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American Zionist Emergency Council, "Jewish Commonwealth,
Meaning of," I. B. Berkson, undated.

EXCERPT FROM THE ESCO FOUNDATION PALESTINE STUDY

ON THE MEANING OF THE JEWISH COMMONWEALTH

by

I. B. Berkson

No precise definition - in the sense of a constitutional program - has been given to the term "Jewish Commonwealth." During the period of the Balfour Declaration it was frequently used interchangeably with "Jewish State," sometimes by the same writer. Likewise, it was generally regarded as synonymous with the term "Jewish National Home." Dr. Weizmann recently declared: "The term 'Jewish Commonwealth' states explicitly what is implicit in the term 'Jewish National Home'." The terms "Jewish National Home," "Jewish State," and "Jewish Commonwealth" are used in the same sense in the following paragraph by Lloyd George in his explanation of the meaning of the Balfour Declaration:

There has been a good deal of discussion as to the meaning of the words 'Jewish National Home' and whether it involved the setting up of a Jewish National State in Palestine. I have already quoted the words actually used by Mr. Balfour when he submitted the Declaration to the Cabinet for approval. They were not challenged at the time by any member present, and there could be no doubt as to what the Cabinet then had in their minds. It was not their idea that a Jewish State should be set up immediately by the Peace Treaty without reference to the wishes of the majority of the inhabitants. On the other hand, it was contemplated that when the time arrived for according representative institutions to Palestine, if the Jews had meanwhile responded to the opportunity offered them by the idea of a National Home and had become a definite majority of the inhabitants, then Palestine would thus become a Jewish Commonwealth.

Insofar as there was any distinction between the terms "Jewish State," and "Jewish Commonwealth," the latter was employed when the intention was to emphasize the democratic and cooperative principles underlying the future Jewish State. At the Pittsburgh Convention in 1918,¹⁵ when a program was proposed for the development of the Jewish national home along the lines of

15. See above, Chapter III.

a commonwealth, the emphasis was laid on social ownership of the natural resources and public utilities of the country and on the employment of the co-operative principle in the development of agriculture, industry and commerce. The labor movement in Palestine has always preferred the term "Jewish Commonwealth" to "Jewish State," and the concept "Labor Commonwealth" has frequently been used to indicate the aim of Labor Zionism. Recently the use of the term "Jewish Commonwealth" has also served to indicate a readiness to accept such limitations on national sovereignty as would be imposed by an international authority if such were formed after the war. The following excerpts from recent statements may be taken as explaining the official Zionist interpretation of the meaning of "Jewish Commonwealth" at the present time.

Shortly before the formulation of the Biltmore Program, Dr. Weizmann wrote:^{16.}

...The Arabs must, therefore, be clearly told that the Jews will be encouraged to settle in Palestine, and will control their own immigration; that here Jews who so desire will be able to achieve their freedom and self-government by establishing a state of their own, and ceasing to be a minority dependent on the will and pleasure of other nations.

In that state there will be complete civil and political equality of of rights for all citizens, without distinction of race or religion, and, in addition, the Arabs will enjoy full autonomy in their own internal affairs. But if any Arabs do not wish to remain in a Jewish state, every facility will be given to them to transfer to one of the many and vast Arab countries. Considering the strategic and economic importance of Palestine, the inclusion of the Jewish state within the British Commonwealth of Nations would be to the interest of both. But we should also be ready, if necessary, to consider joining, under proper safeguards, in federation with Arab states.

A Jewish state in Palestine would be more than merely the necessary means of securing further Jewish immigration and development. It is a moral need and postulate, and it would be a decisive step towards normality and true emancipation. I believe that after the war Jews everywhere can gain in status and security only through the rise of a Jewish state, and this would be especially the case if that state is a part of the British Commonwealth.

16. "Palestine's Role in the Solution of the Jewish Problem," Foreign Affairs, January 1942, pp. 337-338.

In his Biltmore Conference speech, to which reference has been made in the preceding chapter, David Ben-Gurion epitomized the essential principles of a solution of the Zionist problem as being three in number:

A clear and unequivocal reaffirmation of the original intention of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate to re-establish Palestine as a Jewish Commonwealth as made clear by the President of the United States on March 3, 1919.

The Jewish Agency for Palestine, as the trustee for the prospective immigrants and settlers, should have full control over Jewish immigration and be vested with all necessary authority for the development and upbuilding of the country, including the development of its unoccupied and uncultivated lands.

