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Efraim Karsh

## The Collusion that Never Was: King Abdallah, the Jewish Agency and the Partition of Palestine

One of the most enduring conspiracy theories in the historiography of the Arab–Israeli conflict is the existence of a Jewish–Hashemite collusion to carve up Palestine following the termination of the British Mandate. Dating back to the late 1950s and early 1960s,<sup>1</sup> and unanimously accepted by both mainstream and revisionist historians,<sup>2</sup> this theory claims that the collusion was hatched at a secret meeting on 17 November 1947 between King Abdallah of Transjordan and the Acting Head of the Jewish Agency’s Political Department, Golda Meir, and was ‘consciously and deliberately intended to frustrate the will of the international community, as expressed through the United Nations General Assembly, in favour of creating an independent Arab state in part of Palestine’.<sup>3</sup> ‘The common ground for the agreement was a mutual objection to the creation of a Palestinian state’, runs the conspiracy theory. ‘The Jewish Agency in particular abhorred such a possibility, asserting that the creation of a Palestinian state would perpetuate the ideological conflict in Palestine.’<sup>4</sup>

This article rejects this conventional wisdom altogether. It will argue that there was not and could not have been a Jewish–Transjordanian collusion to divide Palestine in a way contradictory to the UN Partition Resolution, not

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1 See, for example, Abdallah al-Tall, *Karīthat Filastin: Mudhakkirat Abdallah al-Tall, Qa'id Ma'rakat al-Quds* (The Palestine Catastrophe: Memoirs of Abdallah al-Tall, Commander of the Jerusalem Campaign) (Cairo 1959); A. Sayegh, *al-Hashemiyyoun wa Qadiyat Filastin* (The Hashemites and the Palestine Question) (Sidon 1964), 261–5; Israel Baer, *Bithon Israel: Etmol, ha-Yom, Mahar* (Israel's Security: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow) (Tel-Aviv 1966), 125–35; Jon Kimche and David Kimche, *Both Sides of the Hill* (London 1960), 60; Zeev Sharef, *Three Days* (London 1962), 72–3; Marie Syrkin, *Golda Meir: Woman with a Cause* (London 1964), 195–202.

2 For mainstream subscription to the theory see, for example: Neil Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy, Vol. II: Arab-Zionist Negotiations and the End of the Mandate* (London 1986); Mary Wilson, *King Abdallah, Britain and the Making of Jordan* (Cambridge 1987), 161–7, 214; Yoav Gelber, *Jewish-Transjordanian Relations 1921–1948* (London 1997); Dan Schueftan, *Optisia Yardenit: Israel, Yarden, Ve-hapalestinaiim* (Jordanian Option: Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians) (Tel-Aviv 1986).

For the revisionist approach see, for example: Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myth and Realities* (New York 1987), 8, 42–4, 142–4, 167–8; Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdallah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford 1988); idem, *The Politics of Partition* (Oxford 1990) (this is an abridged and slightly revised edition of *Collusion*).

3 Shlaim, *Collusion*, op. cit., 1; idem, *The Politics of Partition*, op. cit., viii.

4 Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947–1951* (London 1992), 118.

least because the goals of these two parties were mutually exclusive: Abdallah viewed Palestine as an integral part of his kingdom, the Zionist movement as the site of a prospective Jewish State.

More concretely, this article will argue that first, a careful examination of the two documents on which the collusion theory hinges — reports by Ezra Danin and Eliyahu Sasson, two Zionist officials who participated at the Meir–Abdallah meeting — proves that Meir was implacably opposed to any agreement that would violate the letter and spirit of the UN Partition Resolution passed twelve days later. In no way did she consent to Transjordan's annexation of the Arab areas of Mandatory Palestine. Second, Meir's own verbal account of her conversation with Abdallah, oddly overlooked by all historians, further proves that Mandatory Palestine was *not* divided on 17 November 1947. Third, as mere acting head of the Jewish Agency's political department, Meir was in no position to commit her movement to a binding deal with King Abdallah, especially since that deal would run counter to the Jewish Agency's simultaneous efforts to bring about a UN resolution on partition. All that she could do was to try to convince Abdallah not to oppose the impending UN Partition Resolution violently and to give him the gist of Zionist thinking. Fourth, Meir's conversation with Abdallah was never discussed by the Jewish Agency Executive, the effective government of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine). The Yishuv's military operations during the 1947–49 War show not a trace of the alleged deal in either their planning or their execution. On the contrary, the Zionist leadership remained deeply suspicious of Abdallah's expansionist ambitions up to the pan-Arab invasion of the newly-established State of Israel in mid-May 1948. Fifth, while the Jewish Agency unquestionably preferred Abdallah to the Jerusalem Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini, this preference did not lead the agency to preclude the possibility of a Palestinian State. Quite the reverse, well after the Abdallah–Meir meeting, the most prominent Israeli policy-makers — Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett — still preferred an independent Palestinian State to the annexation of the Arab parts of Mandatory Palestine to Transjordan. Finally, Abdallah viewed Palestine as an integral part of the vast kingdom he had been seeking to establish throughout his political career, and its Jewish community as an autonomous subject province in this kingdom, *not an independent nation state*.

