

11 WHAT IF MUSA ALAMI AND DAVID BEN-GURION HAD AGREED ON A JEWISH-ARAB STATE?*

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Palestine in crisis: 1936

The sense of mutual understanding and respect was never high between the two sides, but now, in the spring of 1936, Jews and Arabs were caught in another round of convulsive violence in Palestine. The Arab General Strike that began on April 19 set in motion a new policy of confrontation against the Zionists, as well as against the British overlords of the country.

For the Arabs, the rising tide of Jewish immigration to Palestine, some 62,000 people in 1935, indicated that the British were committed to implementing the letter and spirit of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which recognized the rights of “a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine, but not their own. Sitting idly by as the Jewish population in Palestine swelled – from some 60,000 in 1918 to over 380,000 in 1936 – was not an option. The momentum in the struggle over control over the land was shifting to the Zionist side, abetted, the Arabs believed, by the British. Decisive action was needed to reverse the trend and reassert their own national priorities.

For the Zionists, immigration was indeed the key issue. If the import of settlement in Erets Yisra’el was clear to them before Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, subsequent developments in Europe confirmed

* This chapter is a work of fiction. The first section, conveyed in roman type, is based on the established historical record. The second part, rendered in italics, shifts into the realm of the counterfactual.

the need to transport as many of their brethren as possible to Palestine. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 introduced a harsh regime of racial classification, according to which Jews were deemed inferior to and segregated from Aryans. The Nazis had already demonstrated their willingness to act on their beliefs, setting up concentration camps for political undesirables shortly after taking power. Time was running short for Jews in Europe, and the need for immediate and unlimited *aliyah* was urgent.

Against the background of these rising tensions, on April 17, 1936, David Ben-Gurion, the leading Jewish politician in the Yishuv and member of the governing Zionist Executive, met with George Antonius, a prominent Lebanese-Christian theoretician of the Arab nationalist movement (Figure 23). The meeting was arranged by Dr. Judah L. Magnes, the president of the Hebrew University and longtime advocate of a binational Jewish-Arab state. Despite the deep differences between Magnes and Ben-Gurion, who steadfastly supported a Jewish state in Palestine, the two men got along surprisingly well. Ben-Gurion especially appreciated Magnes’ close ties to a range of Arab thinkers, and availed himself of Magnes’ connections to them on more than one occasion.

Ben-Gurion began the meeting with Antonius by laying out the two key planks of his platform: unrestricted Jewish immigration to Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. Antonius responded with deep skepticism, suggesting that it would be impossible to find common ground if the Jews flooded the country. Ben-Gurion countered that a future Jewish state would be affiliated in some fashion with a federation of Arab states in the region. Antonius was unimpressed with Ben-Gurion’s formula, and the conversation reached a standstill until Magnes raised the idea of a Legislative Council made up of Arab and Jewish representatives as an interim step. Both sides agreed that it was worth discussing and decided to meet again on April 22 to take up the idea.

In the intervening days, the Arab General Strike broke out in a fit of violence that left sixteen Jews dead in Jaffa. The two subsequent meetings between Ben-Gurion and Antonius on April 22 and April 29 were thus extremely tense. After the third meeting, Antonius came to the conclusion that his fellow Arab leaders, the Lebanese politician Shakib Arslan and the Syrian nationalist Ihsan Bey al-Jabri, had been right in their judgment. They had met Ben-Gurion in Geneva two years earlier, in September 1924, after which they declared that they saw no need for

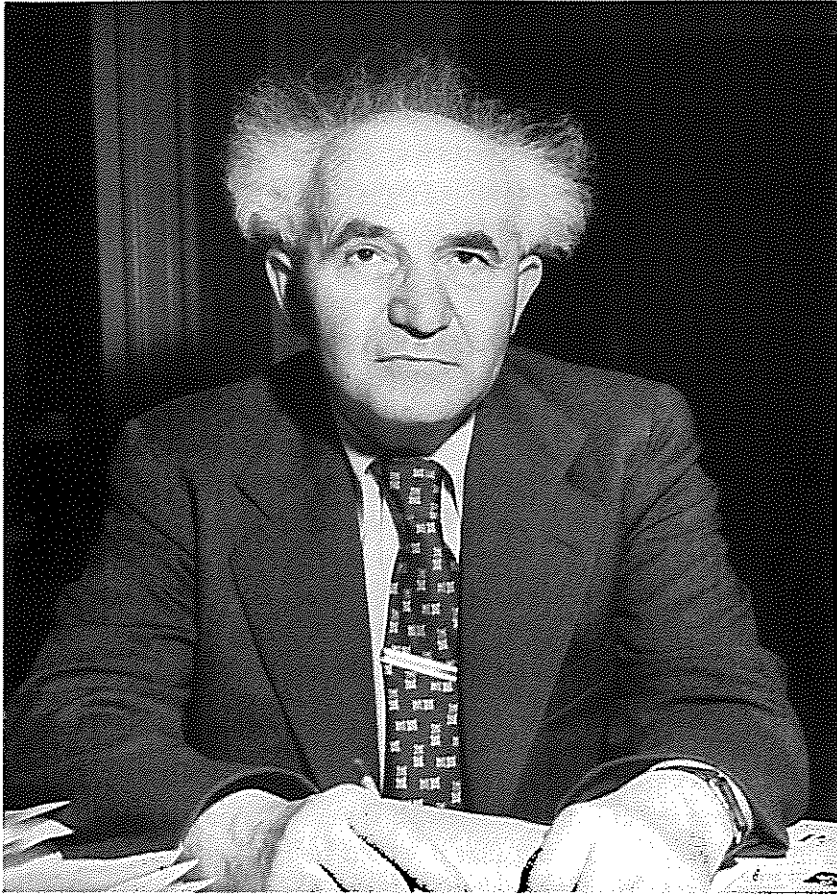


Figure 23. In the pivotal year of 1936, David Ben-Gurion began a series of important negotiations with Arab political leaders in an effort to resolve the intensifying Jewish–Arab conflict in Palestine.

