

**Pre-State Israel.****The Evolution of Jewish Political and Institutional System in Yishuv. From  
Community to State: 1897-1949****Andreana Gabriela Dumitrescu<sup>1</sup>**

**Key-words:** Zionism, Mandate, Legislation, Yishuv, Israel, Democracy, Congress, Great Britain, Community, State, Institutions, Independence, Elections, Knesset, Constitution.

**Abstract:**

*The emergence of World Zionist Organization at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the increasing sympathy of world Jewry for political Zionism have strengthened the sense of the need to obtain a Jewish national home in Palestine. In a positive way, the end of the First World War and the decision of the League of Nations to place Palestine under British mandate favored regional development, especially of the Jewish community living there. Under the foreign administration, the Jewish people borrowed the proper aspects of the British model of parliamentary democracy and adapted them to the needs of the Yishuv, at a time when Jewish ideal enjoyed support and admiration, due in particular to Zionist diplomacy in Western Europe and the United States. Trying to maintain a good relationship with the British administration in order to fulfill its interests, the Jewish community in Palestine has thrived in various areas such as: political-institutional*

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*organization, economy, defence and demography, rapidly reaching a high level of development. These factors contributed tremendously to the birth of a modern democratic Jewish state. The reality of the simultaneous operation in Palestine of the three sets of institutions, those of the Yishuv, those of the Zionist Organization and those of the British administration represented a unique and remarkable fact. After Israel gained independence, the attempt to provide continuity to pre-state institutions represented a reality that was reflected in the flawless formula of the permanent institutions, in order to meet the needs of the new state in a situation of internal and international crisis.*

Among the most important challenges the Jewish people had to cope with in the period before 1948, we can enumerate the pogroms practiced in the Russian Empire, the British rule in Palestine according to the Mandate System<sup>1</sup> imposed by the League of Nations, the efforts of the Zionist Organization, the frictions with the Palestinians, the terror and extermination policy practiced by the Nazis, the promise of the return to Palestine of the Jewish refugees and the problem of the illegal immigration, the change of the British attitude to the Jews' immigration to Palestine, the period of transition to statehood between 1945-1948, the Independence War and the involvement of the United Nations to find a regional solution, which unintentionally leads to worsening of the Arab-Israeli relations.

Previously, the inventor of the *Judeenstaat*<sup>2</sup> concept, Theodor Herzl, came for the first time with the idea of establishing a global Jewish agency, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This idea was supported by a Jewish students organization in Vienna, called Kandimah. In Herzl's vision, the purpose of the agency was to be the investigation of the preliminary political-economics aspects and the establishment of a Jewish company headquartered in London, which was supposed to negotiate with the Ottomans in order to start the Jewish immigration

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<sup>2</sup>Ami Isseroff, *The Jewish State – 1896 Theodor Herzl's Program for Zionism*, Zionism and Israel Information Center, [http://www.zionism-israel.com/js/Jewish\\_State.html](http://www.zionism-israel.com/js/Jewish_State.html).

to Palestine. Then, the leader of the *Hovevei Zion* movement („Zion Lovers”, a group of organizations that came into being as an answer to the pogroms in the Russian Empire), Leon Pinsker, came with the proposal to establish a cultural centre in Palestine, that was to revive the Jewish people spiritually. The period of transition from *Yishuv* to the appearance of Israel representen a temporal segment in which traditional values were combined with the necessities imposed by the fight to obtain independence. The idea of security played a dominant part and generated a high degree of tension and social mobilization.

Thus, according to the Herzlian vision, in August 1897, in the context of the organization of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, a program was adopted by which it was decided to establish the World Zionist Organization. On the basis of this document, item II specifies the decision of *„organization and unification of the entire Jewry, by means of both local and international adequate institutions, according to the legislation of each state,”*<sup>3</sup> which absorbed all the *Hovevei Zion* societies, proposing the establishment of a people’s bank, which was to support the financial needs of the Zionist project. In this respect, as the putting the foundations of an economy was fundamental for the future state, in 1899, according to the decision of the Second Zionist Congress, the Jewish Colonial Trust was founded, as well as the first Zionist bank and in 1901 the Jewish National Fund appeared; they were supposed to deal both with the colonization in Palestine and with the facilitation of land purchase and credit in view of the establishment of industrial and agricultural settlements. At that moment, the Zionist Organization was led by Herzl and the the secretary general, a man of letters and journalist, Nahum Sokolov.

The organization was made up of persons who had to be aged at least 18 and who paid a membership tax. It was authorized to establish autonomous

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<sup>3</sup> *Zionist Congress: First Zionist Congress & Basel Program (August 1897)*, Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/first-zionist-congress-and-basel-program-1897>.

national societies in all the states where there were important Jewish communities, such as the English Jewish Federation, and if they formed together a group of minimum 400 members, they could elect a delegate in the Congress. Thus, the Congress became the core of the organization<sup>4</sup>, being appointed its main working instrument; the Congress elected unanimously Theodor Herzl as President. The first common ethnic committee was established in 1907 and was denominated the Community Council (*Va'ad Haeda*), being constituted on religious criteria, of local committees of ashkenazims and sephards, with the main purpose to fulfill the Zion aspirations to establish an organism including all the Jews, not only the Zionism followers.<sup>5</sup>

Then, at the beginning of the XX century and immediately before World War I, the Labor Zionism influenced the economy of the Jewish communities in Palestine that was underdeveloped at that time, by establishing cooperative organizations, like *Hamashibir*, the forerunner of Histradut, which reunited all the workers in commercial activities. In the context of World War I and of the British interests in the Middle East, Palestine was occupied by the British Army, thus ending the Ottoman domination of four centuries, while the Jews were subjected to the Ottoman Law (*Majelle*), made up of a civil code based on social, religious and Sultanic laws and regulations, but also on a series of Western bills, mainly French, adopted in order to facilitate the commerce with Europe.