As noted earlier, Danin's and Sasson's reports constitute the foremost, indeed the only source used to substantiate the collusion theory. But do they really prove the clinching of such a deal during the Abdallah–Meir meeting? Let these two accounts speak for themselves, starting with Danin's far more elaborate report:

Abdallah got right to the point. He stressed that our conversation should be viewed as an exercise in thinking aloud. 'At the time we talked about partition, and now I would like to

know your opinion. . . . I agree to partition that will not shame me before the Arab world when I come out to defend it. Let me seize this opportunity to suggest to you the idea, for future consideration, of an independent Hebrew Republic in part of Palestine within a Transjordan state that would include both banks of the Jordan, with me at its head, and in which the economy, the army and the legislature will be joint.<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis was on the assumption that it would not be under Transjordanian rule, but within a Transjordanian monarchy. He did not press for an answer, but explained that in the event of the creation of such a state he would be able to expand the territory of his state to embrace G[reater] S[yria] and even Saudi Arabia. When we explained to him that our case was being discussed at the United Nations, that we hoped that it would be decided there to establish two states, one Jewish and one Arab, and that we wished to talk now about an agreement with him [i.e., Abdallah] based on these resolutions, he said that he understood this, and that it would be desirable to meet again immediately after the adoption of the UN resolution to discuss ways of cooperating in the light of that decision.

At this point he went on to ask what our attitude would be to an attempt by him to seize the Arab part of the country? We replied that we would look favourably on it, especially if it did not obstruct us in the establishment of our state, did not lead to a confrontation between us and his forces, and, particularly if this action were accompanied by a declaration that the seizure was solely aimed at ensuring order and keeping the peace until the United Nations could establish a government in that part [of Palestine]. To this he answered: 'But I want that part for myself in order to annex it to my state, and I do not want to create a new Arab state which will upset my plans and allow the Arabs "to ride on me". I want to be the rider, not the horse.' He did not accept our suggestion that he arrange for this in a different manner, namely a referendum in which his influence would be decisive.

. . . At the end he reiterated that concrete matters could only be discussed after the UN had passed its resolution, and said that we must meet again immediately afterwards.<sup>5</sup>

Eliyahu Sasson's much shorter report reads as follows:

Golda [Meir], Ezra [Danin], [and] myself met Meir [code-name for Abdallah] Monday. Stated will not allow his forces to collide with us nor cooperate with any other force against us. Belittled military power [of] Arab states believed would not dare break into Palestine. In case he will decide [to] invade Palestine [he] will concentrate [on] Arab area with a view to prevent bloodshed, keep law [and] order, forestall Mufti. Prepared [to] cooperate with us [in] this matter . . . ready [to] sign written agreement with us provided we agree [to] assist attach Arab part to Transjordan. Replied [that] we [would be] prepared [to] give every assistance within [the] frame [of the] UN Charter. Agreed [to] meet again after UN decision.<sup>6</sup>

Between them the two reports prove the following points:

~ As stated by Abdallah at the outset, the conversation was seen as a joint exercise in 'thinking aloud' about the general principles of a possible Hashemite-Jewish understanding, not as one designed to produce a concrete agreement. Hence his avoidance of pressing for an answer to his ideas; hence his concluding remarks that no concrete issues could be discussed until after

5 Ezra Danin, 'Siha Im Abdallah, 17.11.47' ('Conversation with Abdallah, 17 November 1947'), Central Zionist Archives (hereinafter CZA) S25/4004.

6 Eliyahu Sasson to Moshe Shertok [Sharett], 20 November 1947, CZA, S25/1699.

the UN General Assembly had passed its resolution, and his suggestion for a follow-up meeting.

– In Abdallah's thinking, partition 'that will not shame me before the Arab world' meant an autonomous Jewish province within a Transjordanian kingdom stretching on both sides of the Jordan. As we shall see later, these were not idle words but rather the gist of Abdallah's thinking on the Palestine Question since the early 1920s.

– Most importantly, in no way, shape or form did Golda Meir give Abdallah a 'green light' to annex the Arab part of Mandatory Palestine to his kingdom. Quite the reverse, in fact. While quiescent in his possible capture — but by no means annexation! — of this area, 'especially if it did not obstruct us in the establishment of our state [and] did not lead to a confrontation between us and his forces', she made it eminently clear that:

a) Any Jewish–Hashemite arrangement would have to be compatible with the UN Resolution. In Danin's words: 'We explained to him that our case was being discussed at the United Nations, that we hoped that it would be decided there to establish two states, one Jewish and one Arab, and that we wished to talk now about an agreement with him based on these resolutions'.<sup>7</sup> In Sasson's words: 'Replied [that] we [would be] prepared [to] give every assistance within [the] frame [of the] UN Charter'.<sup>8</sup>

b) The sole purpose of Transjordan's intervention in post-Mandatory Palestine would be to ensure order and keep the peace 'until the United Nations could establish a government in that part',<sup>9</sup> namely, a short-lived law-enforcement operation aimed at facilitating the establishment of a legitimate Palestinian government.

Were Abdallah to gain Palestinian, Arab and international support for his territorial ambitions, the Zionist movement might go along; hence Meir's suggestion for a referendum that would legitimize Abdallah's claim to rule this area. But the distance from this to approval of Abdallah's annexation of western Palestine to his kingdom is very great indeed.

In other words, it was the Jewish representative who defended Palestinian political rights by insisting on the ephemerality of the Transjordanian seizure of the Arab parts of Mandatory Palestine as a means to facilitate the establishment of a legitimate government there in accordance with the UN Resolution. It was the Arab leader who insisted on annexing the area to his kingdom rather than creating 'a new Arab state which will upset my plans and allow the Arabs "to ride on me"'. The gap between these two positions was too wide to bridge, and neither Abdallah nor Meir tried to do so.

Interestingly enough, Meir presented no official report on her conversation with Abdallah to the Jewish Agency Executive (JAE) at the time of the event,

7 Danin, 'Siha Im Abdallah', op. cit.

8 Sasson to Shertok, 20 November 1947.

9 Danin, 'Siha Im Abdallah', op. cit.

which indicates that she deemed it to contain no concrete agreement that needed to be discussed and approved by this highest decision-making institution of the Zionist movement. It was only on 12 May 1948, in a verbal report to the Provisional State Council (which succeeded the JAE as the Yishuv's effective government and was subsequently replaced by a fully-fledged Israeli government following the establishment of the Jewish State) on her second meeting with Abdallah (held on the previous day) in which she failed to convince him not to join the imminent Arab attack on the Jewish State, that Meir gave her own account of the November 1947 meeting:

I do not know whether all present here are aware that several months ago, about ten days before the UN Resolution, a meeting with King Abdallah took place with the participation on our part of Sasson, Danjin, and myself. The meeting was in Transjordan, though on Jewish territory, that is — he came from Amman to see us. The meeting was conducted on the basis that there was an arrangement and an understanding as to what both of us wanted and that our interests did not collide.