further contact. Ben-Gurion, for his part, was struck by Antonius’ statement at their second meeting that there was no Arab leader intent on gaining mutual understanding between Jews and Arabs. It was deeply depressing for Ben-Gurion to hear that statement, but he knew it not to be true.

Musa Alami and Ben-Gurion first meet

Shortly before meeting with Arslan and al-Jabri, Ben-Gurion had held a series of meetings with a thirty-six-year-old Jerusalem lawyer, Musa



Figure 24. Musa Alami, the scion of a renowned Arab family from Jerusalem and a pivotal figure in the eventual creation of a binational Jewish–Arab state in Palestine.

Alami, who was a good friend of Judah Magnes (Figure 24). Several years earlier, the Cambridge-trained Alami had moved from his job as assistant Government Advocate of the British Mandatory government to the post of private secretary to High Commissioner Arthur Wauchope, to whom he was a close confidant. After serving in that

capacity for a year, he became chief Government Advocate. Although Zionist officials were concerned by Alami's influence on the British, Ben-Gurion sensed that Alami was interested in mutual understanding with the Jews.

Alami was the scion of a renowned Arab family from Jerusalem. Along with the Husseinis, Khalidis, Nashashibis, and Nusseibehs, the Alamis were major landowners and high-ranking officials in the waning years of Ottoman rule. His father Faidy served as mayor of Jerusalem from 1907 to 1909. Musa was raised in a grand home in the neighborhood of Musrara just outside the Old City. One of the guiding narratives of his life was that his mother gave birth to him at the same time as a boy was born to Jewish neighbors down the street. The local custom in Jerusalem at this time was for the neighboring mothers of two newborns to nurse them interchangeably. As a result, Musa Alami and his Jewish neighbor were deemed "foster-brothers" of sorts and remained friendly until political tensions undid the relationship in the 1920s. And yet Alami was familiar and friendly with Jews throughout his life, in Jerusalem as well as in Britain during his years as a law student.

At the same time, Alami had a strong sense of mission on behalf of the Arab people. He grew up in an environment in which fears of Jewish immigration to Palestine were constant – and ones that he shared. And notwithstanding his immersion in British culture and social norms, he believed that the Balfour Declaration and League of Nations Mandate were deeply biased against Palestine's native Arab population. This conviction did not prevent him from befriending, even while disagreeing with, the first British High Commissioner in Palestine, Sir Herbert Samuel, a devoted Jew and Zionist. Nor did it prevent him from serving under, or giving his professional counsel to, the later High Commissioner, Arthur Wauchope. In the same spirit, Alami believed it better to hear from the Zionists themselves about their plans than to rely on rumor-driven speculation. He thus acceded to David Ben-Gurion's request to meet in April 1934.

The Polish-born Ben-Gurion was marked by the very characteristics that he hoped Zionism would produce in Jews: a willingness to fight for national revival in the ancient homeland, a single-minded devotion to the cause, and unvarnished candor. Ben-Gurion was small of stature, but large in ambition. He sought nothing less than the transformation of Jewish life through the creation of a Jewish majority in a

Jewish state in Palestine. He went about this task with extraordinary discipline and focus, aided by keen powers of analysis and persuasion – if not always refined gentility. In the crowded field of Zionist ideology, one inevitably had to use sharp elbows in order to get ahead. And Ben-Gurion did, whether in contending with his own rivals in the Labor Zionist camp or facing those to the left and right of him.

Unlike his friend Judah Magnes, a Reform rabbi, Ben-Gurion tended not to speak the language of grand spiritual or cultural harmony with the Arab people. He was deeply, indeed inalterably, committed to his Zionist ideology, but he was a pragmatist. He knew that as long as the British maintained the Mandate over Palestine, he had to deal with them. He also knew, as Ahad Ha-am had warned forty-five years earlier, that Palestine was not, as some had said, "a land without people for a people without land." The Arabs were deeply rooted in the soil of Palestine and not inclined to roll over gently.

The leader with whom he would have most liked to meet – indeed, the one with the most authority in the fractious world of Arab politics – was Haj Amin Al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem and head of the Supreme Muslim Council of the city. The Mufti refused to meet with him, however, and had a reputation as vehemently hostile to Zionists – and Jews, for that matter. Indeed, Zionist officials held him chiefly responsible for the fracas at the Western Wall in 1929 that led to the murder of over 100 Jews.