Towards the end of the year, on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1917, the *Balfour Declaration* was issued, by which the British Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Arthur Balfour, confirmed for Walter Rotchild, a well known Zionist banker, the support for his initiative to establish a Jewish national home, recognizing the Zionist rights and guaranteeing the rights of all the residents in Palestine: "*it being clearly understood*

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<sup>4</sup> Horace Meyer Kellen, *Zionism and World Politics. A Study in History and Social Psychology*, New York, Doubleday Page & Company, 1921, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Anat Kidron, *Jewish Immigration and the Establishment of the National Hebrew Community in the 'Mixed City' of Haifa*, in "Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem", no. 21, 2010.

*that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”<sup>6</sup>*

The situation from Palestine was totally different from the one in the traditional British colonies; the Zionist project enjoyed support and various advantages, the circumstances placing the British at the opposite pole from the Ottoman rule. At the same time, Great Britain was to assure an efficient rule of Palestine by means of some colonial and foreign affairs offices.<sup>7</sup>

At the Peace Conference of Paris (1919-1920) that marked the end of the war, it was agreed that Great Britain and France were to control the former territories that used to belong to the Ottoman Empire, the League of Nations entrusted at the Conference of San Remo the administration of Palestine to Great Britain; in future, mandate power was to offer favorable conditions for the establishment of a Jewish state. Thus, from 1917 until 1920, the British exerted a regime of military occupation in Palestine, under the leadership of General Edmund Allenby. The terms of the Balfour understanding had to be found in the *League of Nations Mandate*, issued on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1922; on its basis Great Britain was to govern Palestine besides other territories that used to belong to the Ottoman Empire.

The manner in which the British had to rule Palestine was established in the text of the document, in items I-III: *“The Mandatory shall have full powers of legislation and of administration, save as they may be limited by the terms of this mandate. The Mandatory shall be responsible for placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home, as laid down in the preamble, and the development of*

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<sup>6</sup>Balfour Declaration: *Text of the Declaration (November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917)*, Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/text-of-the-balfour-declaration>.

<sup>7</sup> Donna Robinson Divine, *Exiled in the Homeland. Zionism and The Return to Mandatory Palestine*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2009, p. 57.

*self-governing institutions, and also for safeguarding the civil and religious rights of all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of race and religion. The Mandatory shall, so far as circumstances permit, encourage local autonomy.”*<sup>8</sup>

Practically, this Mandate System represented a compromise between annexation, based on military conquest and guarantee of the independence of the peoples that had just got out of the incidence of the rule of the Ottoman Empire,<sup>9</sup> being considered by the British authority „A” type mandates, that is communities that were developed enough to reach a degree of self-government at a certain time. The leadership of Palestine under the Mandate is assured by a High Commissioner, who was authorized to exercise his power in the law and administrative fields, to deal with the promulgation of ordinances regarding the domestic order, peace and good government, also having the amnesty power. The latter’s prerogatives could not be limited by any repressive organ in Palestine, be it made up of Jews or of the Arab population. He was assisted by an Advisory Council appointed by himself,<sup>10</sup> made up of administrative officials. However, the local populations made up of Arabs and Jews are granted the right to deal with their own domestic business: *“An independent judiciary under a chief justice was empowered to protect the rights of natives and foreigners alike, and to assure solicitude for the traditions and mores of the various religious communities.”*<sup>11</sup>

The first to occupy this position was no other person but a Jew from the British Cabinet, Sir Herbert Samuel, who also had supported from the shadow the issuance of the *Balfour Declaration*, after he had previously proposed in 1915

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<sup>8</sup>League of Nations, *Communiqué au Conseil et aux Membres de la Société, Mandat pour la Palestine*, Geneva, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1922, UNISPAL, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/2FCA2C68106F11AB05256BCF007BF3CB>.

<sup>9</sup> Naomi Shephard, *Ploughing Sand. British Rule in Palestine 1917-1948*, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2000, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> *High Commissioner for Palestine*, Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/high-commissioner-for-palestine>.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Sachar, *The British Mandate in Palestine. The emergence, structure, and function of the mandatory government from 1923-1948*, My Jewish Learning, in <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-british-mandate-in-palestine/>.

the placement of Palestine under British protectorate. Though he was not a member of the Zionist Organization, he sympathized with the cause of the Jews. Shortly after the Conference of San Remo of April 1920, Samuel began to exert the position of High Commissioner starting with July, focusing on laying the bases of the British administration in Palestine, until 1925. Thus, a part of *Sharia* and *Majelle* laws were replaced or amended to become modern legislation, according to the British pattern, adapted for a region which had to progress in order to become a state.

In this context, in September 1920, Samuel managed to develop the structure of the Advisory Council, that played the part of a legislative body, made up of ten British officers and ten Palestinian ones, seven of which were Arabs. This Council which functioned only for two years, having the role to approve the new legislation, most of which regarded the strengthening of the Zionist policies.<sup>10</sup> Serving the Jewish interests, this institution was despised by the Arabs, who did not even acknowledge its existence.