For our part we told him then that *we could not promise to help his incursion into the country [i.e., Mandatory Palestine], since we would be obliged to observe the UN Resolution which, as we already reckoned at the time, would provide for the establishment of two states in Palestine. We said that we could not therefore give active support to the violation of this resolution.* If he was prepared and willing to confront the world and us with a *fait accompli* — the tradition of friendship between us would continue and we would certainly find a common language on settling those matters that were of interest to both parties. He then promised us that his friendship towards us still existed and that there could be no confrontation between us. He spoke on his friends and on the other [Arab] states and especially on the Mufti; he dismissed the strength of the other neighbouring states and agreed with us that if we were attacked by Arabs it went without saying that we had to respond.

The meeting was conducted very amicably and without any arguments. During the conversation he said, as if by passing, two things that raised some suspicion, apprehension. But the meeting ended on the understanding that we would meet again after the UN Resolution. The two things that raised suspicion were:

- a) He wanted to know what we thought about the possible inclusion of the Jewish State (the 'Jewish Republic' as he called it) within the Transjordanian Kingdom;
- b) He hoped to have a partition that would not disgrace him [in front of the Arabs].

These two things raised, as already noted, our apprehension, and we thought that in due course we would discuss the matter.<sup>10</sup>

As is clearly evident from Meir's account, Mandatory Palestine was *not* divided in November 1947. There was mutual recognition of the lack of enthusiasm on either side for military confrontation and of the existence of a certain convergence of interests. But no definitive agreement on the future of Palestine was reached. To the contrary, as Meir saw it, Abdallah was made to understand that the decision on whether to confront the world with a *fait accompli* by annexing the Arab parts of Palestine to his kingdom was

10 Golda Meir's verbal report to the Provisional State Council on 12 May 1948. Israel State Archives, *Provisional State Council: Protocols, 18 April-13 May 1948* (Jerusalem 1978), 40 (emphasis added).

exclusively his, and that he could expect no Jewish support whatsoever for such a move.

Misreading of historical documents and overlooking vital source material are the more obvious flaws of the collusion theory. The misconception that such critical decisions as the making of war and peace or the division of foreign lands can be made in the course of a single conversation between state officials without consultations or extended bargaining reflects a fundamental lack of understanding of the nature of foreign policy-making in general and of the Zionist decision-making process in particular. Whether regular or irregular, direct or indirect, overt or covert, political relations among nations are routinely maintained through foreign policy establishments — diplomats, officials and politicians — without necessarily informing, at every single twist and turn, the state's ruling institutions (be it a Cabinet or a 'Revolutionary Command Council' of sorts); yet, on the whole, they operate within the broad lines set by the state leadership. Resourceful bureaucrats can, of course, find ways and means to influence their ministers, just as powerful foreign secretaries can sidestep their own officialdom or manipulate, even deceive, the Cabinet; conversely, heads of state can, and at times do, circumvent their foreign policy establishments. Yet in democratic societies there are clear limits to what the most powerful foreign secretaries, or even heads of state, can do without Cabinet or at times parliamentary approval: they cannot commit their countries to binding agreements in the course of a single conversation, let alone to such a far-reaching undertaking as that alleged by the collusion theory.

This state of affairs was fully applicable to the Zionist movement. The lion's share of its secret contacts with King Abdallah, among other Arab leaders, was maintained by the Jewish Agency's Political Department, headed since 1933 by Moshe Sharett, and more concretely by the Department's Arab Section, headed since 1939 by Eliyahu Sasson. By way of doing so, the Political Department enjoyed a wide latitude, but it nevertheless remained bound by the policy guidelines set by the Zionist movement's governing bodies and institutions.

Indeed, the main source of strength of the Jewish national movement had been its ability to organize itself from an early stage as a 'state in the making' based on democratic-parliamentary principles:

It was all there, set up and running, within a year or two of the calling of the first Congress of Zionists in 1897: free elections on a constituency basis; universal suffrage (i.e. men and women voting and members of the Congress itself); a fully representative assembly; a political leadership responsible to that assembly; open debate on all major issues; and, before long, what might usefully be called a loyal opposition too.<sup>11</sup>

11 David Vital, 'Some of the Forks in the Road' in Efraim Karsh and Gregory Mahler (eds), *Israel at the Crossroads* (New York 1994), 9–10.

As Jewish presence in Mandatory Palestine grew rapidly during the 1930s and the centre of gravity of Zionist activities shifted from Europe to Mandatory Palestine, the Jewish Agency Executive (JAE) evolved into the foremost decision-making body of the Zionist movement and the *de facto* 'government' of the Yishuv, managing its affairs, from the more mundane aspects of daily life to the critical political issues of the day, such as the various British proposals on the future of Palestine, Jewish–Arab relations in the prospective Jewish state, etc.

