feels that British claims are taken as settled, while the French claims were to be regarded as under investigation."63

While this revealing correspondence was taking place, the president himself told his British and French counterparts on May 3, 1919, that all of them were to some degree "committed" to the Zionists in Palestine.

The inherent contradiction in Wilson's Middle East diplomacy escaped him but not the American Zionists. They expressed a relaxed presidential great concern over his initiative. It was only after being badgered by letters from Frankfurter that the president offered him general assurances on May 16 that "I see no ground for discouragement and every reason to hope that satisfactory guarantees can be secured [for the Zionist cause]."64 Even then, Wilson was unwilling to explicitly connect his commission proposal to the Zionist question. As events demonstrate, the King-Crane Commission did contribute to the exacerbation of Arab-Jewish relations in that region; and it deepened American and British skepticism for their reciprocal commitment to Zionism. Perhaps neither one really wished to facilitate "the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine."

When Wilson's March 20 proposal finally bore fruit with the dispatch of the King-Crane Commission, it was only after France declined to participate,65 since she saw herself as the guaranteed loser. Britain and Italy also dropped out. Despite this public rejection of his proposal, the president, on May 21, informed the council of his decision to send
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his commissioners "to Syria." He had been urged to do so by Feisal, supported by House and the American missionary group in Paris. Under the circumstances, it is remarkable that he took this step. Senior members of his own delegation were disturbed at this high-risk exposure of the United States to responsibilities which they felt were not practical. At one point earlier in the conference, Secretary Lansing even considered the desirability of disguising any American commissioners the president sent to the region as "food investigators." It is also possible that the May 21 decision was the result of a mental aberration. Recent evidence indicates that Wilson's "flu" of April 1919 was in reality a serious illness which altered his perceptions of reality.

With or without the rational judgment of Wilson, the American commissioners and their staff landed at Jaffa on June 10 and, by June 20, began to send back interim telegraphic reports containing their conclusion that the Zionist program could not be implemented without the supporting presence of "a large army" and, therefore, should be greatly revised downward. For the next several weeks, the American investigators traveled to much of Syria and Lebanon and, from there, to parts of battle-torn Asia Minor on the way to Constantinople, where they remained to prepare their final report. They did not visit Mesopotamia. The commission's interim and final reports contained the following observations and recommendations:

- Greater Syria (i.e., including the Lebanon and Palestine) should be assigned as a single mandate, if possible to the United States, and placed under the kingship of Feisal, who was the "heart of the Moslem world," a "really great lover of Christianity" who "even talks seriously of American college for women at Mecca," and would pose "no danger... of his getting adrift on taking steps without Anglo-Saxon approval."
- A series of mandates, all if possible to be assigned to the United States, would be established in the Straits/Constantinople, Anatolia (despite Point Twelve!), and Armenian regions.
- No preferential status should be accorded the Jews in Palestine, because they held the Christian and Moslem holy places "not only not sacred... but abhorrent."
- Mesopotamia should be assigned to England as a mandate.

Even taking into account the narrow terms of reference Wilson
drew up for it, such as excluding the Balfour Declaration from its policy guidelines, the commission's particular perspective, reporting tone, and proposed course of action were not disinterested and might have been quite different had the president chosen men of another sort than King and Crane. Another staff member, William Yale, disputed the King-Crane findings despite the fact that he did not particularly like Jews. His field experience in the Arab world left him cold to the obvious inaccuracies of King and Crane's "scientific" study.  

Yale, who was responsible for the Arabic-speaking lands, demonstrated a much more realistic appreciation of local and international factors than did the commissioners themselves. His separate submission took into accurate account the various shadings of enthusiasm for, and even of opposition to, Lebanon and Palestine being absorbed by a Damascus-controlled Greater Syria. Yale also recognized the urgency in the French political will to assume the major foreign role in Syria and Lebanon, where the commissioners left them no role at all. Also, although the opposite of a Zionist in his thinking, Yale acknowledged the wartime justification for British support of Zionism and concluded that Arab nationalism in Palestine was not as yet so deep as to preclude the feasibility of peaceful fulfillment of the British pledge to the Jews. A senior British official in Syria, General Clayton, said in July 1919 that he thought 75 percent of the Arab population there would accept "a clear statement of policy and the declaration of the fait accompli" on Zionism. Yale, on the basis of his analysis, recommended that France be assigned as mandatory power in Lebanon, and England in Mesopotamia and Palestine. More Wilsonian than the commissioners themselves, Yale supported the immediate independence of Syria, with Feisal as king. He doubted the practicability of recommending any American mandatory role in the Arab region.