Then, on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1922, the Mandate Power issued a so-called constitution that took the shape of a document entitled *Order-in-Council*, a primary legislation issued on behalf of King George V, by which the military governing of Palestine was abolished and replaced by a system of civil administration, authorizing the High Commissioner, together with an Executive Council to exert the executive authority and to establish dispositions so that a Legislative Council shall be elected to operate reporting to the High Commissioner, which became its President, establishing a system of civil and religious courts and validating the existing British legislation.<sup>12</sup> The Order was officially abrogated in Great Britain at the end of the mandate, in May 1948, but parts of it remained in force after the establishment of Israel, as the Knesset and the Israeli Government exert the authority specified in the latter. Nevertheless,

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<sup>12</sup> King George V of United Kingdom, *The Palestine Order in Council*, Buckingham Palace, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1922, UNISPAL, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSE/0/C7AAE196F41AA055052565F50054E656>.

the Legislative Council had limited powers, as the Order contained articles that were in contradiction. For example, on the one hand, Article 18 mentions that they have full authority and power and, on the other hand, Article 28 restricts its power, forbidding its members to issue any kind of proposal, ordinance, tax, except this is done by the High Commissioner,<sup>13</sup> who thus holds the most power.

The Executive Council is made up of the High Commissioner, the Chief Secretary, the treasurer and the Minister of Justice; there are cases when the latter has to get involved in the legal procedure in the absence of the Legislative Council (a fact that will also be perpetuated after 1948 in Israel), in case according to a certain policy a new ordinance or amendment of an old law is necessary, in cooperation with the Advisory Council.<sup>14</sup> As soon as the British lawmakers in Palestine approved a law, this was published in the *Official Gazette*, in the three official languages. Not only the Ottoman legislation underwent modifications, but also the Jewish one, which could not be coded correctly, as it was very complex.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the mandate power decided to reorganize the legal system into one of Anglo-Saxon type of common law.

As the situation of Palestine represented a completely separate case, different from the situation in the British dominions, as it was necessary to establish a national Jewish home, the legislation was generally exceptional, to be able to confer the necessary conditions to fulfill the Jewish ideal, which made permanently the mandate power face big challenges. For example, during the period 1918-1920, any sale of land had to be approved by the head of the military administration, but any sale of land had to be approved by the head of the military administration, but as soon as the civil administration came into operation, this provision was cancelled and replaced with the *Decree of Land*

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> Mogannam E. Mogannam, *Palestine Legislation under the British*. in "The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", vol. 164, 1932, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p.50.



*Transfer*, which allowed free land sales and land rentals, a cadastre and taxation regime being established in this respect.<sup>16</sup>

Practically, this moment marked the moment of dispossession of the Palestinian population of land, as the British administration did not watch closely the land transfers, the latter being bought by the Jews who arrived in Palestine. Besides this situation there was the problem of the legal power of the British Administration, which lay with the district rulers, who, most times, had no training in this respect; nor were they under the direct control of the Ministry of Justice, which led to multiple breaks of them by the officers. We must understand that there was no proper legal system, but it was a conglomerate made up of the remains of the Ottoman legislation which came into impact with the new British legislation, the regulations applicable to Palestine not being published in the Official Gazette, not even the text of the *Mandate for Palestine of the League of Nations*. It was intended to establish a Criminal Code, but at more than ten years from the debut of the civil administration there existed none;<sup>17</sup> till 1936, when the *Resolution of establishment of the Criminal Code*, by which only theoretically the Ottoman legislation expired and was replaced with the British one, statuting in Article 4, that "*This Code shall be interpreted in accordance with the principles of legal interpretation obtaining in England, and expressions used in it shall be presumed, so far as is consistent with their context and except as may be otherwise expressly provided, to be used with the meaning attaching to them in English law and shall be construed in accordance therewith*".<sup>18</sup> The Code was in a certain discrepancy with the situation in Palestine, which can be attributed to the impossibility to understand the needs of this region, where two completely different peoples lived together, which till

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<sup>16</sup> Dov Gavish, *A Survey of Palestine Under the British Mandate, 1920-1948*, Oxon, Routledge Curzon, 2005, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Mogannam E. Mogannam, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-54.

<sup>18</sup> *Criminal Code Ordinance*, in "The Palestine Gazette", no. 633, Jerusalem, Government Printing Press, Monday, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1936, p. 973, Nevo, [https://www.nevo.co.il/law\\_html/law21/PG-e-0633.pdf](https://www.nevo.co.il/law_html/law21/PG-e-0633.pdf).

not long ago had been part of an empire, there existing moments when the rights of the two were prejudiced, but the British administration favored the Jews at first, practically infringing their promise to observe and protect the rights of the two populations.

Zionism was the one which finally determined the form of the Israeli institutions by means of separate ways: the prosperous diaspora, the immigrants with a national conscience besides the traditional institutions of the Jewish residents in Palestine. The Jewish community in Palestine was called *Yishuvul* during the British mandate; it constituted an autonomous political organism, within which a political elite developed, as well as political procedures, political parties were established, public officers appeared who acquired experience and established operation procedures.<sup>19</sup> This Jewish concept designates the Jewish community of Palestine, starting with the Ottoman domination, until the end of the British mandate and the proclamation of independence. This was made up of the “Old Yishuv”, which referred to the pre-Zionist Jewish community and “The New Yishuv”, which emerged with the birth of Zionism, in the context of its adherents sponsoring immigration into Ottoman Palestine since 1882 with the aim of sets the foundations for a secular, equal and autonomous society based on productive labor and the revival of Jewish culture.<sup>20</sup>

The *Yishuv* had an accelerated development in the twenties, a pseudo-parliament being established, that represented the organizational frame of the Jewish community, called *Knesset Yisrael*, as an union in which even women had voting rights and were entitled to hold management positions. The responsibility for Jewish religion. Cultural and social problems were transferred to it. More explicitly, this represented the organizational structure of *Yishuvului*

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<sup>19</sup> Bernard Reich, David. H. Goldberg, *Historical Dictionary of Israel*, Second Edition, Lanham, The Scarecrow Press, 2008, p. 596.