Lingering resentment from that episode was fanned anew by violence in Arab towns in 1933, as fears of growing Jewish immigration deepened. Against that backdrop, Ben-Gurion was encouraged by his close Zionist associate, Moshe Shertok, to seek out Musa Alami, who was in regular contact with the Mufti (and, in fact, was a brother-in-law of the Mufti's cousin, Jamal Al-Husseini). Ben-Gurion and Alami met for the first time at Shertok's apartment in Jerusalem, where they had a candid exchange of views. Alami expressed his concern that the Jews were interested only in displacing the Arabs from their home in Palestine. Ben-Gurion, for his part, put forward his call for unrestricted Jewish immigration to Palestine culminating in a Jewish state. He added that he was willing to link this state to a larger union of Arab states in neighboring countries. Alami did not dismiss the idea out of hand, but wondered what would happen in the interim. Rather than pursue the British proposal for a Legislative Council, in which Arabs and Jews would serve together (under British control), Ben-Gurion suggested the

possibility of a joint Executive in which Jews, Arabs, and the British would share power. The parties agreed to use this point as a basis for discussion.

The pace of discussions picked up over the summer of 1934. Ben-Gurion and Shertok met separately with Lebanese leader Riad al-Sulh and then, through the good offices of Judah Magnes, with Palestinian nationalist leader Auni Abdul Hadi. On August 31 Ben-Gurion met again with Musa Alami, who surprised him by telling him that the Mufti knew of their talks. In fact, the Mufti was astonished to hear that there were Jews interested in achieving mutual understanding with Arabs and listened to Alami's report of Ben-Gurion's ideas with great interest. At some point, it would make sense, Alami proposed, for Ben-Gurion to meet with the Mufti. But in the delicate game of intra-Arab diplomacy, Alami clarified that it was important to meet first with the pan-Arab leaders from Syria, Shakib Arslan and Ihsan Bey al-Jabri (the latter was Alami's father-in-law). The Mufti would want to hear their impressions of Ben-Gurion before proceeding. A meeting was thus scheduled to take place in Geneva when Ben-Gurion was on a European trip.

By Ben-Gurion's account, the discussion at Arslan's apartment on September 23 was exceptionally frank, with differences aired not only between the Zionist leader and the Arabs, but also, subtly, between Arslan and al-Jabri. Ben-Gurion laid out his insistence on a Jewish majority, which Arslan regarded with grave alarm. Arslan cast doubt on the depth of the Jewish connection to Palestine, though al-Jabri was more sensitive to the link. The two sides did not reach agreement on any concrete proposals, though they did agree, at least according to Ben-Gurion, to keep the conversation private in the hope that "the last word had not been spoken." Ben-Gurion was thus upset to read several months later an article in the Lebanese newspaper *La Nation Arabe*, which Arslan and al-Jabri edited, in which they dismissed Ben-Gurion's views as "arrogant and impudent." From that point in late 1934 until the outbreak of the Arab General Strike in 1936, there were various rounds of discussion between Zionist and Arab leaders. But a frustrated Ben-Gurion, who believed that he had been deceived by Arslan and al-Jabri, did not participate. Only in April 1936, as tensions reached a fever pitch, did he meet with George Antonius for their three inconclusive meetings. At the end of them, with Palestine on the verge of a major conflagration, Ben-Gurion decided to turn once more to the most

reliable Arab interlocutor with whom he had engaged up to that point, Musa Alami.

Musa Alami returns to the stage: Sunday, September 6, 1936

"Mr. Alami," Ben-Gurion declared in his fluent, though accented English, "I am delighted to see you after several years. Many thanks for hosting us in your lovely home. You look well, though I'm afraid that the situation around us does not look so good."

"Good to see you, too, Mr. Ben-Gurion," Alami responded in the elegant lilt of his Cambridge years. "And yes, like the summer heat of Palestine, the circumstances seem rather oppressive. Thus, rejoining our conversation of two years ago seems most prudent. I should let you know that the High Commissioner has been apprised of this meeting and firmly supports our efforts to achieve understanding."

"Thank you for letting me know. Mr. Shertok has given me a full report on his meetings with you in May and June. And you may have heard of my meetings with Mr. Antonius."

Shertok, as on previous occasions, sat in on these meetings. Along with the Canadian-born lawyer, Dov Joseph, he had met with Alami on various occasions in the spring and summer of 1936, following Ben-Gurion's conversations with George Antonius.

"Permit me to get right to the heart of the matter, Mr. Alami. Do you think there is any reason to believe that an agreement between Jews and Arabs is possible in Palestine? Mr. Antonius led me to believe that there is not."

"Mr. Ben-Gurion, I do not deign to speak in Mr. Antonius' name, nor is it clear to me that he speaks on behalf of the Arabs of Palestine. But I firmly believe that we do not have the luxury of despair. A vast gulf separates us, indeed. You insist on a Jewish majority as a necessary outcome of negotiations. We look upon such a demand as a denial of the very existence of Arab peoples on the soil of Palestine. And yet we do not desire to have our children and their children and their children's children dwell in a state of perpetual war and bloodshed. We must find a way to understand one another."

"You are right, Mr. Alami. Time is short. Jews in Europe are under increasing attack. The villain Hitler, may his name be erased, makes bolder threats every day. We will need this land to save our

people. They must be allowed to immigrate without restriction. Otherwise, a catastrophe may occur, and we will all be responsible."

Shertok, who had been sitting silently, interjected without his usual tact: "Where does the Mufti stand, Mr. Alami? You have told us in the past that we cannot do anything unless he permits it. But he seems to be preoccupied now with running a violent rebellion. And he has never acknowledged our presence in Palestine."