By the time the commission and its final report reached Paris in late August, the heads of governments had left and the remaining representatives were not in a position, nor were they inclined, to make decisions on the matter. Wilson was now in the throes of his great debate with the Senate over approving the Treaty of Versailles, and the commission's report did not reach him until the day before his physical collapse on September 25 in Colorado, while on a speaking tour of the country; doubtless, he never read it. Considering the report's contents, and its inopportune timing, it is
not surprising that Lansing's State Department declined to release it.\textsuperscript{77} Commission members and supporters have charged that its suppression was due primarily to Zionist influence. However, releasing it could only have embarrassed the American government generally, and the Democratic Party particularly, in the upcoming presidential election. It was now certain that there would be no prospect of the United States' assuming any mandatory role(s) recommended for it.\textsuperscript{78} Therefore, the report would only have further antagonized the French and deepened the disappointment of the Arabs had it been issued. On July 2 Feisal had cabled Wilson that "you will not allow the Syrian nation to voice its opinion and then see them punished for it revengefully."\textsuperscript{79} There was no response: it would clearly have been politically unwise for the administration to associate itself with the commission's strongly stated views on the religious and ethnic aspects of its investigation, given the American commitment to objectivity in these sensitive areas.

Despite this anticlimactic end, the King-Crane Commission had a profound effect on events in 1919. By delaying conference decisions and arousing unwarranted expectations in the Near East of a major U.S. field role, it undoubtedly retarded the cause of moderation in the Arab lands. By 1920, both Feisal and Clemenceau would be displaced by a more rigid diplomacy emanating from Paris, resulting in direct French rule over Damascus. Feisal was then made king of Iraq by Britain. These events occurred subsequent to the agreement of April 1920 at San Remo, which essentially encouraged the former Allies to implement their 1916 agreement in substantially all its details with regard to the Arab Near East.

Of interest, too, is the long-term impact within the United States of President Wilson's style of handling Arab-Zionist matters. The curious disjointedness shown in American diplomacy toward Palestine from the First World War through to the establishment of Israel, and even beyond, had its beginnings in the Wilson administration. The pattern of policy behavior established at that time, remarkably, was to be repeated in subsequent periods. Thus, the White House would periodically produce statements and approve actions favoring the Zionist cause which seemingly would bear no relationship to the policies of
the rest of the governmental machinery or, at times, even to other White House statements and actions. Key presidential moves supporting Zionism were frequently cast as “personal” ones, or in ambivalent terms, suggesting that they did not fully reflect the fundamental policies of the American government. This allowed the impression to be gained that, whatever pro-Zionist actions the President may take from time to time, these were largely for domestic political reasons and were not intended to reflect the totality of U.S. national values and interests in Palestine.

Of course, this sort of dualistic diplomacy originated during Wilson’s period, with the King-Crane Commission. Given that panel’s intrinsic emphasis on national self-determination, it could not ultimately be reconciled with the president’s support of spiritual/biblical Zionism. Another example of this is Wilson’s handling of the Balfour Declaration issue. By his ambivalence, he reinforced the suspicion that the White House did not feel strongly enough about Zionism to fight for it in the corridors of government, or to give it the highest priority when it competed with other more practical goals. A parallel to this Wilsonian duality can be seen in President Harding’s 1922 endorsement of a Congressional Resolution supporting Zionism, while the State Department fought against the inclusion even of a preambular reference to the Balfour Declaration in the Anglo-American Convention of 1924 which protected American interests in Palestine. Also noteworthy was the resistance of each secretary of state from Lansing to George Marshall in accepting as official policy the annual endorsements their presidents gave to the goal of a Jewish national home in Palestine. This duality came dramatically into public view when the American delegation to the United Nations in 1948 sought to delay implementation of the American-approved 1947 Palestine Partition Resolution, unaware that the president had announced U.S. recognition of Israel pursuant to that resolution.