It is inconceivable, therefore, that the Zionist movement reached any binding agreement with Abdallah, let alone such a far-reaching understanding on the division of Palestine and the incorporation of her Arab parts into Transjordan, without the matter being thoroughly discussed and approved by the JAE; this is all the more pertinent to this specific case since the alleged deal would have run counter to the Zionists' own contemporary efforts to bring about a UN resolution on partition. That Meir's conversation with Abdallah was not discussed at any of the JAE's meetings — either prior to its occurrence or in its aftermath — indicates that it involved no binding agreement. During the six fateful months between November 1947 and May 1948, when it was superseded by a 13-member Provisional State Council, the JAE discussed numerous critical issues pertaining to the Yishuv's ability to weather both the war with the Palestinian Arabs following the UN Partition Resolution, and the pan-Arab attack that was bound to come if a Jewish State were to be proclaimed upon the end of the Mandate: the alleged Meir–Abdallah agreement was not one of them; on the contrary, as we shall see shortly, the isolated references to Abdallah revealed deep uncertainty as to the King's future agenda.<sup>12</sup>

Nor did Meir deem her meeting with the King sufficiently important to warrant a report to her JAE colleagues; indeed, the only contemporary account of the conversation, and the one on which the collusion theory is predicated, was prepared by the relatively junior official Danin.<sup>13</sup> Which leads to the conclusion that, for all its significance, the meeting was at once a part of the Zionist effort to weaken Arab opposition to partition and to prevent the outbreak of an Arab–Jewish war, and a link in the chain of intermittent Jewish–Hashemite secret contacts aimed at forging the widest possible common denominator between the two parties. Nothing more, nothing less.

If Palestine was indeed divided on 17 November 1947, which it was not, then the Jewish Agency which was an alleged party to this deal displayed no awareness whatsoever of such a partition. Not only was it never discussed by the Jewish Agency Executive, but the Yishuv's military operations during the 1948–49 War show not a trace of its existence in either their planning or their

12 See, for example, protocols of the meetings of the Zionist Agency Executive of 2, 9, 16, 23, 30 November 1947, 7, 9 December 1947, CZA.

13 Sasson, however, sent the above-noted telegraphic report to Sharett in New York.



execution. On the contrary, as is clearly borne out by Meir's verbal report, the meeting left her and the Zionist leadership deeply suspicious of Abdallah's expansionist ambitions, the precise nature of which was to be gauged at a future meeting shortly after the passing of the UN Resolution. In the event, this meeting did not take place until 11 May 1948, and Jewish suspicions of Abdallah's real agenda remained unabated up to the Arab attack on the newly-established State of Israel, in which Transjordan's Arab Legion participated.

The Jewish Agency's distrust of Abdallah was vividly demonstrated by its vehement opposition to the presence of Transjordan's British-led Arab Legion in Mandatory Palestine, and its tireless efforts to bring about its departure.<sup>14</sup> Thus, for example, at a JAE discussion on security issues on 16 November 1947, a day before Meir's meeting with Abdallah, David Ben-Gurion warned his colleagues that the Arab Legion's presence in Palestine constituted a potential security threat. 'It is true that it is headed by a person who is not our enemy', he said, 'but we must brace ourselves for all trouble.'<sup>15</sup> The Abdallah-Meir meeting did nothing to allay these apprehensions. On 7 December 1947, Ben-Gurion reiterated his apprehensions of the deployment of the Arab Legion in Palestine. 'The Government claims that this is their force', he told his colleagues of a meeting he had just held with the British High Commissioner Sir Alan Cunningham at which he had protested on this point. 'But this is an Arab Legion.'<sup>16</sup> Two days later, Ben-Gurion expressed doubts over Abdallah's political standing. 'All evidence points to the fact that the Mufti has gained control over the Arab community in the country [Mandatory Palestine]', he told a JAE meeting. 'King Abdallah is isolated.'<sup>17</sup> In a cable to Sharett in New York he was equally puzzled about Abdallah's intentions, if slightly more optimistic: "'The King" is still defiant — does not lend a hand to the Mufti or the League; it is not clear to me whether he will stay his course, but there is a chance for this.'<sup>18</sup>

By January 1948 this guarded optimism was all but gone. 'There has been some news recently which may change our view of the king', Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary on 1 January 1948:

14 See, for example, Meir's meeting with Sir Alan Cunningham, 17 December 1947, and her letter to him of the same day; State of Israel, Israel State Archives & World Zionist Organization, CZA, *Teudot Medinot Ve-diplomatit, December 1947–May 1948* (Political and Diplomatic Documents, December 1947–May 1948) (Jerusalem 1979) (hereinafter *Israel Documents*), 83–4; a meeting in London between representatives of the Jewish Agency and the Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech-Jones, on 23 December 1947, *ibid.*, 96–7.

15 CZA, Jewish Agency Executive meeting of 16 November 1947, p. 4 (12697).

16 CZA, Jewish Agency Executive meeting of 7 December 1947, protocol 13, p. 2 (12717), protocol 14, p. 1 (12724).

17 CZA, Protocols of the JAE meeting of 9 January 1948, p. 1 (12740). In his diary Ben-Gurion made the point in similar terms: 'Opposition [to the Mufti among the Palestine Arabs] is feeble . . . . According to Sasson the Mufti has gained control over all the Palestine Arabs. The king is isolated and cannot be trusted.' David Ben-Gurion, *Yoman Ha-milhama* (War Diary) (Tel-Aviv 1983), 9 December 1947, vol. I, 28.

18 *Israel Documents*, *op. cit.*, 60.