Carefully drawing out his words, Alami answered: "Appearances to the contrary, the Mufti is neither naïve nor irresponsible. He is a political leader caught in the midst of a storm, trying to steer his ship in exceptionally rough waters. He not only has to steer clear of the British and the Zionists, but also of many within his own circle. Is it so different from your predicament among fellow Zionists? Under the right conditions, the Mufti would agree to meet with you."

"Would it not make more sense, Mr. Alami, to strengthen the hand of the moderates among you like the Nashashibis or the Khalidis?"

"May I answer your question with a question, Mr. Shertok? Would it not be easier for our side to strike a bargain with Dr. Magnes? Of course, it would. Magnes is not only a close friend, but a widely respected man of humanity and compassion. But we are realistic enough to know that he is not the one with whom to reach an agreement."

Shertok shot a quick smile at Ben-Gurion, nodding in appreciation at Alami's grasp of Yishuv politics. Ben-Gurion then probed: "What would it take to get the Mufti to meet us? Although he is no friend of the Jews, it is not with one's friends that one negotiates. We are prepared to meet him without conditions, assuming that the British don't arrest him first. As far as I can tell – and you may know better – the High Commissioner has tired of his rhetoric, which has become more and more incendiary over the course of the summer."

"Yes, the Mufti is in a tough spot," Alami replied. "But I do not see the British arresting him. What I think we want to avoid, both your side and ours, is a scenario in which the British impose a long-term solution. As you know, they will soon be sending a commission of inquiry to investigate the current state of affairs in Palestine. Perhaps it would be better for us to bring an initiative to the British rather than have them force a plan on us."

"Agreed," Ben-Gurion said. He then proceeded with his customary forcefulness: "What will it take to get the Mufti to the table?"

And if he comes, will he only come to complain, as he did in the manifesto he sent to Wauchope in April?"

"The April 26 manifesto of the Mufti," Alami declared, "reflected well our view that, since Balfour, the British have continuously trampled on Arab rights. I understand that you see it differently, but you must recognize our perspective. At the same time, it will serve no good purpose for us to play the victim forever. You Zionists will march steadily toward your goal while we sit in a corner and weep. And so, I will do my best to convince the Mufti that the time has come to sit down with you."

"Thank you again for your assistance, Mr. Alami, and for your hospitality," replied Ben-Gurion. "If there is anything we can do to help, please let me or Mr. Shertok know."

"I will be in touch soon. In the meantime, let us all do our very best to avoid provocative steps."

Ben-Gurion and Shertok nodded in assent, rose, and bade farewell to Alami. Their driver ferried them back from Alami's home in Musrara to the offices of the Jewish Agency building on King George Street.

During the drive, Shertok turned to Ben-Gurion and said: "If Alami is able to deliver the Mufti, you will have to exercise all of your diplomatic skill in dealing with him. Are you up to the task?"

"I have no choice. He is no ohev Yisra'el [lover of the Jews]. But we are at a crossroads. The Arab General Strike has weakened their cause; the British have lost patience. But we too are in desperate straits: we need the gates of Palestine to be opened to Jews. Let us see if we can break through to the good Mufti. And by the way, inform Magnes of these developments. Given the good will that the Arabs have for him, he should be present at that meeting."

Musa Alami seeks to persuade the Mufti: Monday, September 7, 1936

Immediately after his guests left, Musa Alami called the Mufti's office and arranged a meeting for the next day. He did not look forward to the encounter. Alami knew Haj Amin Al-Husseini well, perhaps too well. Their families belonged to the same small privileged circle of Jerusalemite Arabs. Both born in 1897, the two were acquaintances

and rivals from childhood. As an adolescent, Alami never would have imagined that Amin would follow in the footsteps of his father and brother as Mufti. To this day, he was amused by the fact that Amin was the leading Muslim official in Jerusalem. Amin, after all, was always more interested in politics than religion. From an early age, he was a fervent Arab nationalist and ardent opponent of Zionism. Although he had studied at Al-Azhar in Cairo, he had not been a prominent or even promising religious scholar. In fact, the other candidates for the election to Mufti in the spring of 1921, which included representatives from the well-known Khalidi and Jaralla families, were far more competent as religious authorities. And yet High Commissioner Herbert Samuel intervened in the election and appointed Al-Husseini to the position of Mufti.

Both due to his office and as a result of his personal qualities – he could be, in equal measure, charming and unyielding in support of the nationalist cause – Amin Al-Husseini was the most influential Arab political figure in Palestine. Musa Alami had long considered the Mufti an opportunist, willing to sacrifice principle to his brand of populist politics. But he also knew that he was indispensable. If the Arab side were to secure any guarantee of political rights in Palestine, the Mufti had to be involved.

With a measure of trepidation, Alami arrived at 8:30 the next morning at the Mufti's office on Haram al Sharif, the Muslim holy site overlooking the Western Wall.

"Most Venerable Guardian of Al-Quds, al-Haj Amin, salaam alaikum," announced Alami to his old compatriot with exaggerated formality.

"May peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be upon you, my dear Musa," replied the Mufti. "It has been far too long. How is Saadiyeh?"

"She is well, Amin. Many thanks for inquiring. I trust that all is well with the Husseinis."

"Praise be to Allah, yes. To what do I owe the honor of your presence?"