After President Wilson’s stroke and during the remainder of his administration, he took two final actions with regard to Palestine. First, at the request of Justice Louis Brandeis, the president, on February 20, 1920, instructed the State Department to appeal to the Allies,
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in the name of "the honor of Christendom," to approve a liberal set of boundaries for northern and eastern Palestine in order to promote the economic growth of the prospective Jewish homeland, but the appeal proved of little consequence. Second, in May 1920 Wilson formally submitted to the Senate a proposal for an American mandate in Armenia "in accordance with the wishes of the greatest of the Christian peoples"—the proposal was defeated by a wide margin.91

These final gestures of the president in support of his failed Paris missionary policy attest to the fact that there was once a moment when the United States government sought a direct governing role in the Near East in the name of peace, democracy, and, especially, Christianity.

Notes


2. Papers. To date, 51 volumes have been released by the Princeton University Press, carrying the record to the end of the First World War.


6. Ibid., vol. 41, pp. 128, 133; vol. 48, p. 70; vol. 49, p. 365.


9. Ibid., pp. 305, 391. Also, E. House, Diaries (House Collection, Yale University Library), October 16, 1917. Note that H. Parzen, in his "Brandeis and the Balfour Declaration," Herzl Year Book, vol. 5, p. 333, incorrectly connects to this subject House's comment to Wilson of October 3 (not October 13, as Parzen has it) that "the Jews from every tribe have descended in force, and they seem determined to break in with a jimmy if they are not let in." Actually, House's comment referred not to the proposed British declaration but rather to his organizing an "Inquiry" staff to help Wilson prepare for the peace.


11. See the Brandeis-dictated memorandum of May 6, 1917: "The President assured [Brandeis] that he was entirely sympathetic to the aims of the Zionist movement... Further, the President expressed himself in agreement with the policy, under England's protectorate, for a Jewish homeland." M. Urofsky, etc., The Letters of Louis D. Brandeis (1975), vol. 4, p. 286. Also, J. De Haas, Louis D. Brandeis: A Biographical Sketch, p. 88, for the assertion that in 1916, Wilson put his initials on a memorandum giving "assurances" on postwar Zionist goals.

12. Papers, vol. 2, pp. 77-78 (on his praising W. R. Smith, The Old Testament in the Jewish
Church, from which the quotation was taken—p. v); vol. 23, p. 20; vol. 25, p. 105. Also De Haas, Louis D. Brandeis, p. 101, and P. Grose, Israel in the Mind of America (1983), p. 67.


19. Ibid.


21. Ibid., vol. 49, pp. 363–364. Wise himself had drafted the letter from Wilson. Contrary to the view in E. Manuel’s The Realities of American-Palestine Relations (1949), p. 175, the letter does expressly endorse the declaration: “I welcome an opportunity to express the satisfaction I have felt in the progress of the Zionist movement in the United States and in the Allied countries since the declaration by Mr. Balfour” (Papers, vol. 49, pp. 363–364). Later, in March 1919, Wilson was to characterize this letter as representing his “personal approval of the declaration of the British Government regarding Palestine.” De Hass, Louis D. Brandeis, p. 109.


25. The dates of notable Dodge-Wilson correspondence on U.S. policy toward Turkey were October 7, 1915; February 5 and 6, 1917; December 2 and 4, 1917 (Papers, vol. 35, p. 39; vol. 41, pp. 128, 133; vol. 44, p. 250; vol. 45, pp. 185–186, 213). This correspondence documents the view that Dodge was “at the center of relief and governmental interaction with the Near East,” and that he “guided” Wilson’s diplomacy in that region up to 1921. J. Grabill, Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East (1971), pp. 98 ff.


28. More than 10 million Arabs were liberated from Turkish rule. The total area of affected Arab lands was 1,184,000 square miles. Palestine covers somewhat less than 11,000 square miles (Jewish Homeland portion). M. Gilbert, Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict (1975), p. 9.

29. At the war’s close, the Arabian peninsula was under Arab sovereignty, although parts were under veiled British protectorates. The rest of the formerly Turkish-controlled Arab lands were to remain under direct British or French rule for varying periods of time, with the last such land to achieve sovereignty in 1946.

30. L. Evans, U.S. Policy and the Partition of Turkey (1965), pp. 89 ff. This was also the basis for Germany’s acceptance of the Armistice.