Complete equality to all inhabitants of Palestine, civil, political and religious; self-government in all municipal affairs; autonomy for the different communities - Jewish and Arab - in the management of all their internal affairs - education, religion, etc.

In testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives on February 15, 1944, Mr. Emanuel Neumann submitted a statement which was regarded as representing the prevalent view of the American Zionist Emergency Council. He said, in part:

When we Zionists speak of a Jewish Commonwealth, we certainly do not mean a state which is exclusively Jewish. We do not mean to drive the existing Arab population into the desert or cast it into the sea. On the contrary, those who choose to do so are to remain. Moreover, their civic and personal rights shall be inviolate. There shall be full and complete equality before the law. Not only that, but the Arabs shall have every right and possibility to preserve and develop their cultural and religious heritage. Their language shall be recognized and their traditions respected. And in addition, they shall share fully in the economic advantages and opportunities, and the prosperity which will come with the modernization of the country and the development of its resources. Indeed this has already been the case in a substantial measure.

If, then, we are asked what we mean by the adjective Jewish as applied to the future Commonwealth of Palestine, my answer is that it is a short and abbreviated way of saying that through the repatriation of large numbers of European and other Jews, the Jewish people will attain a numerical majority in Palestine and thereby permanently guarantee the open door for others who may follow; so that Palestine shall never cease to serve as a sanctuary and Homeland for any and all Jews, from whatever

part of the world, who may choose to go there in the future. It will also be a Jewish Commonwealth in the vital sense that in that country, in that little corner of the world, the Jewish people, no longer living under minority conditions, but as the majority, will be free to apply their talent, their industry, their genius, and leave the indelible impress of their civilization upon their ancestral land as in the days of the Kings and the Prophets.

But the development of this Jewish Commonwealth shall take place under democratic institutions and in the democratic spirit. There shall be no crowding out of minority elements and no "racial superiority". The Jews will preponderate and lead in the development of the country without dominating or oppressing the minority. Jews and Arabs, devoted to their respective cultures and traditions, shall cooperate as free and equal citizens and jointly contribute to the prosperity and welfare of a common, single, unitary State. The Arab citizens of the Jewish Commonwealth will be as favorably situated as are the French speaking citizens of the British Dominion of Canada. It will be a free and democratic and preponderantly Jewish state composed of Jews, Moslems, Christians and, if there are any, Buddhists as well - compatriots all. All shall be eligible to public office, even the highest.¹⁷.

On the basis of the above used and of other recent discussions, the following may be said to represent the principles which animate the present leaders of the World Zionist Organization who have adopted the formula of the Jewish Commonwealth as the Zionist aim.

Establishment of the Jewish Commonwealth. In the post-war settlement Palestine should be designated as the Jewish Commonwealth, to be constituted as such when the Jews become a majority in the country. The Jewish Commonwealth is to have a democratic constitution and will be "Jewish" by virtue of the fact that the majority of the population will be Jews. The constitution will have no theocratic or racial basis. After it is established the Commonwealth need not, in fact, be called "Jewish" but may have some neutral or geographical name, e.g., "The Palestine Commonwealth."

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17. In another address delivered before the National Convention of Junior Hadassah, in Cleveland, in November 27, 1943, Mr. Neumann added: "Personally, I would look forward to a time - sometime in the future - when the Jewish Commonwealth, or the Republic of Judea, may on occasion have a Jewish president and an Arab prime minister, or even an Arab president and a Jewish prime minister, serving the State with equal loyalty and devotion." It may be noted that this view is not unlike the one expressed in the program formulated by Vladimir Jabotinsky in 1934 (see above, p.) although the latter goes further in making such a provision part of the constitutional arrangement.

The Area of Palestine. The Jewish Commonwealth proposal is opposed to partition and demands that all of Palestine, west of the Jordan at least, should be assigned to the Jewish Commonwealth, and that such adjustment of boundaries shall be made as is requisite for large scale irrigation and land development schemes. Moreover, the ban on Jewish immigration in Trans-Jordan should be removed and settlement of Jews should be permitted under suitable conditions to be determined by the international post-war settlement authority.

Transitional Jewish Agency Regime. The powers of the Jewish Agency - now recognized by the Mandate as the instrument of the Jewish people in the matter of upbuilding Palestine - should be augmented in two directions: 1) it should be given adequate control over Jewish immigration for the purpose of achieving a Jewish majority as quickly as possible; 2) it should be given adequate authority to enable it to develop the potential absorptive capacity of Palestine. The Jewish Agency will be responsible to international authority and will cooperate with the trustee for Palestine - presumably Great Britain - appointed to administrate Palestine in the transitional period.