"Amin, you know that I am in regular touch with my friend, Dr. Magnes, the president of the Hebrew University who is as sympathetic to the Arabs as any Jew I know. You also know that I have met periodically over the last few years with Ben-Gurion and his associate, Shertok. Our discussions have not led to any agreements, nor could they, since I possess no authority to make a deal. But they have led to a better understanding of the other side."

"Yes, I know, Musa. You and others have kept me informed from time to time. I appreciate your openness to the outside world. It has always been the case with you, even as a young boy. You had your Jewish friends, while the rest of us looked on in astonishment. But I must tell you, Musa, that there are those among us who view your relations with the Jews today with suspicion. They wonder if you truly stand with the Arab nation. I need not tell you that they can be rather impetuous."

"I appreciate the warning, Amin. Of course, I have heard it before. But the moment at which we find ourselves today requires courage. Let me speak to you candidly. Our glorious strike has not served us well at all. Our people cannot sustain the deprivation and lack of livelihood. The British are fed up with us, as I hear from the High Commissioner. And the Jews are more numerous, more powerful, more assertive than ever before. We have little choice but to sit down with them to discuss possible arrangements."

"Musa, you know that the Zionists are devious interlopers who have come to steal our land. How could I, as the custodian of the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque, agree to sit down with them? Your father-in-law did so two years ago with Shakib Arslan, and all they encountered was the intransigence of your friend Ben-Gurion."

"That may well be. But that was then, and this is now. We find ourselves in a different – and I mean weaker – position than before. If we hope to secure any measure of self-determination for ourselves at this point, we must do it with and through the Jews. The British will not grant it to us."

"You understand, Musa, that I would be angering many of our brethren, including my fellow members of the Higher Committee, by meeting with the Jews. And I would be placing myself and my family at great personal risk."

"I do understand, Amin. But that is the mark of a true leader. You have been the model of national steadfastness for the Arabs of Palestine. But the hour now calls upon you to wage a different kind of battle than you have in the past, to extend beyond your hard-earned reputation and sit down with the enemy."

"I will consider it. But you must understand, Musa, that I will never compromise the integrity of our holy Jerusalem, which I have been commanded to safeguard."

"I understand well, Honorable Mufti. I would never ask you to do so."

Ben-Gurion and Shertok consult with Magnes: Monday, September 7, 1936

Following their meeting with Musa Alami on Sunday, Ben-Gurion and Shertok convened in the Jewish Agency offices where the Zionist Executive was housed. Ben-Gurion's election as chairman of the Executive the previous year consolidated his position as the leading political figure in the Yishuv.

This should not lead one to assume that the Jewish population was marked by harmonious coexistence. The spike in violence during the Arab strike had led to some eighty Jewish deaths and widened the chasm between Ben-Gurion's Mapai Party and the Revisionist Zionists of Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, as well as between their respective paramilitary units, the Haganah and Irgun. The Irgun was unwilling to heed Ben-Gurion's policy of havlagah, the call for restraint in retaliating against Arab forces following attacks. Ben-Gurion's calculation that restraint served a strategic purpose in inclining the British to favor the Zionists was altogether rejected by the Irgun. For the Irgun's members, the failure to retaliate against Arabs – and, if need be, to attack British forces – replicated the diaspora passivity that Zionism sought to eradicate.

Ben-Gurion was lost in thought about the problems he faced – the Irgun, the British, and the situation in Europe – when Shertok interjected: “I have called Magnes, and he has agreed to meet with us tomorrow. Let us see what he has to say.”

The next morning, Shertok and Ben-Gurion hosted Magnes at the Jewish Agency office. Magnes had been intensely engaged since May with four Jewish colleagues, together known as the Committee of Five, in formulating a document for discussion with Arab leaders regarding the creation of a Legislative Council that would operate “on the basis of equality between the two peoples.” The Jewish Agency, including Ben-Gurion and Shertok, had been briefed on it, and rejected the document because it proposed too low a number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine.

“Dr. Magnes, thank you for making time for us on such short notice,” Ben-Gurion opened.

“My pleasure, dear Ben-Gurion. Mr. Shertok told me of the interesting prospect before you. As you know, I am always available to assist in matters involving Jewish–Arab reconciliation. At the end of the day, the differences between the two of us are small compared to the perils of obstinacy and inaction.”

“Yes, and we have a rare opportunity to talk to someone whose voice matters on the Arab side. If you would be willing, Dr. Magnes, I would like you to join Shertok and me in meeting with the Mufti.”

“I will be honored to attend and to serve the interests of the Jewish people. In doing so, I will hope to serve the interests of our Arab cousins as well – and humanity at large. Remember what is etched on the archway of my friend Klausner's home in Talpiot – ‘Yahadut ve-enoshiyut’ [Judaism and Humanity]. The values of Judaism and of humanity are one. If Klausner, my political opposite, can agree with me about that, then so too can we Jews with the Arabs.”

“Inshallah, Dr. Magnes,” chuckled Ben-Gurion. “But the devil lies in the details. Your group of five has focused on three key issues: immigration, land, and governance. I do not favor the precise proposals you raised, but I agree on the centrality of these three.”

“Let us focus on those issues then,” Shertok joined in. “It will be important that we three, divergent as our views may be, present a unified front to Alami and the Mufti. We can begin perhaps by demonstrating our sensitivity to the issue of land.”