32. Evans, U.S. Policy and the Partition of Turkey, pp. 79–80.
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34. The 1916 agreement on Asia Minor is informally known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. England, France, and Russia were the signatories in 1916 (Italy's 1917 adherence was never legally consummated due to the failure of revolutionary Russia to give its concurrence, as required by the terms of Italy's adherence). For the authoritative text, see *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, First Series, vol. 4, pp. 241 ff. For a detailed discussion of this agreement and its relation to subsequent Allied commitments in the region, see the present author's "Scholarship and the Diplomatic Roots of Israel," *Jewish Social Studies*, Spring 1985. Also see A. J. Toynbee, 1925 *Survey of International Affairs*, for a discussion of the situation at the time and subsequently in the Arabian peninsula.

35. For the authoritative text of the correspondence, see *U.K. Foreign Office, Miscellaneous Papers #3* (1939), CMD 5957.


38. For a contemporary view of France as "the greatest military power in the world," see Toynbee, 1925 *Survey of International Affairs*, p. 9. Lloyd George was widely quoted as favoring Zionism less from any enthusiasm for the Jews than from his opposition to French/Catholic domination of the Holy Land.


40. Bliss was the father-in-law of Dodge's son, who would succeed him as president of the college, renamed American University of Beirut, in 1924.


43. *State PPC*, vol. 2, p. 892. The records of the conference support the view that Bliss and Feisal closely coordinated their approaches to Wilson and the council.


51. That there was such a connection is made explicit, inter alia, in Commissioner Crane's telegram to President Wilson from Beirut on July 10, 1919, as follows: "I hope that if Howard Bliss is still in the U.S.A. you will ask him to look over these papers (bearing upon our experiences in Syria, including a copy of the partial report cabled to you in code) and see if our conclusions and observations based on so brief an experience tally with his own." Crane Collection, Bakhmetteff Archives, Columbia University Library.


55. Papers, vol. 45, p. 148. Ironically, the Sykes-Picot Agreement was at first seen by "defenders of Arab nationalism . . . as a charter of Arab liberty (rather than as a contrivance to perpetual aggression)." Kedourie, England and the Middle East, p. 42.


60. Ibid., vol. 11, p. 75.

61. In addition to the sources already cited, see Manuel, Realities of American-Palestine Relations, p. 15.

62. House Collection, Yale University Library.

63. Ibid.

64. Manuel, Realities of American-Palestine Relations, p. 15.

65. Clemenceau by now was expressly accusing Wilson of being anti-French and of having designs on Syria for the United States; see, e.g., State PPC, vol. 5, p. 760.

66. Ibid.

67. House-Feisal Correspondence, May 20, 1917 (House Collection, Yale University Library).

68. State PPC, vol. 11, p. 117.


71. Howard, King-Crane Commission, pp. 81, 85.

72. For the texts of the report and its private appendix addressed to the U.S. government, see State PPC, vol. 12, pp. 745 ff.

73. Ibid., p. 750. Recall Crane's trusteeship at the Women's College of Constantinople.

74. For a description of Yale's report, also see Howard, King-Crane Commission, pp. 132 ff; Manuel, Realities of American-Palestine Relations, p. 251.

75. Documents on British Foreign Policy, p. 333.

76. Manuel, Realities of American-Palestine Relations, p. 16.

77. Lansing during this period had great authority in the U.S. government, given Wilson's illness; for example, he on his own called and chaired many cabinet meetings. That was, along with their disagreements over Mexican policy, the final straw for Wilson, who discharged him in February 1920.
78. This point was formally made to Crane by Assistant Secretary of State William Phillips in a letter of October 30, 1919, as follows: "I have read every word of your report, which, by the way, is a masterly document. I do not believe, however, that there is the slightest possibility of your conclusion being adopted by the Senate." Crane Collection, Bakhmeteff Archives, Columbia University.

79. House Collection, Yale University Library.

80. The State Department as late as 1939 would hold to the view that it had "successfully objected" to the inclusion of any reference to the Balfour Declaration in the Preamble to the 1924 Mandate Convention, as was being proposed by the British negotiators. "Instead, the United States agreed to include . . . the preamble [containing a reference to the Balfour Declaration . . . [This] entails no more of an obligation on our part for its fulfillment than that of the fulfillment of the terms of the mandate, which is contained likewise in the preamble." Foreign Relations, 1939, vol. 4, pp. 725–729.


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