It is said that the Arab Legion will operate [in Palestine] and the neighbouring Arab states will send a symbolic force. This news may be correct. According to this news, the Legion will occupy *the whole* of Palestine, though without entering the populated areas, and will force the Jews to negotiate on the [Arab] League's terms: autonomy for the Jewish community under a single [Arab] regime for the whole country; Palestine within the League. Sasson recalled what [the King] said during the [November 1947] meeting in Naharaim: 'A partition that will not disgrace me in front of the Arabs. What do you think about a small republic [within my kingdom]?' This proves that the idea resides in the king's heart and is not of recent origin.<sup>19</sup>

Later that day Ben-Gurion dined with Avraham Rutenberg, in whose house the Meir–Abdallah meeting had taken place, and who now tried to convince Ben-Gurion to persuade the United Nations to introduce the King into the Arab parts of Palestine. 'We have to examine whether this is desirable — because Abdallah means Iraq',<sup>20</sup> was Ben-Gurion's cautious response, reflecting the lack of any agreed deal on the partition of Palestine. Two days later, he received a warning from Eliyahu Epstein (Eilath), the Jewish Agency's delegate in the USA, of Abdallah's intention to employ the Arab Legion in Palestine on behalf of the Arab League. 'In the entire country?', the puzzled Ben-Gurion jotted to himself. 'In the Arab area?'<sup>21</sup>

This scepticism was not confined to the leader of the Zionist movement. Contemporary documents are replete with deep-seated suspicions of Abdallah both by Zionist officialdom and by such moderate leaders as Moshe Sharett, all of whom were totally unaware of the alleged agreement with the King on the division of Mandatory Palestine. Early in January 1948 Sharett opined that if it transpired that Abdallah were capable of gaining control over the Arab parts of Palestine, either directly or by proxy, then the Zionist movement should make serious efforts to support him. Yet he profoundly feared that 'the King will deceive and cheat us'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, two months after Meir's meeting with Abdallah, her direct superior and the head of the department which had maintained secret contacts with the King for well over a decade was unaware of the alleged deal to divide Mandatory Palestine, despite receiving Sasson's report on the conversation three days after the meeting.

Even Sasson, who participated in the Meir–Abdallah meeting, did not behave as if there was any firm agreement with the King. On the contrary, as Palestinian–Jewish fighting intensified, he increasingly lost trust in Abdallah's ability to stay his course. On 9 February 1948 he told Ben-Gurion that the King would most probably have to play along with the Arab League's plan. Sasson still believed in Abdallah's sincerity; however, given his dependence on

19 Ben-Gurion, *Yoman Ha-milhama*, 1 January 1948, vol. I, pp. 100–1 (emphasis in the original).

20 *Ibid.*, 103. As late as 16 April 1948 Ben-Gurion warned a JAE meeting that 'we should not be lured into a sense of relief, there may be various mishaps, for example if the Arab Legion will go into action' (p. 3, 12562).

21 *Ibid.*, 3 January 1948, 107.

22 E. Danin to E. Sasson, 4 January 1948, *Israel Documents*, op. cit., 127. In the same cable, Danin also reported David Horovitz's great fear that Abdallah 'will cheat and fail us'.

the British and his limited power base, he could not be relied upon.<sup>23</sup> A month later Sasson told Ben-Gurion of the need to establish a secret dialogue with the governments of Egypt, Lebanon and Syria in an attempt to reach an understanding that would prevent an all-out war. 'Have you despaired of your King?', Ben-Gurion asked, apparently surprised at Abdallah's glaring absence from this list. 'No, but he is helpless', Sasson answered. 'I despaired of the King since the British had surrendered him', said Reuben Shiloah who attended the meeting.<sup>24</sup>

If anything, one need not look further than Sasson's impassioned appeal on 5 December 1947 to the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Abd al-Rahman Azzam, imploring him to accept the UN Partition Resolution, to realize that no Hashemite-Jewish deal had been struck: had Palestine actually been divided between the King and the Jewish Agency on 17 November, then there would have been no need for such an appeal in the first place.<sup>25</sup> That the Zionist movement sought a mutually-agreed solution with the Arab League, which Abdallah so intensely detested, three weeks after his meeting with Meir, indicated that all options were open.

Indeed, the Zionists' preference for Abdallah over the Mufti as their direct neighbour did not preclude, *ipso facto*, the possibility of an independent Palestinian state that would not be headed by this arch enemy of the Jewish national cause. As far as the Zionist movement was concerned, a Jewish state was to be established in part of Mandatory Palestine; what happened to the rest of the country, as noted by Moshe Sharett, Head of the Jewish Agency's Political Department, 'is not for us but rather for them [the Arabs] to decide, whether it would be merged [with Transjordan] or separated'.<sup>26</sup> Since all Zionist efforts during the 1930s to reach an understanding with the Palestinian leadership came to naught,<sup>27</sup> and since there was no 'Palestinian option' in the late 1940s due to the extreme fragmentation of Palestinian society and the intransigence of its leadership, the Zionists sought to win over whatever Arab partners they could find to the cause of partition. King Abdallah figured prominently in these efforts given his intermittent contacts with the Zionist movement since the early 1930s, but he was by no means the only one. In 1946 the Zionists managed to convince the Egyptian Prime Minister, Ismail Sidqi, to persuade the Arab world of the desirability of partition, with its attendant Palestinian state, though this success was aborted by Sidqi's fall from power in autumn 1946.<sup>28</sup>

23 Ben-Gurion, *Yoman Ha-milhama*, 9 February 1948, vol. I, 224-5.

24 *Ibid.*, 7 March 1948, 284.

25 *Israel Documents*, op. cit., 30.

26 Shertok to Sasson, 18 August 1946, CZA, S25/10015.

27 See, for example, David Ben-Gurion, *My Talks with Arab Leaders* (Jerusalem 1972); Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, Vol. II, op. cit.; Avraham Sela, 'Talks and Contacts between Zionist Leaders and Palestinian-Arab Leaders, 1933-1939', *Ha-mizrah Ha-hadash* (Hebrew), vol. XXII (1972), 401-23 (part I); vol. XXIII (1973), 1-21 (part II).