“Yes, indeed,” Magnes responded. “The Arabs feel, and not without cause, that when we buy land in large blocks, we are stripping them not only of their most precious natural resource, but of their very mooring in this country. It is the fellahin, the poor farmers, who are most vulnerable. And so our group of five proposed that for every 75 dunams of land purchased, we commit to preserving 25 for the rural Arab population. We also proposed that we make a major commitment to the economic development of those who remain on the land.”

“It has always been a foundation of our position with the Arabs,” Shertok noted, “that we make a major investment in their development. Not only will the Jewish Agency contribute. We will also ask our non-Zionist friends – Rothschild and Warburg, for example – to help in that regard. I am confident that we can put together a sizable fund for this purpose.”

“Of course, I will be happy to take that up with Warburg, who has been such a generous friend of my university,” Magnes added. “He will be delighted to hear of this initiative. But assuming that we can achieve agreement on land, do you believe that we can find common ground on immigration and governance? What do you propose there, Mr. Ben-Gurion?”

"For years, Magnes, I have reiterated my two main goals of creating a Jewish majority in a Jewish state," Ben-Gurion pronounced. "To turn away from either at this point would violate the core of my Zionist convictions."

"But remember that you are about to enter a negotiation, Mr. Ben-Gurion," Magnes stated. "As you said, this is a rare opportunity. It will require not just the appearance of flexibility, but actual evidence of such. You are the leader of the Jewish people in Palestine. History will be your judge."

"Dr. Magnes, I am well aware of the import of the moment," Ben-Gurion responded with a trace of impatience. "Shertok and I will discuss the two issues in the next few days. I promise that I will listen to Alami and the Mufti and demonstrate as much flexibility as I feel I can."

"Well then, I will proceed to contact Mr. Alami and suggest that we focus our conversation around the three issues we just mentioned," added Shertok.

The Zionist leadership meets the Mufti of Jerusalem: Thursday, September 10, 1936

The car carrying Ben-Gurion, Shertok, and Magnes pulled up to Musa Alami's house at the appointed hour of 10:00 a.m. They were greeted cordially at the door by Alami. Before entering the large sitting room, they paused, knowing that they would presently encounter the Mufti of Jerusalem, whose very name evoked fear and revulsion among Jews in Palestine. Magnes led the Jewish delegation into the room and extended his hand to the Mufti. Shertok and finally Ben-Gurion did the same as they announced their names.

The Mufti had been hearing the names of his new acquaintances for years, but had never met them. In fact, he had met relatively few Jews in his life. He now stood face to face with major Zionist figures, the very people who he often said had come to steal his land.

The two key men in the room, Ben-Gurion and the Mufti, towering figures in their respective communities, were of equally diminutive stature. But both radiated a sense of power and importance, creating a palpable sense of tension as they stood a few feet from one another in the middle of Musa Alami's salon. Ben-Gurion proceeded to address the Mufti in his less than perfect French, knowing that this was a common language between them. He thanked him for agreeing

to meet. The Mufti responded that it was a matter of national duty and honor to do so.

Alami then invited his guests to sit down, as he slowly poured each a demitasse of Turkish coffee. He suggested that he serve as translator, moving between Arabic and English, which would be less of a strain for all. He opened by telling his Jewish guests that he had informed the Mufti of their proposal to focus on three issues and that the Mufti had agreed. It might make sense, he continued, to begin with the issue of land purchases.

As agreed upon by the three Jewish participants, Magnes commenced by acknowledging the sanctity of the Holy Land for Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike, and then quoted a verse from Deuteronomy (16:20) that reflected his most deeply held Jewish credo: "Justice, justice, thou shall pursue." It was his personal mission, he pronounced, to pursue justice for all inhabitants of the Holy Land.

The Mufti appeared unmoved. He parried Magnes' scriptural reference by quoting a Quranic sura (4:58): "Verily! Allah commands that you should render back the trusts to those to whom they are due; and that when you judge between men, you judge with justice." Justice between men, he declared, requires that that which is taken from one unfairly be returned to him.

Shertok stole a quick glance at Ben-Gurion, fearing an angry response. Before either could open his mouth, Musa Alami intervened: "Dear friends, we can all agree on the principle of justice in our religions, as well as the sanctity of the land. Let us turn to the specific issue we agreed to discuss. Mr. Shertok, could you lay out your views on land ownership and purchase?"

"Thank you, Mr. Alami. We come here in the hope of achieving a better understanding of the Arab position. It is in the interests of both groups to find their way to mutual recognition rather than succumb to violence. The view of the Zionist Executive is two-fold: first, Jews should be able to purchase land anywhere in Palestine provided that they do so in conformance with the law of the land and with respect for the well-being of the Arab residents who would be directly affected by a land sale. Second, in the spirit of cooperation and our desire for peaceful coexistence, we are prepared to mobilize the resources of the Zionist movement and its supporters the world over to raise hundreds of millions of dollars for the economic development of Palestine, of which a substantial portion would be directed to the Arab population."

"We appreciate the spirit of cooperation, but the facts on the ground cannot be ignored, Mr. Shertok," Alami retorted in Arabic before repeating the line in English. "The Zionists are not only purchasing land through any means available to them, sometimes legally and often not, but in doing so, they are displacing large numbers of our rural brethren, the fellahin."