Immigration. The Jewish Agency will undertake to respect the principle of economic absorptive capacity in the sense of the potential absorptive capacity of Palestine fully developed. It will adhere to the rule that Jewish immigration should not lead to unemployment, cause displacement from the land, or bring about the deterioration of the standard of living of the present inhabitants. However, it repudiates the so-called "economic absorptive capacity" procedures as determined by the British administration in the past in view of the fact that such procedures were devised largely for the purpose of hampering Jewish immigration and were inspired, moreover, by static economic presuppositions.

Palestine Development Authority. An essential element in the Jewish Commonwealth conception is the constitution of the Jewish Agency as a public corporation charged with the responsibility of fully utilizing its natural resources for the good of the country as a whole and of rapidly developing the agriculture, industry and commerce of Palestine. The constitution of the Palestine Development Authority should provide for: the right of acquiring land and natural resources through condemnation at prices established by courts; the right - in cooperation with existing local communities and enterprises - to develop Palestine's resources without needing to compete against other concessionaires; the duty of improving existing Arab localities as well as promoting Jewish settlements.¹⁸ The funds for the development scheme should be supplied partly by Jews, partly by international agencies, partly by the Palestine Administration.

18. It is suggested that in such cases the Palestine Development Authority apply the type of policy now adopted by agreement between the Jewish National Fund and the Palestine Administration in construction work in Arab sections. See Alexander Lourie, "Jordan Valley Authority," Jewish Frontier, May 1944, p.14.

The Problem of Transfer. The Jewish Commonwealth proposal assumes that Jews will have the priority of immigrating into Palestine. However, a basic postulate is that the present inhabitants of Palestine and their offspring shall have a full right to remain in Palestine. The Jewish Agency would be ready to cooperate with neighboring Arab states in facilitating an exchange of population or a transfer of Arabs from Palestine to other Arab areas. It assumes that no large migration of population will take place, regarding transfer as an auxiliary factor but not an indispensable one. Above all, the principle is that no transfer shall be made excepting by voluntary agreement on the part of families transferred and of the governments of the countries to which transfer will be made.

Relation to the Palestine Arab Community. The Jewish Commonwealth proposal assumes not only absolute equality of rights - civic, political and economic - for all individuals in Palestine, but proposes also that each of the two peoples - Arab and Jewish - be recognized as national communities with equal rights in the development of their religious, communal and cultural interests. Arabic as well as Hebrew will be recognized as official languages. Each group will have its own educational system and may maintain religious courts for those who prefer them. Although rejecting the principle of constitutional parity, it assumes that Arabs and Jews will be recognized in government appointments and will be duly represented in the judicial and executive branches as well as in the legislative.

Regional Federation. The Jewish Commonwealth proposal envisages the formation of a regional federation of Middle Eastern states for the purpose of coordinating customs policies, and for promoting planned economic development. Such a federation would aim for the full utilization of the natural resources of the Middle East, for raising its standard of agricultural production, and for the development of industry and commercial relations. The Jewish Commonwealth plan does not envisage a political or military union of Palestine with Near East states along the lines proposed by some Arab and British leaders.

International Authority. The Jewish Commonwealth conception is based on the hope of an extension of international control in world affairs. While accepting the assumption that Great Britain will continue to be the trustee of Palestine during the transitional period, it welcomes the participation of the United Nations in the formulation of a policy for Palestine.

The Jewish Commonwealth proposal may be said to differ from the more extreme Jewish State plans in the following points: 1) It does not demand the immediate establishment of the Jewish state after the war, but envisages a transitional period in which the Jews will be given the powers necessary

to form a Jewish majority; 2) It assumes the continued co-existence of the Arab people in Palestine and therefore makes full provision for equality in religious, cultural and communal affairs, as well as in individual rights; 3) It places great emphasis on economic development and requires that the Jewish authority be granted quasi-governmental powers to realize the potential absorptive capacity of the country; 4) It envisages economic development in contemporary social-economic terms giving primary consideration to the part that organized labor must play in a modern economy and the importance of a high standard of living for the whole population; 5) It emphasizes the significance of regional development and of conceiving the development of Palestine and the Middle East as part of a general movement toward international organization.



INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MEANING OF THE JEWISH
COMMONWEALTH

AMERICAN ZIONIST
EMERGENCY COUNCIL

(From the ESCO Foundation Palestine Study
Prepared by I. B. Berkson, Chap. XV, pp.21-4)

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