28 Shlaim, *Collusion*, op. cit., 76, 80-1.

On 15 September 1947, a couple of months before the passing of the UN Partition Resolution, the Jewish Agency made yet another attempt to convince the Arab world of the merits of partition. At a secret meeting with Azzam in London, Aubrey (Abba) Eban and David Horovitz, the Jewish Agency's liaison officers with UNSCOP, tried to convince their interlocutor that 'once agreement had been reached on a practical compromise such as that suggested by UNSCOP, it should not be difficult to convince the Arab world that it had nothing to fear from Jewish development, and that no threat of Jewish expansion would exist'. Azzam remained unimpressed. 'The Arab world is not at all in a compromising mood', he said.

You will achieve nothing with talk of compromise or peace. You may perhaps achieve something by force of your arms. We will try to rout you. I am not sure we will succeed, but we will try. We succeeded in expelling the Crusaders, but lost Spain and Persia, and may lose Palestine. But it is too late for a peaceable solution.<sup>29</sup>

Then came Sasson's above-noted plea to Azzam to accept the idea of partition and to forego recourse to violence. No response ever came from Azzam.

That the Zionist movement was not averse to the possibility of a Palestinian state, as envisaged by the Partition Resolution, was also evidenced by Meir's refusal to condone Abdallah's annexation of the Arab parts of Palestine and her insistence on the temporary nature of Transjordan's occupation 'until the United Nations could establish a government in that part [of Palestine]'. It was further underscored by Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett at the Israeli Cabinet meeting of 16 June 1948. Those were the days of the first armistice after the pan-Arab invasion of Israel the previous month. Fighting was about to resume in three weeks; several political solutions revising the UN Partition Resolution were being contrived, especially by the British government; and Sharett briefed his fellow ministers on the various options confronting Israel. 'At a certain stage we committed ourselves vis-à-vis the international community to a specific arrangement — that of the 29th of November', he said.

We gave our partial and explicit agreement to a specific arrangement, and now we are being asked in England and America: 'Do you wash your hands of it? But you would be renegeing on your commitment!'. It seems to me that it should be clear, which is precisely what I have said at a press conference and advised colleagues to speak in a similar vein: the 29 November Resolution is an arrangement comprising several components, which together constitute one whole. When there was a chance for this 'package deal' to be implemented — we accepted it. And if it is still feasible — we would not renege on our undertaking. But when changes are being introduced, and should certain components of this arrangement be changed — then our hands are free, and there would be a renegotiation of the entire arrangement.

There are four such components [in the 'package deal']: a) A Jewish State in a certain part of Palestine within specific borders; b) A separate Arab State, unattached to Transjordan, let

29 A.S. Eban, 'Note of Conversation with Abd al-Rahman Azzam Pasha, London, 15 September 1947', CZA, S25/9020, quoted in Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, op. cit., 274–6; Aharon Cohen, *Israel and the Arab World* (London 1970), 381, citing Horovitz's account.

alone Syria, but rather a separate Arab–Palestinian State in a specific territory of Palestine and within specific borders; c) An international Jerusalem having an efficient international regime based on certain elements, such as ensuring equality and free access to holy sites etc; d) An economic alliance *unifying* these three elements — the Jewish State, the Arab State, and International Jerusalem — into a single economic entity, thus *preserving* the country's unity and the interrelationship between those parts. This is what we have agreed to.

'I assume, therefore, that it is our [i.e., the Cabinet's] unanimous view that an Arab Palestine is here to stay', Sharett added, reflecting the general reluctance within the Israeli leadership to condone Transjordan's annexation of the Arab areas of Mandatory Palestine.

And there is a more concrete question of Arab Palestine, namely the question of Abdallah. I do not think that on this issue we can determine the course of events in one way or the other, but we should have a prepared position on all possible contingencies.

If Arab Palestine goes to Abdallah, this means unification with Transjordan; and a possible linkage with Iraq. And if this Palestine is a separate state, standing on its own — it is a wholly different issue. In the former case [i.e., unification with Transjordan] — an economic alliance is impossible. This is not to say that no economic alliance would be feasible — but not the economic alliance [envisaged by the UN Partition Resolution] in which we would pay tax [to the Palestinian State], and which would comprise joint customs, an international regime, as well as shared use of the railway system and the port of Haifa. All this will be inconceivable. We undertook to associate ourselves with a specific partner, and we are prepared to negotiate with it. But not with another partner.<sup>30</sup>

Two months later, in a telegram to Bechor Shalom Shitrit, Minister of Police and Minorities in the Israeli government, Sharett was equally opposed to Transjordan's annexation of the Arab areas of Mandatory Palestine:

We should strive for contact and mutual understanding with people and groups among our opponents who carry weight in Arab public life and who are today prepared for co-operation with us, whether on the basis of recognizing the State of Israel within its borders or in order to establish independent rule in the Arab part of Western Palestine.

Without being able to totally remove from the agenda the possibility of the annexation of the Arab part of Western Palestine to Transjordan, we must prefer the establishment of an independent Arab state within Western Palestine. In any event we must endeavour to explore this possibility and to underscore its desirability in our eyes over the annexation proposal.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, in a conversation in early December 1948 with the British ambassador to Transjordan, Sir Alec Kirkbride, Ralph Bunche, the UN Mediator for Palestine, claimed that

... the Jews had practically abandoned their original idea of insisting on the Arab areas of Palestine being formed into an independent state because he, Bunche, had convinced them

30 Israel's State Archives, 'Protocol of the Provisional Government Meeting of 16 June 1948', 12–13, 23–4 (emphasis in the original).