"You surely know, Mr. Alami, that many of your urban brethren are willing to sell us their land," Ben-Gurion declared with emphasis. He stared directly at Alami, signaling that he had heard the rumor that Alami had himself sold land from a family estate in the Galilee to Jews. "And why shouldn't they? We only seek legal purchases, and we pay a fair price. That said, we do recognize the logic of the proposal of Dr. Magnes and his friends that it is our obligation to set aside a portion of the property that we purchase for its long-time residents. We propose therefore a 25 percent set-aside on all future land purchases. We also propose a \$250 million economic development plan over the next five years, of which half would be directed to the Arab population. That will require a huge effort on our part, but it can be done in the name of peace."

Alami translated Ben-Gurion's words to the Mufti, who listened with evident interest. He did not doubt the ability of the Jews to raise vast sums of capital given their global connections. "How can we be sure that such funds will make their way to our people?" he asked. "And how can we make sure that our land will not be plundered?"

Ben-Gurion sensed a certain pragmatic interest lurking beneath the Mufti's skepticism and responded: "We will establish a joint committee of Arabs and Jews, with British representation as well. Its purpose will be to oversee all land purchases in Palestine to ensure that they are conducted legally and fairly. We will also establish a joint economic development committee to guarantee the equitable distribution of development funds raised abroad."

"Of course, Mr. Ben-Gurion, the question of land cannot be separated from the question of Jewish immigration to Palestine," Alami announced. "Unrestrained immigration will lead to unrestrained land purchases which, in turn, will force the natives of this country off their land. That is unacceptable."

"Mr. Alami, my people are now experiencing one of the darkest chapters in their long history. A brutal German tyrant is threatening to render Europe judenrein, free of all Jews. We believe he is capable of

nothing short of mass murder to accomplish this goal. We must open the gates of Palestine to our brothers and sisters, and we must do so now."

"Why must the Arab people of Palestine bear the brunt of the Jews' burden elsewhere?" asked the Mufti. "It is not our problem, but we are being asked to pay for it."

"Honorable Mufti, I will not bore you with impassioned professions of our deep connection to the land," Ben-Gurion uttered with characteristic directness. "Rather, I want to mention the careful work of our experts, particularly Professor Arthur Ruppin, an internationally renowned scholar, who has studied the absorptive capacity of Palestine. Quite in contrast to the Hope-Simpson Report that you remember from 1930, he believes that this land can easily absorb millions of new immigrants. We agree entirely. At the same time, we understand that a massive flood of immigrants will overwhelm Palestine's existing infrastructure. We would therefore like to offer an immigration plan beginning this year based on the number of Jewish arrivals last year: 62,000. Should conditions prove hospitable, we would propose to raise the figure by at least 10,000 every year. And if conditions in Europe deteriorate dramatically, we would propose a more significant increase in numbers."

"The Arab people would never accept this," objected the Mufti, upon hearing Alami's translation. "And even if I agreed, I could never win support from the Higher Committee."

"I understand that there are serious risks for you," Ben-Gurion nodded. "I, too, would face fierce opposition from my fellow Zionists for any agreement that we arrive at. But history demands a great deal from the two of us now. Together we have the opportunity to alter the future for the sake of our children. The time is now."

The Mufti looked on pensively, without uttering a word, as Alami joined in: "I appreciate the complexities of your internal situation, Mr. Ben-Gurion. I also understand the delicacy of the situation in Europe. But how can we justify permitting hundreds of thousands of Jews to come into this country and displace our people from their land?"

"I reiterate: We will insist on the preservation of land for the rural Arab population. And we will embark on a massive economic development campaign for both peoples. Mr. Alami, the time is right not only for us, but for you. By all accounts, the British have lost patience

with the General Strike. We are offering you a compromise. We are not proposing unlimited Jewish immigration to Palestine, but an incremental plan that balances your interests with ours."

"And who will oversee this flood of immigrants?" the Mufti asked. "What sort of government do you propose? If we share one thing, it is that we are sick and tired of our British overlords. But we cannot accept the idea that people who arrived here from Europe no more than fifty years ago will rule over a majority of the population who have lived here for millennia."

"Here too we are prepared to compromise," Shertok responded. "Over the past few days, we have had intensive and far-reaching discussions with members of the Zionist Executive. In the past, we have spoken of our need for a Jewish state. In fact, in previous conversations with Mr. Alami and others, we have discussed the prospect of linking such a state to a neighboring Arab federation. However, we are now prepared to raise a different concept, motivated, to no small extent, by our friend, Dr. Magnes. We are proposing a five-year transition toward self-rule by Jews and Arabs in a state to be known as Filastin-Erets Yisrael. The mechanisms of government will be: first, a bicameral legislature, the lower house of which will elect delegates proportionate to the population (and thus will be Arab-controlled for the foreseeable future), and the upper house of which will be evenly divided between Jewish and Arab representatives; second, an executive body consisting of four Arab and four Jewish members led by an Arab first minister and a Jewish deputy first minister; and, third, at the end of the transition period, after which the British would surrender the Mandate, a ceremonial head of state to be known as President to be elected by the upper house of Parliament."

Alami translated the details to the Mufti, and the two men sat in silence. They had come to the meeting expecting to hear once again the Zionists' insistence on a Jewish state. The new proposal was very different. It entailed unmistakable compromise on the part of the Zionists, reflecting their urgent need for a place of refuge for European Jews. It would also require deep compromise on the Arab side.