<sup>20</sup> Claude Faure, *Dictionary of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Culture, History and Politics*, vol. 1, New York, Thomson Gale, 2005, pp. 478-480.

during the British mandate.

*Yishuv* functioned as a parliamentary democracy, having officially all the branches of governing, created by *Knesset Yisrael*: the parliament - *Asefat ha-Nivharim* (the Assembly of the Representatives), chosen by general vote in which all the adults in the community could participate,<sup>21</sup> being a self-government instrument, which used a proportional representation system determined by the direct vote, at national level, in which the whole community functioned as a single election district.

The assembly used to meet once a year and elected 36 members from its components in order to form an executive organ, *Va'ad Le'umi* (The National Council), divided into multiple sectors that dealt with public matters as social assistance, health, defence, education and religious matters being organized within it.<sup>22</sup> When the state was established, this structure of departments served as a base for the organization of the governmental ministries.<sup>23</sup>

The first council was established in 1920, and its members used to participate in the meetings of of the Zionist General Council, used to keep close connections with the Jewish Agency and to negotiate with the British Government, but the functions were focussed almost exclusively on the domestic affairs of *Yishuv*. This was managed till the establishment of the state by four presidents: David Yellin, Pinhas Rutenberg, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, David Remez, the last two being among the signatories of the *Declaration of Independence*.

The legal system was represented by *Beit Mishpat ha-Shalom ha-Ivri* (The Jewish Court of Peace), which initially functioned deficiently, as the Jews were

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<sup>21</sup> Dan Horowitz, Moshe Lissak, *Authority without Sovereignty: The Case of the National Centre of the Jewish Community in Palestine*, in "Palestine. Government and Opposition, vol. 8, no. 1, Cambridge University Press, 1973, p.52.

<sup>22</sup> Julius Sykes, *The Jewish Athena: The Political Genesis of the State of Israel*, in "Office of the Vice President for Research", University of South Carolina, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> *Pre-State Israel: Va'ad Leumi (National Council)*, Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/va-ad-leumi-national-council>

subjected to the legal system of the mandate power, but also due to the lack of means of coercion to execute decisions.<sup>24</sup>

This Court deals exclusively with civil cases. Then, the High Commissioner offered exclusive jurisdiction over the personal problems to the Rabbinic Courts. When we talk about Rabbinical Courts we refer, in fact, to the Rabbinic Council, the religious institution of *Yishuv*, established in 1921, headed by two Chief Rabbis, one ashkenazim and one sephardim: Abraham Isaac Kook and Ya'akov Meir, enjoying the recognition of the British Administration, by The *Order-in-Council*, where were mentioned three types of courts – tribal, civil and religious instances, this trilateral system, with the due amendments in force even today. In all the Jewish towns and settlements, there were local Rabbinical representantes, that used to deal with such matters as marriages, divorces and inheritances.<sup>25</sup> In 1927 the Committee for the Jewish rights and standards was established, which became the central authority of the traditional Jewish Law based on *Halakha*, a corpus of 613 religious laws (*mitzvot*) derived from *Torah*.<sup>26</sup> At the same time it is based on the Biblical commandments, the Talmudic and Rabbinical Law, representing rather a daily life conduct code than a proper legislation.

We can say that the sources of the *Yishuv* democracy are based on the self-government tradition of the diaspora communities, then of the Zionist Organization which was created and organized according to democratic criteria, and then, the British leadership itself, that brought the values of parliamentary democracy, influencing the Jews to adopt this model in the future. Also, the ideal

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<sup>24</sup> Aviva Halamish, *The Yishuv: The Jewish Community in Mandatory Palestine*, in "Israel Studies An Anthology", September 2009, Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israel-studies-an-anthology-the-yishuv>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> Mendy Hecht, *The 613 Commandments (Mitzvot)*, Chabad, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/756399/jewish/The-613-Commandments-Mitzvot.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/756399/jewish/The-613-Commandments-Mitzvot.htm).

of a Jewish national home itself, promoted by the Zionist movement, enjoyed political and financial support from the democratic states of the West.

The first elections for the National Assembly took place in 1920, and, though they had to be organized every four years, they took place only in 1925, 1931 and 1944. At the elections of 19<sup>th</sup> April 1920 the biggest faction, Ahdut HaAvoda (Zionist Socialist Labor Party), obtained the majority, but the elections were boycotted by the ultra-Orthodox party, Agudat Yisrael, which, for a good period of time more exactly till 1935 opposed the appearance of a centralized leadership, not wishing to be represented in the National Council. The first Assembly had 314 members, representing 20 lists elected by 22,200 electors, the second had 221 members, representing 26 lists elected by 36,437 electors, and the third one had 71 members, representing 12 lists elected by 50,436 electors, and the fourth one had 171 members, representing 18 lists elected by 202,448 electors.

