

Intelligence and Diplomacy in the Crossroad to Statehood: The Political Department of the Jewish Agency for Palestine

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The few years between the end of World War II and the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel were critical for the Jewish community of Palestine. It required a combined political and intelligence activity while strengthening the defense and security capabilities of the Yishuv. As an operational wing of the Zionist Executive that was recognized by the British authorities, the Jewish Agency's objectives were to strengthen the connections between the Yishuv and the world Jewry, to buttress its economic development, to inspire Jewish immigration, to strengthen the legitimacy of Jewish settlement among Arab leaders in Palestine and the neighboring countries, and to gather security related information.

On September 10, 1929, the "Joint Bureau" was established to coordinate the various approaches toward the Arab issue. In December, an intelligence apparatus was established under the direction of Colonel Frederick Kisch (a former British army officer without a recognizable political affiliation) and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi.

Following Kisch's retirement in 1931 and the appointment of Haim Arlosorov as head of the Bureau, the Agency came under the control of MAPAI, the Socialist-Democrat party led by David Ben Gurion, who loomed above Arlosorov while Moshe Sharett oversaw the activities of the Agency's Political Department. Sharett, a man of letters fluent in several languages, including Arabic, was recruited by Arlosorov as secretary of the political department and, after Arlosorov's assassination in 1933, headed the department until the establishment of the State of Israel.



Colonel Frederick Herman Kisch, Head of the intelligence apparatus, of the "Joint Bureau" (Wikipedia)

The Arab Issues 1929-1945

The stated goal of the Political Department was to foster friendly relations with the Arab population. However, the violence against the Yishuv (in 1921 and 1929) made it clear that there was a dire need for a defense apparatus with intelligence-gathering capabilities. This mechanism, subordinate to Kisch and Ben-Zvi, monitored "open sources," such as the Arab press in Palestine and beyond. Following the riots of 1929, a "news service" was established. It was later known as the Shai (Hebrew acronym for Information Service). It had developed into a HUMINT office handling human assets. To map its recruitment targets, a detailed card index was prepared, which the end of the 1930s, consisted of some 800 names of Arabs and Muslims in Palestine and neighboring countries. In addition, ongoing monitoring was conducted to expose belligerent intentions and preparations. For this purpose, operatives tapped the phones of Arab leaders, mainly the Arab Executive Committee and the Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini. Arlosorov, who replaced Kisch, initially believed that an agreement could be reached with the Arab national movement; he held meetings with leaders such as Gha'eb Nashashibi, who was the mayor of Jerusalem, and Awni Abd al-Hadi, who was a leader in the Al-Istiqlal party.

The Political Department produced intelligence materials regarding the Mufti's preparations for an Islamic Conference in Jerusalem and his overall hostility to Zionism and the British. To meet this challenge, the Arab Bureau of the Political Department published brochures in Arabic introducing the Zionist movement and its goals. However, Arlosorov's efforts vis-à-vis the British and foreign consuls to generate opposition to the conference were unsuccessful. In December 1931, a conference was convened with the participation of 130 representatives from the Muslim world, at which the Mufti presented the Zionist settlement as a threat to the holy sites of Islam.

Like his predecessors, Sharett believed in dialogue with the Arabs and expanded his activities beyond Palestine. In addition to Aharon Haim Cohen (who operated disguised as an Arab), in 1943, Sharett recruited Reuven Zaslani (Shiloah) and Eliyahu Epstein (Eilat), who were students at the American University of Beirut and reported to Jerusalem. In 1934, the Arabic-language expert Eliyahu Sasson was recruited to lead intelligence and political issues among the Arabs. Following the Department's PIR, journalist Nahum Wilensky reported from Cairo on Egypt and even set up a news bureau, "The Eastern Agency," with materials provided by Jerusalem. Still, the recruitment and work methods were not orderly, and the number of employees was not made public.



**Eliyahu Sasson,
Head of the Arab Division,
at the Political Department
of the Jewish Agency,
(Wikipedia)**

Intelligence relations with the British

In addition to interviews with Jewish residents and officials in Palestine, such as police officers and civil servants in the Mandate government, the ties with British security agencies were strengthened with police, army, intelligence officers, and the like. In light of the British need for good maps, the Political Department provided them with Arabic-speaking (Jewish) guides. It also passed intelligence materials mainly regarding attack plans and translations of documents captured from Arab militant groups (Known as "gangs").