While still processing his thoughts, Alami said: "Thank you for this proposal, Mr. Shertok. It demands serious attention. I would like to discuss these ideas with the High Commissioner, whose support would obviously be needed. Meanwhile, the Mufti will need to speak with members of the Higher Committee to see if there is any receptivity

to the proposal. I propose that we be in touch after your Sabbath on Sunday morning."

Alami then translated for the Mufti, who nodded his agreement. The participants stood, shook hands, and parted ways.

The fateful meeting at Magnes' house: Monday, September 14, 1936

When Alami and the Mufti arrived at 10:00 on Monday morning, Ben-Gurion and Shertok were already seated in the living room of Magnes' house in a mixed Jewish-Arab neighborhood in the north of Jerusalem. The Jewish officials rose to greet their Arab counterparts, and then all took their seats.

Alami immediately began: "Dear friends, when we met last at my home, I must confess that I was in a state of near-total despair. The General Strike, about which I always had my doubts, does not seem to be yielding any positive results for the Arab side. Meanwhile, your efforts to bring more Jews to Palestine with the aim of creating a Jewish state are proceeding apace. Tensions between Jews and Arabs are boiling over. It seemed as if all hope was lost. But much has changed since Friday. You have given us a serious proposal. I had a chance to discuss it with the High Commissioner on Friday, and he enthusiastically supports it. He is confident that it will supersede the plan to bring the royal commission to Palestine. He believes that His Majesty's government is prepared to surrender its Mandate over Palestine, assuming that relations between it and the new government of Filastin-Erets Yisrael be strong. I will let the Mufti report on his conversations."

The Mufti turned to face Ben-Gurion and explained: "I have discussed your proposal with my colleagues on the Arab Higher Committee. To recognize you as partners in negotiation would require a major concession on our part. But I am not here to belabor the obvious. What my colleagues and I see is that you are gaining traction in our country, with the support of the British. Although there was not unanimity in the Arab Higher Committee, I have come to believe that we must secure for our people what we can now. Accordingly, I offer you my support to move on to the next phase of negotiation over your plan."

Ben-Gurion looked in astonishment at the Mufti, recalling that a few short months ago his meetings with George Antonius ended with

no prospect for further dialogue. In a matter of days, his world – and that of Jews and Arabs in Palestine – had been totally upended: “I am stunned and delighted, sir. We are on the verge of an historic new era, ending a half-century of enmity between Jews and Arabs and offering new hope to our peoples in a time of great need. In that vein, I should add that we have agreed among ourselves that if the negotiations move forward as we hope, we would like to nominate Mr. Alami to serve as the initial first minister in the five-year transition period.”

Alami smiled at the suggestion and proclaimed: “I am honored by your confidence, my friends, though hardly deserving of it. I doubt that I am capable of meeting the huge demands of such a job, but I pledge to do all within my powers to help our peoples find their way to peace. And in that spirit, I would like to reciprocate by suggesting here and now that Dr. Magnes be considered for the position of first President of the new state. He has labored tirelessly for peaceful coexistence between our peoples and is an inspiration to Jew and Arab alike.”

Magnes was visibly moved by the suggestion, but quickly added: “My dear friend Alami, what an extraordinary privilege that would be! But we are getting ahead of ourselves. We must sell this plan to our respective peoples, and it will be immensely challenging. Even if we succeed in that regard, there would not be a President for five years. Who knows if I will even be around at that point by then, when I will be sixty-five years old? In the meantime, we face the major challenge of crafting instruments of shared governance under British control. But before embarking on that difficult and noble work, let us pause and take stock of this extraordinary moment. The Almighty has made us holy vessels to undertake what I never thought possible – the founding of an Arab–Jewish state in Palestine, a state born in peace and hope rather than in the violence and despair in which we have been so dreadfully mired for decades.”

The five men stood up and joined hands in the center of the room. After a minute of silent meditation, they sat down again and began to lay the foundation for the State of Filastin-Erets Yisrael.

12 WHAT IF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC HAD SURVIVED? A CHAPTER FROM WALTHER RATHENAU'S MEMOIR*

Michael Brenner

It gives me great pleasure to publish an excerpt from Walther Rathenau's forthcoming memoir. As readers will recall, Rathenau died unexpectedly two years ago after retiring from his post as Germany's President (Figure 25). He was nearing the completion of his memoir, which he planned on calling On Bygone Events (“Von vergangenen Dingen”), and had hoped to see it published in time for his seventy-fifth birthday. It was unfortunately not to be. I have therefore taken it upon myself to edit this remarkable book. It would be too much to say that we were companions. But there were many occasions when Rathenau and I shared the same goals and worked for a common cause. We both helped to establish the Deutsche Demokratische Partei and we both were among the supporters of the Deutsche Hochschule für Politik. My admiration for Rathenau grew steadily during the years of his presidency, in which he helped to lead Germany out of political crisis and economic depression. I regarded it therefore both as an honor and as my duty to edit this volume.

The following excerpts describe Rathenau's reflections on his Jewish background. I was always convinced that Jews contributed much both to the spiritual and economic well-being of Germany. Some of my best students were Jews, among them Franz Rosenzweig, whose dissertation on Hegel remains a work of enduring value to German intellectual history. Unfortunately, Rosenzweig rejected my offer of a university position. He declined to explore the heights of German Protestant

* This chapter is a work of fiction.

What Ifs of Jewish History

From Abraham to Zionism

Edited by

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld