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The Party Ahdut HaAvoda, founded in 1919 of urban and rural workers, represents the first great success of the future founder of Jewish state, David Ben-Gurion, who became the leader of the structure of reorganization of *Yishuv*. Understanding the importance of the development of the economic infrastructure supporting the needs of the immigrants, this labor party represented the basis of the labor federation established one year later, in 1920 – Histradut. Ahdut HaAvoda controlled Histradut, whose general secretary was David Ben-Gurion, who considered that a developed economy meant the possibility to strengthen the defence of the Jewish community. Within Histradut auxiliary institutions were established, such as the Workers' Society, but also building companies. In the thirties, when Ahdut HaAvoda had already become strong enough absorb a rival labor party, Hapoel Hatzair, which did not enjoy enough support in the

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<sup>27</sup> *Assembly of Representatives (Assefat Hanivharim)*, in "Lexicon of Terms", The Knesset, [https://www.knesset.gov.il/lexicon/eng/asefat\\_niv\\_eng.htm](https://www.knesset.gov.il/lexicon/eng/asefat_niv_eng.htm).

urban environments, the Mapai political faction resulted by the fusion of the two, that was to determinate the political spectrum in the next two decades. These institutions could not crystalize into a real power pole, due to their fragmentation and weakness. The major action spheres of *Yishuv* included immigration, the creation and development of settlements, education, and obtaining of military and political power.

However, the Assembly and Council were not recognized initially by the British administration as representatives of *Yishuv*, lacking sovereignty, functioning without a legal statute until 1928, when they were recognized on the basis of the *Regulations of Organization of the Jewish Community in Palestine* of 1<sup>st</sup> January 1926, that offered the legal framework and mandatory support to the national institutions, both at national level, and at local level, reiterating the framework assured by the order with the value of a constitution of 1922, by which “*each Religious Community recognized by the Government shall enjoy autonomy for the internal affairs of the Community, subject to the provisions of any Ordinance or Order issued by the High Commissioner[...]. If any religious community in Palestine makes application under this Ordinance, the High Commissioner in the Executive Council may with the approval of one of His Majesty’s Principal Secretaries of State, make, and when made vary or revoke regulations for its organization as such by the Government in Palestine.*”<sup>28</sup>

The lack of sovereignty makes the political decisions to be taken ad-hoc, in a political system in which the balance of power between the parties was delineated according to the representativity in the quasi-parliamentary or governmental institutions. At the same time, this led to the lack of a coercive authority, outlining the existence of *Yishuv* to a voluntary democracy, where the individuals were not perceived only as holders of rights, but especially of

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<sup>28</sup> *Palestine Communities Ordinance: Text*, in “*Jewish Daily Bulletin*”, section 2, vol. 3, New York, 12<sup>th</sup> March, 1926, p. 2, Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

obligations. The Members of the Assembly were the representatives of the lists elected at the general elections organized by *Knesset Yisrael*. The Assembly of the Representatives was authorized to make decisions and vote on the budgets of the National Council and of the Rabbinical Council.

At the same time, *Yishuv* was also managed by a second Jewish level leadership, controlled by the representatives appointed by the Zionist Organization. The strongest organ of *Yishuv* was the Zionist Executive, whose essence was recognized by means of the Mandate text, holding international legitimacy, dealing inclusively with the diplomatic representation in the relationship with the League of Nations. Therefore, the key of the new institutional future is to be found in Article IV of the Mandate text, where it was imposed that the British administration shall recognize a public organism of the type of a Jewish agency cooperating with it, in view of the social-economic development of the future state – meaning, in fact, the Palestinian Office of the Zionist Organization, which initially was taking the part of an agency.

This office was reorganized after an investigation of the Zionist Commission, established in 1918 by nobody else than Dr. Chaim Weizmann, President of the English Zionist Federation, together with other Zionist representatives from France and Italy, accompanied by the British officials.<sup>29</sup> The Zionist Commission had the role of a semi-independent authority and held as tasks the centralization of the activities in Palestine of the Zionist Organization, but, instead of keeping its role of pseudo-embassy, it took the part of a so-called first Zionist Government.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *The Zionist Commission*, in "Origins and Evolution of the Palestine Problem: 1917-1947 (Part I)", United Nations, [https://www.un.org/unispal/history/origins-and-evolution-of-the-palestine-problem/part-i-1917-1947/#The\\_working\\_of\\_the\\_Mandates\\_System](https://www.un.org/unispal/history/origins-and-evolution-of-the-palestine-problem/part-i-1917-1947/#The_working_of_the_Mandates_System).

<sup>30</sup> *The Zionist Commission (Va'ad HaTzirim)*, in "The Wayback Internet Archive", 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2006, "<https://web.archive.org/web/20061002040541/http://www.jafi.org.il/education/jafi75/history/commision.html>".

Thus, it was decided that the Office of Palestine shall enter under the leadership of the Commission, so that it could cover a larger range of competences, such as immigration, agriculture, industry, education, establishment of new settlements and purchase of land. Weizmann led in 1919 the Zionist delegation at the Peace Conference of Paris, being elected, a year later, the chairman of the Zionist Organization.

There also appeared the idea of establishing an Arab Agency, that was to play a similar role as the Zionist one in the relationship with the British administration, but this was impossible by the decentralization of the Palestinian population, that had neither local institutions, nor an international forum supporting their need and wish of self-determination.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the British decided that these shall be led by a mufti, but was to be controlled by the Mandate power, besides a supreme Muslim Council dealing with public services.

At The Twelfth Zionist Congress that took place at Karlovy Vary in Czechoslovakia, it was decided according to the mandate text, that the present Commission shall become the Zionist executive in Palestine, formally appointed as the agency mentioned in Article 4, that was to cooperate with the British administration to establish a Jewish state. Officially, only in 1929 in Zurich, at the Sixteenth Zionist Congress of the Organization, it was decided that the executive shall get the name of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, being organized as follows: the Governmental Department (Foreign relations), the Security Department, the *Aliyah* Department and the Education Department, to cover the largest possible area of the immediate needs of the Jews all over the world. The organisms of the Agency were elected on the basis of the result of the elections, that took place in the Zionist Congress, whose electoral body was made up of the whole Zionist movements, affiliated or organized from the diaspora or from Palestine.