The network of Arab sources that provided regular information was also expanded, and the Arab Bureau, headed by Abraham Haim Cohen, held three daily gathering & analysis sessions. They channeled insights garnered this way to Reuven Shiloah, who by then became a liaison with British Intelligence. He provided the British with synthesized materials, including some based on clandestine listening camouflaged as emanating from less sensitive sources.

All the while and in the midst of the Arab Revolt, the Political Department expanded its activities vis-à-vis the neighboring countries: in June 1936, Chaim Weizmann met in London with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Said, who aspired to mediate between the Palestinians and the Yishuv, and in July 1936, the Jewish Agency's delegation to Damascus, headed by Eilat, Dov Hoz and David Hacoheh, met with the Syrian National Bloc (headed by Christian-Syrian politician Anton Sa'ada) with whom Eilat had established contact while still in Beirut. However, the Arab side insisted on stopping aliyah (Jewish immigration to Palestine). The agency could not meet this pre-condition, and the talks failed. Other contacts also yielded no results.

In conclusion, throughout the 1930s, tactical intelligence gathering within British-ruled Palestine, especially by the Shai, which detected offensive intentions against the Jewish population. When the Arab Revolt broke out, the Political Department strengthened communication lines with Jewish settlements and provided legal assistance to Jewish victims of Arab attacks. The Shai were also asked to identify moderate political trends or rivals to the Mufti's extremist leadership, in order to nurture them. The Agency continued to contact Arab leaders, mainly in Lebanon and Transjordan, as well as in Egypt, Syria, and even Iraq. The Arab Revolt against the British and resumed violence against Jews strengthened the cooperation with the British, especially in areas better acquainted to the Jews, and with the encouragement of the political department. At the same time, the HUMINT and SIGINT capabilities for covering British communication were also improved.

The Second World War 1939-1945

Even before the war, Colonel Kisch began to promote ties with the British forces, and, with the help of Jewish volunteers, worked to host British troops and provide them with tours, mainly to Christian sites. During the war, the Jewish civilian population mobilized to support the British forces in Palestine. In the larger cities, social events were held with British soldiers,

which contributed to the creation of social and intelligence connections, and fundraisers were held for the welfare of the soldiers. This cooperation, volunteering for the British Army, and the Yishuv's participation in combat and intelligence, which Prof. Yoav Gelber calls the "Partnership of equals," led to evolving Jewish expertise not only in combat but also in an organized administrative, military framework and in the professionalization of intelligence and the basis for a modern intelligence community that operated both vis-à-vis the Arab population in Palestine and abroad. Although the Jews who were posted in intelligence units occupied junior positions, they were nevertheless exposed to the professional methods of an organized army in gathering, compartmentalizing, and extracting intelligence for the needs of their skippers.

During these years, the regular intelligence network expanded in both Syria and Lebanon, which in July 1941 were occupied by Britain, from the French Vichy regime. Anton Sa'ada's "National Bloc" was closely monitored in Syria and Lebanon. The Bloc's ideas later fed nationalist leaders such as Michel Aflak, one of the founders of the Ba'ath party. The Agency also maintained constant ties with Emir Abdullah in Transjordan. In Egypt, the agency kept contact with Palestinian exiles, and with the establishment of the British-backed Arab League based in Cairo, Egypt became an important pan-Arab gathering arena.

During the war, international political activity intensified with a growing understanding of the need for international public opinion, especially among the world Jewry, on the issue of restrictions on immigration. In 1943, the Jewish Agency opened its office in Washington, D.C., headed by Nahum Goldman. Most of the activity of the Political Department began to move from London to the United States.

The Post-war Years

With the surrender of Germany in May 1945, and the revealing of the extent and horrors of the Holocaust in Europe, the Zionist leadership hoped that the British government would change its policy towards immigration of displaced Holocaust survivors to Palestine. The Political Department continued to work to gain legitimacy for the idea of a national home among Arab elements in neighboring countries, especially Emir Abdullah of Trans-Jordan and the Maronite leadership in Lebanon, as well as in Western capitals.

Between 1947 and 1948, the structure of the Political Department was already established as a body with clear responsibilities and relegation. The head of the Department Moshe Sharett, reported directly to Ben-Gurion. Under him, the acting director, Golda Meyerson, oversaw the functions of the attorney general, political adviser, spokesperson, and administrative secretary, as well as professional divisions of security and the Arab wing, headed by Eliyahu Sasson.

The Political Department worked in the United States, including among non-Zionist organizations, to rally support in the administration and Congress in order to solve the problem of displaced persons in Europe, and to promote the recognition that the establishment of a Jewish state provides a humanitarian solution for their rehabilitation. Throughout this period, Reuven Shiloah was shuttling between the United States, Britain, and Cairo. Subsequently, Eliyahu Eilat (who was also the agency's envoy in Paris) as well as Shiloah, and Gershon Agron represented the Political Department as observers at the Constituent Assembly of the United Nations in San Francisco (25.4-26.6.1945).



Eliyahu Eilat,
Director of Neighboring Countries
department, the Jewish Agency

In January 1947, in preparation for the partition debate, Sharett held a conference of the Zionist Executive in London, where he called for expanding political activity among Jewish communities around the world. At the initiative of Walter Eitan, contacts were held in Jerusalem and Cairo with the diplomats of the UN member states, ahead of the vote in the UN General Assembly. Representatives of the Political Department abroad, such as Uriel Heyd) Later prof. Uriel Hed), operated from London vis-à-vis the Scandinavian countries, Holland and Belgium. The Paris-based representative, Maurice Fischer, operated vis-à-vis Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia. In Washington, Eilat was also entrusted with contacting Latin America. Regional departments were established at the headquarters in Jerusalem to provide adequate materials to representatives abroad.

Activities in the U.S.



Reuven Shiloah

In early 1945, Reuven Shiloah arrived in Washington, where he met with officials of the Near East Bureau at the State and War Departments, as well as with the OSS (Office of Strategic Service – the nascent CIA). It was agreed that the Political Department of the Jewish Agency would provide intelligence mainly on Nazi war crimes and expose Nazi cells still operating under false identities. The information was extracted from reports of the agency's emissaries in Germany and Austria and from testimonies of Holocaust survivors who arrived in Palestine. The Americans were provided with analyses on the Middle East by experts in the Political Department, like Eliyahu Sasson, David Horowitz, Ezra Danin, and others. Shiloah was also involved in advocating with military circles in Washington and with opinion makers, in order to facilitate the ongoing Yishuv's procurement efforts.

Eliyahu Eilat, who arrived in Washington in 1946, learned about the pressures on President Truman by pro-Arab elements in the administration, mainly in the State Department and oil companies. Truman, who had previously shown sympathy for Zionism and the issue of displaced Jews, was slow to make Palestine-related decisions. The activation of Jewish (not just Zionist) organizations, vis-à-vis the administration and Congress, led Truman in October 1946 to demand the U.K. increase the immigration quotas. This appeal sparked protests in the Arab world, and King Saud published a strongly worded letter to President Truman, calling on the United States to oppose "Zionist aggression" on the grounds that the Jews aspire to spread across Arab countries, including towards the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. President Truman replied (over the head of the State Department) that since World War I, the United States has supported the idea of self-determination of nations, and, therefore, supports the establishment of a national home in Palestine to absorb the displaced persons.

The secret intelligence gathered in Washington included political assessments of the situation in Palestine and the positions of the various countries regarding the chances of realizing partition. The information was derived from diplomatic correspondence between Washington and Arab capitals, and internal information from the discussions of the U.S. delegation to the UN and with Arab counterparts, as well as from listening to Arab diplomats.

Jordan – Continuous links with Emir Abdullah

The Political Department attributed great importance to the continuation of contacts with Emir Abdullah, which had begun in a well-publicized meeting between Weizmann and the Emir as early as 1922. In 1934, the Agency reached an agreement with the Emir regarding negotiations with Britain. The contacts took place throughout the period and even included financial support to the Emir. In 1946-1947, the agency worked to persuade Abdullah to accept the partition decision and then to refrain from taking military action against the Yishuv. In two meetings Sasson held with Abdullah in August 1946, he reached a vague understanding that the Emir would agree to accept the partition plan, in return for his annexation of the Arab districts west of the Jordan River; additional sums of money were to be involved. In a crucial meeting in November 1947, Golda Meyerson met, at Ben-Gurion's request and accompanied by Sasson and Shiloah, with King Abdullah, who expressed a sort of agreement to partition, but one that would "not embarrass him in the eyes of the Arab world." Thus, the delegation thought Abdulla would not participate in an all-out Arab offensive. On May 12, Golda met again with the Emir, accompanied by Ezra Danin, but at this meeting, it was already clear that Jordan would participate in the war. At the same time, throughout the entire period, extensive intelligence contacts were maintained with Jordan. Operatives met with personalities in the royal court, and Jordanian statesmen, who provided continuing information about the developments in the Arab world, especially in Syria and Saudi Arabia, including the attempts to establish a Hashemite kingdom in Greater Syria.

Intelligence Relations in Egypt

During the war, the Political Department, including its intelligence branch, became increasingly interested in Egypt, the seat of British regional headquarters, including the British intelligence services. Information was collected on the internal and political situation in Egypt. In addition to the presence of Yishuv volunteers for the British army, emissaries of the Zionist movements were also present in Egypt. From 1943, the Jewish Agency was represented continually by Yaakov Tchernovitz (Tzur).

In order to obtain a reliable picture of the Egyptian political system, the Department was assisted by British-Jewish journalist Jon Kimche, who met in early 1946 with Ali Maher and Mahmoud Nukrashi (prime ministers at various times) as well as with Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna. In March 1945, Eliyahu Sasson recruited Yolande Gabay-Harmer, a Jewish woman connected with the Egyptian elite. "Nicole" (as she was called) operated under the cover of a representative of a foreign news agency and began to build a network of contacts and sources, including with courtiers at the royal palace, the Prime Minister's Office, and Arab League Secretary General (Abdel Rahman) Azzam Pasha. As a journalist, she also met with Egyptian and Arab politicians who visited Egypt for Arab League discussions. From the end of November 1947, and following the departure of the Agency's (now Israeli) envoys, Yolande remained solely responsible for the intelligence activities of the Political Department in Egypt. She was assisted by Egyptian Jewish lawyer Rudolf Pilpul. She reported on the threat of arrest of members of the Zionist youth movements and was even arrested herself in May 1948 (for a short time) with other Zionist activists. Upon her release, she left to Paris and later held positions in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Political Department, under the continuous leadership of Moshe Sharett, was not the only division active at the intersection of policy and intelligence, until a better coordination procedure was established. There were other bodies, such as the Histadrut (Workers' Union), led by Abba Hushi in Haifa, the Revisionists, and the Shai. There were also individuals, who sometimes worked with the department, which, as stated, did not have a defined workforce, or orderly work and reporting procedures. Although the agency's legal adviser, Bernard Joseph (Dov Yosef), formulated procedures for coordinating and defining authority, these were implemented only with the expansion of the department in the 1940s. There was also no shortage of clashes and conflicts, reflecting political differences or ego rivalries. On the Left, there was a disagreement with the liberal Brit Shalom in the 1920s. On the Right, the Irgun and Lehi activities severely impaired the cooperation of the political department with the British Mandate authorities. A serious source of contention was related to the behavior toward the



Moshe Sharett (Wikipedia)

British, including the resistance movement that led to a harsh British response, during which Moshe Sharett was also arrested.

Throughout this period, an ongoing effort was made to contact and persuade the Arab leadership in Palestine and neighboring countries to accord recognition and legitimacy to the Jewish home. However, these attempts bore no fruits. Even after the "Black Sabbath" (29 June 1946), Moshe Sharett continued, from his detention in Latrun, to nurture Arab circles in Palestine and the region in order to examine the possibility of direct negotiations toward partition. He was briefed by department secretary Ze'ev Sherf, who disseminated Sharett's instructions to the Department. Despite the conflicts, it was an important activity for the nascent state, and the interaction between political and intelligence activity, especially after the war, was critical. The Political Department strived to strengthen ties with world Jewry, especially in the United States, to obtain political support and financial aid, and to enable continued procurement and arms in preparation for the looming War of Independence.

Throughout this entire period, David Ben-Gurion's leadership stands out, including top leadership in the field of intelligence. He posted Reuven Shiloah next to him in his "Red House" Haganah Headquarters' in Tel Aviv. Thus, at the most critical time leading up to the establishment of the state. Ben-Gurion's proximity to his intelligence apparatus helped seize a historic opportunity after the Holocaust and establish a Jewish state.