31 Sharett to Shitrit, 8 August 1948, in Yehoshua Freindlich (ed.), *Teudot Mediniot Ve-diplomatit, May–September 1948* (Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, May–September 1948) (Jerusalem 1981), 498.

that it was as likely as not to fall under the influence of Haj Amin el Husseini and to be an endless source of friction and disorder.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, more than a year after Palestine had allegedly been divided by Abdallah and Meir, Israeli leaders still needed to be convinced of the merits of Transjordan's annexation of the Arab parts of Palestine. Even a cursory examination of Ben-Gurion's war diary would easily reveal divergencies within the Israeli leadership over the future status of the Arab areas of Palestine: an independent state or part of Transjordan.<sup>33</sup> It is true that Bunche was somewhat self-complimentary in crediting himself with this change of attitude. On the one hand, the Israelis needed no reminder of the hazards of a Multi-dominated state; and they were painfully aware of the slim prospects of the emergence of a viable moderate Palestinian leadership. On the other hand, Bunche did not succeed in convincing the entire Israeli leadership of the merits of Transjordanian annexation to the extent he believed he did. While Sasson seemed to support Transjordan's annexation of the Arab parts of Palestine (though not due to Bunche's persuasive power),<sup>34</sup> Ben-Gurion remained unconvinced. 'While we may still expect two more [military] operations, our main objective now is peace', he said at a meeting with foreign policy officials and experts on Arab affairs on 18 December 1948.

Aliya requires the end of war, our future necessitates peace and friendship with Arabs. Therefore I support talking to Abdallah, though I doubt to what extent the British will allow him to make peace. But we should clarify [to Abdallah] from the outset that, apart from a truce, there is not yet any agreement between us, and that the discussion is on the basis of *tabula rasa*. We will not be able to agree lightly to the annexation of [the Arab] parts of Palestine to Transjordan, because of 1) Israel's security: an Arab State in Western Palestine is less dangerous than a state that is tied to Transjordan, and tomorrow — probably to Iraq; 2) Why should we vainly antagonize the Russians? 3) Why should we do this [i.e., agree to Transjordan's annexation of Western Palestine] against the [wishes of the] rest of the Arab states? This does not mean that we might not agree under any circumstances — but only in the context of a general arrangement.<sup>35</sup>

In line with this view, Ben-Gurion instructed the Israeli delegation to the truce talks with Transjordan 'to remain non-committal for the time being, while avoiding [outright] objection; to explain the difficulties (England, the Arab states, Russia); to express sympathy; to say that there is not yet a government decision on this issue'.<sup>36</sup>

Just as the Zionist movement would not concede to Abdallah what he considered to be his, so the king was totally impervious to the essence of Zionist

32 Kirkbride to Bernard Burrows, 10 December 1948, FO 371/68603/E16265.

33 Ben-Gurion, *Yoman Ha-milhama*, 29 December 1948, vol. III, 910.

34 *Ibid.*, 30 December 1948, 913.

35 *Ibid.*, 18 December 1948, 885 (emphasis added).

36 *Ibid.*, 4 January 1949, 927.

aspirations: national self-determination. As a product of the Ottoman imperial system, where religion constituted the linchpin of the socio-political order of things, Abdallah had no real grasp of Jewish nationalism, or for that matter of the phenomenon of nationalism *per se*. True, he had been the moving spirit behind his father's decision to launch the so-called 'Great Arab Revolt' in 1916; however, the revolt had far less to do with the desire to unshackle the 'Arab Nation' from the chains of Ottoman captivity than with the ambition to substitute a Hashemite empire, extending well beyond the predominantly Arabic-speaking territories, for that of the Ottomans.<sup>37</sup> It was only after he had been elbowed out by his younger brother, Faisal, from what he considered to be his prospective kingdom, i.e. Iraq, that Abdallah turned his sights to Transjordan as a springboard for an alternative empire embracing Syria, Palestine and possibly Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Hence, when in March 1921 the offer was put to him by the British Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, that Transjordan be constituted as an Arab province of Palestine, under an Arab governor amenable to him and subordinate to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Abdallah demurred. If a certain territory had to be incorporated into another as a province, then it should be Palestine into Transjordan, under his headship, and not the other way round:

If His Majesty's Government could agree that there should be an Arab Emir over Palestine and Trans-Jordania in the same relation with the High Commissioner for Palestine as that of the Emir Feisal with the High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, he was convinced that the present difficulties between Arabs and Jews would be most easily overcome.

Churchill's explanation that there was a fundamental difference between Mesopotamia, which had been provisionally recognized as an independent state, and Palestine, which had been entrusted to the administration of a mandatary, failed to impress Abdallah. 'His Majesty's Government proposed to have his brother Feisal in Mesopotamia with a High Commissioner or a mandate, or whatever term they might like to employ. He felt strongly that a similar régime should be adopted for Palestine and Trans-Jordania.'<sup>38</sup>

This was an ambition which Abdallah was to nurture until the late 1940s, when it was dealt a mortal blow by the establishment of the State of Israel and its ability to withstand the pan-Arab attack of May 1948, and he never tired of reiterating it to successive British and Zionist interlocutors. Due to both his Ottoman education and his own imperial ambitions, he viewed Jews, like other non-Muslim minorities, as members of a tolerated religious community (*millet*), deserving protection and autonomy in the practice of their religious affairs — but not a state of their own; given his perception of Jews as an influential, affluent and technologically advanced community, he was keen to

37 See Efraim and Inari Karsh, 'Myth in the Desert, or Not the Great Arab Revolt', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 (April 1997), 267–312.

38 'First Conversation on Trans-Jordania, Held at Government House, Jerusalem, March 28, 1921', FO 371/6343, fols. 99–101.

incorporate them into his kingdom — *as subjects*. As the Transjordanian Prime Minister, Samir al-Rifai, told Brigadier I.N. Clayton of the British Middle East Office (BMEO) in Cairo on 11 December 1947: ‘The enlarged Transjordan State with the support of Jewish economy would become the most influential State in the Arab Middle East’.<sup>39</sup>

It is in this light that Abdallah’s acquiescence in the idea of partition, first raised as a concrete political option by the 1937 Royal Peel Commission, should be seen: not acceptance of the partition of Mandatory Palestine into independent Jewish and Palestinian states but rather the incorporation of these two communities into his kingdom. This is what he repeatedly communicated to the Zionist movement in the 1930s — before, during and after the Peel Commission,<sup>40</sup> this is what he told the follow-up Woodhead Commission of Inquiry (1938),<sup>41</sup> and this is what he told Jewish leaders well after the second world war,<sup>42</sup> including Golda Meir at their meeting on 17 November 1947.

As shown earlier, it was only upon realizing that this solution was totally unacceptable to Meir that Abdallah opted for the lesser choice of incorporating the Arab areas of Mandatory Palestine into his kingdom. But even then he did not view this option as final, but rather as a tactical withdrawal on the road to his strategic goal: in early December 1947, shortly after the passing of the UN Partition Resolution and a fortnight after his secret meeting with Meir, Abdallah sought to persuade the Arab League to finance Transjordan’s occupation of Palestine which he was prepared to undertake.<sup>43</sup> As his Arab partners were no warmer to the idea than his Jewish interlocutors, Abdallah renewed his efforts to persuade the Jewish Agency to cede him some of the territory awarded to them by the UN or even to forego the idea of an independent state altogether and to become an autonomous province in his kingdom.

The last such attempt was made during Abdallah’s second meeting with Golda Meir on 11 May 1948, a mere three days before the establishment of the State of Israel and its subsequent invasion by the Arab states. Through his personal envoy, Muhammad Zubeiti, Abdallah had already communicated to his Jewish interlocutors his envisaged solution to the Palestine question: ‘The country would remain undivided, with autonomy for the areas in which the Jews constituted the majority, such as Tel-Aviv. This arrangement would last

39 Clayton to Foreign Office, 12 December 1947, telegram 67, FO 371/62226/E11928.

40 See, for example, B. Joseph, ‘Note of Talk with Salim Ayoub, 20 May 1936’ and ‘Note of Talk with “S.A.”, M. al-Unsi and “Fr. N.”, 5 June 1936, CZA, S25\10093; Lourie to Shertok (Sharett), 25 May 1936, S25/6325; Shertok to Abdallah, 30 April 1936 and Abdallah to Shertok, 6 May 1936, S25/3243; Yehoshua Porath, *Mi-mhumot li-mrida: Ha-tnu’a Ha-aravit-Ha-Palestinit 1929–1939* (From Riots to Rebellion: The Palestinian–Arab National Movement 1929–1939) (Tel-Aviv 1978), 97–8.

41 See, for example, ‘Text of the Proposal for the Solution of the Palestine Problem Sent to the British Government’ (i.e., to the Woodhead Commission, May 1938), in King Abdallah of Jordan, *My Memoirs Completed: ‘al-Takmilah’* (London 1951), 89–90.

42 See, for example, Sasson’s reports on his two meetings in August 1946 with Abdallah: CZA, S25/9036; idem, *Ba-derekh el Ha-shalom: Igrot Ve-sihot* (On The Road to Peace: Letters and Conversations) (Tel-Aviv 1978), 367–72.

43 Haza al-Majali, *Mudhakkirati* (My Memoirs) (Beirut 1960), 63.



one year, after which the country would be incorporated into Transjordan.' Meir's categorical rejection of the idea at their meeting on 11 May 1948 failed to discourage Abdallah. He had always been for peace, he argued, but now the only way to avoid war was to accept his proposal. And in any event, why were the Jews in such a hurry to proclaim their own state? Even as his guests were taking their leave, Abdallah reiterated his request that they consider his offer,

... and if the reply were affirmative, it had to be given before 15 May. He would invite his Palestinian backers and the moderate Arabs, and asked us [i.e., the Jews] to send moderate representatives too — and then the matter could be settled. He also said: 'There is no need to fear that the Government will include extremist Arabs, Jew-haters, but only moderate Arabs'.<sup>44</sup>

Meir dismissed the idea out of hand.

The preceding discussion proves that the 'collusion theory' does not hold water for the simple reason that Abdallah and the Zionist movement were talking at cross purposes: the former wished to see the Jews as prospective subjects of his expanded kingdom and kept on pressing the idea up to the proclamation of the State of Israel; the latter strove to establish their own independent state, free of foreign control and subjugation. These two positions were mutually exclusive, and, in their two decades of intermittent contacts, Abdallah and the Jewish Agency never came even close to transcending this divide.

Whenever the Jewish interlocutors pointed to the glaring contradiction between Abdallah's apparent support for the partition of Palestine and his advocacy of a unified Transjordanian–Palestinian kingdom, or 'federation', under his headship, the King would either indulge in vague generalities (e.g., at his meeting on 12 August 1946 with Sasson) or resort to a 'salami tactic' (e.g., his conversation with Meir in November 1947) of trying to harness Jewish support to certain parts of his imperial vision, while leaving its ultimate implementation to a later date.

However, as conclusively shown both by the account of the latter meeting by all its Jewish participants (Meir, Danin and Sasson), and by Jewish political and military activities in the wake of the meeting, even Abdallah's interim goal of annexing the Arab parts of Palestine to his kingdom was unacceptable to the Zionist leadership. It was prepared to acquiesce in his capture of these areas — but only as a temporary law-enforcement measure to prevent bloodshed and facilitate the establishment of a legitimate Palestinian government in accordance with the UN Partition Resolution. It was not, however, prepared to condone the annexation of these territories to Transjordan for several interconnected reasons: a) lingering doubts whether Abdallah would be amenable to most Palestinians; b) fears of Abdallah's imperial ambitions and mistrust of

44 Meir's verbal report to the Provisional State Council on 12 May 1948.

his promises; c) the belief that a Palestinian state in part of western Palestine was far less dangerous as a neighbour than an expanded Transjordanian kingdom.

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