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<sup>31</sup> Britain Eakin, *British Policy in Mandate Palestine: Institution Building and the Thwarting of a Palestinian State*, in "Special Studies", 1<sup>st</sup> March 2011, pp. 7-8.



Both the Agency and the National Council were considered national institutions, in charge of representation before the British administration.<sup>32</sup>

Very many of the political and social-economic activities of the Jewish community did not take place within the central institutions, but in particular institutions established by the political movements, the strongest of which was Histradut. The need of integration of the new-comers to *Yishuv* produced both a gradual separation from the social-economic relationships with the Palestinian inhabitants, as well as a need to exert a pressure on the Mandate power, representing one of the main causes of appearance of new political parties based on the working class, leading in the thirties to the appearance of Mapai party. The main purpose of the political parties in this period was to arbitrate the relationship between the citizens and the national institutions, the most important political orientations besides Mapai were: the revisionists, conservatives, right-wing religious, liberals and center religious, ethnic groups, communists, radical Orthodox and left-wing Zionists from Histradut. The parties took over the role of local agencies of resource distribution, mainly regarding the control of the jobs in the national institutions.

Only in the thirties, the British administration conferred to the Jewish Agency, only partly authority over matters that entered in the competences of the governments of some independent states, as well as economy, immigration, and even military matters, overshadowing the local institutions of the Jews in Palestine. The general weakness that characterized these pre-state institutions was supported by the lack of coherence of the political sphere and of the public, as there was no power center to support.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Dan Horowitz, Moshe Lissak, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> Aviva Halamish, *Israel studies an Anthology: The Yishuv: the Jewish Community in Mandatory Palestine* in <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israel-studies-an-anthology-the-yishuv>

In spite of all these shortcomings, the Jewish society in Palestine strongly involved itself in political activities, and the political parties occupied a role of maximum importance in public life. Only in the last day of 1933, the legal officer Robert Harry Drayton, who had been appointed registrar of the Government in Palestine, in charge of collecting and editing the whole legislation in the territory, finalized a work in three volumes, that came into force as a legal framework.<sup>34</sup>

In 1940, the Jewish community in Palestine had already acquired an important degree of development in the economy, agriculture, industry, health and education system. Practically, the British administration gave the local populations the right to develop their own societies, but did not allow them to establish sovereign states, as a document of Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in 1946 showed beyond doubt: *"That Jew shall not dominate Arab and Arab shall not dominate Jew in Palestine. That Palestine shall be neither a Jewish state nor an Arab state. That the form of government ultimately to be established, shall, under international guarantees, fully protect and preserve the interests in the Holy Land of Christendom and of the Moslem and Jewish faiths. Thus Palestine must ultimately become a state which guards the rights and interests of Moslems, Jews and Christians alike; and accords to the inhabitants, as a whole, the fullest measure of self-government, consistent with the three paramount principles set forth above,"*<sup>35</sup> thus contradicting the mandate text that referred to the responsibility of the administration to develop self-government institutions.

One should not overlook the fact that the formal legal basis for the establishment of Israel, is to be found in Resolution 181 of the UN General Assembly dated 29<sup>th</sup> November 1947, which proposed the *Partition Plan*,

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<sup>34</sup>Julius Sykes, *The Jewish Athena: the political genesis of the state of Israel* in [https://sc.edu/about/offices\\_and\\_divisions/research/news\\_and\\_pubs/caravel/archive/2016/2016-caravel-jewish-athena.php](https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/research/news_and_pubs/caravel/archive/2016/2016-caravel-jewish-athena.php).

<sup>35</sup> *Principles of Government: No Arab, No Jewish State*, in "Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry", Chapter I, Recommendation no.3, Points I-III, 1946, Yale Law School: The Avalon Project, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/angch01.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/angch01.asp).

supervised by a special United Nations Commission for Palestine. Here, the transition stages were specified, as well as the major directions of the political institutions, specifying the need to establish a provisional government council with advisory role in the relationships with the public organizations, but also with the political parties, during the transition period:<sup>36</sup>

*"The Commission, after consultation with the democratic parties and other public organizations of The Arab and Jewish States, shall select and establish in each State as rapidly as possible a Provisional Council of Government. The activities of both the Arab and Jewish Provisional Councils of Government shall be carried out under the general direction of the Commission."*<sup>37</sup>

The Assembly and the Council became the backbone of the future state. Thus, a month before the expiry of the mandate, in the period 6-12 April 1948, the General Zionist Council met in Tel Aviv and established two new institutional bodies, with temporary character, fit for the needs of a state much different from the ones of a community, in which power derives from the people: a legislative organism, *Mo'etzet ha-am* (The People's Council), made up of 37 members, who represented all that meant the Jewish population in Palestine, including the political formations, irrespective of their orientation. An executive organism *Minhelet Ha-am* (The People's Administration), made up of 13 members was also established. This temporary executive was reunited on 12 May 1948 to decide if the independence of the Jewish state would be declared. Only 10 members could participate, due to the fact that the rest were blocked in various areas, due to the state of war, only 6 voted for the declaration of independence, and two days later, the remarkable event occurred, marking the appearance of state Israel on the map of the world.

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Y. Medding, *The Founding of Israeli Democracy, 1948-1967*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Harry Sacher, *Israel The Establishment of a State*, London, George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1952, p. 113.

Once the *Declaration of Independence* was read and signed, *Mo'etzet Ha-Am* was converted into the Provisional State Council (*Mo'etzet Hamedinah Hazemanit*), and *Minhelet Ha-Am* became the Provisional Government (*Minhelet Hamemshalah Hazemanit*)<sup>38</sup>. The Provisional Council was not an elected organism and functioned only till 14<sup>th</sup> February 1949, when it was replaced by the Constituent Assembly. This was made up of 38 members, headed by President Chaim Weizmann. Given his statute, he dealt only with the matters that required immediate settlement, during 39 meetings. It had to function "*as a legislative and executive branch of the governing system until a government is formed by the Constituent Assembly, and to prepare the state for parliamentary elections.*"<sup>39</sup>

In this term, its main tasks included the enactment of ordinances from various fields, such as the political, administrative, defence and finances ones, as well as the organization of elections, but not later than 1<sup>st</sup> October 1948, but they were postponed till 25<sup>th</sup> January 1949. At the same time, this moment marked the revocation of all the British decisions instituted by the White Chart of 1939. But the basis of this provisional institutions was *Va'ad Le'umi* (National Council) that had functioned during the British mandate, from inside breaking into two cores, one to form the Provisional Council, that represented the forerunner of the permanent legislative, the Knesset, and the leadership of *Va'ad Le'umi*, represented the core of the Provisional Government.<sup>40</sup>

The Council was immediately recognized by the United States, as *de facto* authority of Israel,<sup>41</sup> with the promise that as soon as a permanent one was elected, this will enjoy the same treatment.<sup>42</sup> Its headquarters was set up in the

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<sup>38</sup> Aviva Halamish, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> *Roles of the Provisional State Council*, in "The Provisional State Council, 14 May 1948-14 February 1949", The Knesset, <https://knesset.gov.il/review/ReviewPage3.aspx?kns=0&lng=3>.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard Reich, David. H. Goldberg, *op. cit.*, p. 567.

<sup>41</sup> *Memorandum on the De Jure Recognition of Israel*, in "Recognition of the State of Israel Documents", ca.1948, p.2, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, [https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/israel/large/index.php](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/israel/large/index.php).

<sup>42</sup> *Revised Draft Press Release*, in "Recognition of the State of Israel Research File," 31<sup>st</sup> January 1949, p. 1, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum,

North of Tel Aviv. This was made up of 14 ministries, headed by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who also occupies the position of Minister of Defence, while the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs was held by Moshe-Sharet, the future Prime Minister. This government council dealt mainly with tax collection, while the officials of the Jewish Agency and *Va'ad Leumi* had and assumed ministerial responsibilities.

The Provisional Government was established at the same time with the Provisional Council, but it was neither elected, nor approved by the latter, therefore its authority does not derive from the legislative sphere.<sup>43</sup> We can characterize it as having the role of a temporary cabinet, that was to function for a period of nine months, between 14.05.1948 - 10.03.1949, till the first government was formed, following the first parliamentary elections as specified in the *Law and Administration Ordinance*: "*The Provisional Government shall act in accordance with the policy laid down by the Provisional Council of State, shall carry out its decisions, shall report to it on its activities and shall be answerable to it for its activities.*"

<sup>44</sup> This decree had the role to fix the agenda of the Provisional Council, authorizing it as a legislative authority of the new state and stipulating the transfer of competences from the mandate authority to the new administration.

This also provided the legal basis for the declaration by the Provisional State Council of an emergency situation. This institutional conversion was provided in the text of the *Declaration of Independence* itself: "*We declare that, with effect from the moment of the termination of the Mandate being tonight, the eve of Sabbath, the 6<sup>th</sup> Iyar, 5708 (15<sup>th</sup> May, 1948), until the establishment of the elected, regular authorities of the State in accordance with the Constitution which shall be adopted by the Elected Constituent Assembly not later than the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1948, the*

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[https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/israel/large/documents/index.php?documentdate=1949-01-31&documentid=1-15&collectionid=ROI&pagenumber=1](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/israel/large/documents/index.php?documentdate=1949-01-31&documentid=1-15&collectionid=ROI&pagenumber=1).

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Sager, *The Parliamentary System of Israel*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1985, p.29.

<sup>44</sup> *Law and Administration Ordinance No.1 of 5708 -1948\**, in "Selected ordinances of The Provisional State Council", Chapter I, Point c, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1948, p. 7, The Knesset, [https://knesset.gov.il/review/data/eng/law/kns0\\_govt-justice\\_eng.pdf](https://knesset.gov.il/review/data/eng/law/kns0_govt-justice_eng.pdf).

*People's Council shall act as a Provisional Council of State, and its executive organ, the People's Administration, shall be the Provisional Government of the Jewish State, to be called «Israel».*"<sup>45</sup>

For various reasons, the Provisional Council rejected the idea of conceiving immediately a fixed legislative framework and preferred the establishment of some *Basic Laws*, which, in time, could have evolved into a state constitution with full rights.<sup>46</sup> Among the ones who opposed the idea of a written constitution there were David Ben-Gurion and the religious parties, which argued their position by appeal to the British model: "*despite and perhaps even because of the absence of a written constitution in Great Britain, the rule of law and democracy there are solid, and civil freedoms are upheld.*"<sup>47</sup> However, we cannot state that the Israeli political system was fully copied after the British one, as it would have fit neither the regional realities, nor the requirements of the moment.

This situation extended up to the moment when their attributions were taken over by permanent institutions, that were to be established by the Constituent Assembly, which was under organization and to which it was intended to offer the task to issue the formal constitution. This delay can be considered in a certain way gainful, as there were no negative effects, as historians S. Ilan Troen and Noah Lucas mentioned, in one of their studies on the political situation of Israel in its incipient stage as a sovereign state: "*the whole range of institutional adaptations that followed statehood were all reached without benefit of a written constitution. In fact, it may be that avoidance of the political challenge of drafting a formal constitution made possible the successful extension of unity and*

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<sup>45</sup> Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1948, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20establishment%20of%20state%20of%20israel.aspx>.

<sup>46</sup> Clive Jones, Emma C. Murphy, *Israel Challenges to Identity, Democracy and the State*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 32.

<sup>47</sup> *Arguments Against, Jewish Virtual Library*, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/constitution-of-israel>.

stability throughout the whole population.”<sup>48</sup> It was also specified the deadline of 25<sup>th</sup> January for organization of the first free elections after the arrangement of a census, whose result showed that there were half a million eligible Israeli to vote,<sup>49</sup> and a part of the Palestinians that remained on the territory of the state entitled to vote, as approximately 60,000 immediately received Israeli citizenship.<sup>50</sup> Starting from the document of the declaration, which has an incomplete character, that is it does not offer sufficient details about the drafting of a constitution or about the future elections, but these aspects remain at the option of the provisional institutions. In spite of these shortcomings, some key-aspects are mentioned however for the definition of the state, such as the functioning according to democratic principles, the observance and guarantee of the fundamental rights and liberties. It can be noticed that the provisional institutions successfully fulfilled their assignments till the first final government came into operation. Even if we talk only about a short period of time, these conferred them continuity in the period of *Yishuv*. Instead of being removed and replaced with new ones, it was decided to improve and adapt them to the new realities.

The condition of the elections being fulfilled, on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1949, the members of the Constituent Assembly voted the change of the denomination, and thus the First Knesset in the history of Israel came into force. The reunion ceremony was opened by Chaim Weizmann, who was to become the first President of Israel. The highest position in Knesset, the one that assured a great political influence, is called *Yoshev Rosh HaKnesset*, (equivalent to a function of president, a term copied after the American formula *Speaker of the House*), being

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<sup>48</sup> S. Ian Troen, Noah Lucas, *An Introduction To Research on Israel's First Decade*, in "Israel The First Decade of Independence", S. Ilan Troen, Noah Lucas (eds.), Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> *A Page from History: Israel's First National Elections*, The Israel Forever Foundation, [https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/first\\_national\\_elections\\_israel/](https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/first_national_elections_israel/).

<sup>50</sup> Yoav Peled, *The Challenge of Ethnic Democracy. The State and Minority Groups in Israel, Poland and Northern Ireland*, London, Routledge, 2014. p. 97.

occupied in the first decade by Joseph Sprinzak. He became responsible for the affairs of Knesset internally and on foreign plans, he was the representative of the Knesset, he had the obligation to maintain the integrity of its image and ensured observance its procedure regulations.<sup>51</sup>

According to the *Harari Decision*, that came from the progressivist Yizhar Harari, it was stipulated that, instead of a single document, the constitution of Israel was to be made up of a series of fundamental laws that will be created in time by a special commission and approved by Knesset .

In this context, the first Israeli Government was established on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1949, by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, identifying itself with the dominant party, Mapai, that received at the elections 35% of the total number of votes, which means that it got 155,274 valid votes, obtaining 46 allocated places of the total of 120.<sup>52</sup> In order to come into force, its components must be approved by Knesset. At its formation, the Government is obliged to present a program to the Knesset. The Government is an institution of crucial importance, playing the part of an intermediary between Knesset and the Prime Minister. The relationship between Knesset and the Government is based on the conception according to which the duty of the parliament is to establish an efficient government.<sup>53</sup>

From the formation of the state up to the present, no party could form a government without depending on the smaller political formations to form coalitions. The Prime Minister is the one who appoints the ministers, but they must also receive the vote of confidence of Knesset. The executive function of the government is assured by a Prime Minister and a cabinet whose power derives

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<sup>51</sup> The *Knesset: The Role of the Knesset Speaker*, in "Legislative Branch (Knesset)", Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-role-of-the-knesset-speaker>.

<sup>52</sup> *Constituent Assembly (which later turned into the First Knesset) Elections to the Constituent Assembly*, in "Knesset Elections Results", 25 January 1949, The Knesset, [https://knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng\\_mimshal\\_res1.htm](https://knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_res1.htm).

<sup>53</sup> Gregory S. Mahler, Asher Zidon, *The Knesset: Parliament in the Israeli Political System*, London, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981, p. 37.



from Knesset. On the basis of this perspective on the institutional experience of the Jewish community in Palestine in the pre-statal period, we can understand the evolution and fusion of the institutions of *Yishuv*, with the Zionist and British ones, together with the reminiscences from the Ottoman period and the aspects of the mosaic religion.

Thus we can conclude that the institutions of Israel, even if they have a modern character, are strongly connected to the fight for the survival and welfare of the Jewish people, whose sole purpose became from the moment of the proclamation of independence, the security and survival of the state. In the first decade of existence, finding a functioning formula for the Israeli society had become the main preoccupation of the leaders, but especially of Ben-Gurion, together with the protection of the state, which already involved massive expenses. The legislative efforts were concentrated around the modification, by some amendments, of the regulations that had functioned in the period of the British mandate, as that no longer suited the realities of the new state. Practically, Israel had inherited a large part of the legal system from the former mandate power. The First Knesset only continued the legislative process initiated in the interim period. In this context, the target of the policies of reorganization of the Israeli leadership included such fields as the education system, economy, organization and functioning of the army, the woman's statute, the military service, the rights of the demobilized soldiers and even the family matters, trying to motivate the actions by the necessity to get the society out of difficulty, resorting to the welfare of the Jewish population.

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