Early U.S. Policy toward Palestinian Refugees: the Syria Option
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During the first four years following the 1948 Palestine war, the United States attempted to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict by settling Palestinian Refugees in Syria. At the height of U.S.-Syrian negotiations during the summer of 1952, the U.S. contemplated paying the Syrian government $400,000,000 dollars in exchange for settling up to 500,000 Palestinians in the fertile plains of the Jazira that lie between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

This chapter of U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict has been almost entirely ignored. Despite the failure of U.S. attempts to settle the majority of Palestinian refugees in Syria, it is an important episode in U.S. foreign policy. It was the first concerted effort by the West to settle the Palestine issue after the 1948 war. It helped define U.S. attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. As the Truman administration abandoned efforts to induce Israel to compromise with the Arabs either by returning land to the Palestinians or by allowing for the return of refugees, the State Department asked

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1 I thank my student, Russ Allen, for his help in researching this article and in sharpening its arguments.
the Arab countries to resettle the refugees. In doing so, the U.S. accepted the notion that
the solution to the Palestinian problem was to assimilate the refugees into the neighboring
Arab countries. This meant denying the force of Palestinian nationalism and embracing
the notion that economic assistance and development could solve the political problems
of the region.

US policy toward the Palestine Question following the 1948 war was guided by
two main concerns: domestic concerns, in particular, President Truman’s inability or
unwillingness to push the Israelis to allow the return of Palestinian refugees; and foreign
concerns, in particular, the emerging Cold War and the policy of containment. The
United States might have ignored the refugee issue altogether had it not been committed
to helping Great Britain organize some framework for defending the Middle East against
the influence of communism and possible attack by the Soviet Union. The successful
organization of such a defense organization required a resolution to the Arab-Israeli
conflict that was souring relations between the Western powers and the Arab states.

At the Lausanne Conference, which ran from April to September of 1949, the
U.S. and U.K. attempt to solve the Arab Israeli conflict. It is there that President Truman
made his last attempt to pressure Israel to accept the return of Palestinian refugees. US
State Department officials were largely hostile to Israel. Like Mark Ethridge, the U.S.
member of the Palestine Conciliation Commission, they insisted to Ben Gurion that “the
refugees were the main concern for Arab States,” and reported to President Truman that
“the Arabs have made what the Commission considers very great concessions; the Jews
have made none so far.”

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2 FRUS 1949, “Mr. Mark F. Ethridge to the President,” (Jerusalem) April 11, 1949, pp. 905-06, as quoted in Neff, Fallen Pillars, p. 75.
Under pressure from the State Department, President Truman decided to get tough with Israel. In April, he wrote to Ethridge the following, “Dear Mark…. I am rather disgusted with the manner in which the Jews are approaching the refugee problem. I told the President of Israel in the presence of his Ambassador just exactly what I thought about it. It may have some effect, I hope so.” Later Truman cabled the Israeli government, insisting that if they were not more forthcoming on the refugee issue “the US Govt. will regretfully be forced to the conclusion that a revision of its attitude toward Israel has become unavoidable.” Emboldened by these Presidential declarations George McGhee, the U.S. coordinator on Palestine Refugee Matters, threatened the Israeli ambassador to the U.S. that if Israel did not accept 200,000 refugees, the US would withhold $49 million worth of Export-Import Bank loans to Israel. The Israeli Ambassador was unimpressed with McGhee’s threat and responded that McGhee “wouldn’t get by with this move.” The Israeli Ambassador boasted that “he would stop it….”

True to his word, the Ambassador was able to nip McGhee’s threat in the bud. That same afternoon, the White house phoned McGhee to say that the President would have nothing to do with withholding loans to Israel. Never again would a State Department official under President Truman attempt to intimidate Israel on the issue of refugees.

U.S. policy toward the refugees took a dramatic turn during the summer of 1949 away from Israel and toward Syria. Rather than withhold money from Israel, a policy for

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3 Ibid., p. 76.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
which President Truman did not have the stomach, the U.S. began to develop a plan to pay money to Syria in order to take in refugees and turn them into Syrians.

The notion of Syria’s taking in a large number of Palestinians first came up under Husni Za`im. On March 30th 1949, the Syrian army led by Husni Za`im, the Chief of Staff, overthrew President Shukri al-Quwwatli and the republican government in Syria. U.S. policy toward Syria’s new military ruler was influenced from the start by concern for settling the refugee problem. Only days after the coup, U.S. officials on the Palestine Conciliation Commission began to argue for the recognition of the Za`im regime because without diplomatic recognition no progress on refugee matters “could be adequately undertaken.” Furthermore, the U.S. State Department and British Foreign Office were unanimous in recognizing that without some resolution of the refugee problem and the Palestine Question, no progress could be made on the question of organizing Middle East defense. As the Policy Planning Staff in Washington concluded in June 1949:

All of the countries of the Middle East area…have indicated at one time or another a desire to enter into a military alliance or other military arrangements with the U.S. or with the U.S. and U.K…. Moreover, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, none of the Arab governments could enter into an alliance with the U.S. at this time due to the deterioration of relations relating to the Palestine Question.

Settling refugees was important to the Western Powers because of their interest in organizing Middle East Defense and fighting the Cold War. It was during these years from 1949 through 1956 that Great Britain sought to form what it called the Middle East Command, then MEDO or Middle East Defense Organization - following the plan of NATO and SEATO, and finally, the Baghdad Pact.

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From the moment the West recognized Za`im’s government, Britain’s Prime
Minister Ernest Bevin began to “put pressure on Syria for the settlement of between
200,000 and 300,000 in northern Syria.” Za`im who was from a Aleppine Kurdish
family did not have strong Arab nationalist feelings and was willing to conclude a deal
with the Israelis. He had fought under Ottoman, French and Syrian command and had led
the Syrian army during its disastrous Palestine campaign of 1948. His experience had
taught him the value of possessing a strong army, which he wanted for Syria above all
else. In the hope of winning Western military support in July, Za`im offered “to settle
about 300,000 refugees in the Jazirah area” on condition that Israel accept “large -scale
international financial aid to Syria and the repatriation of most of the refugees and
resettlement of the rest in Syria.” Israel was not interested in such a deal. It had already
determined that Washington would not pressure it to accept refugees. Syria presented
little military threat to Tel Aviv either. During the 1948 War in Palestine, Syria stationed
only 3,000 Syrian soldiers out of a total military strength of 10,000 at the border with
Israel. Za`im had no bargaining power in his negotiations with Israel. Ben Gurion
understood this full well and refused to meet Za`im. He was not about to accept 200,000
additional Arabs in Israel. Ben Gurion’s policy of delay paid off in August 1949. Husni
Za`im was overthrown by Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, who was in turn overthrown by
Colonel `Adib al-Shishakli in December 1949 four months later.

`Adib Shishakli was a more able leader than Za`im. He tried to work through
Syria’s parliament, known for its emulous factionalism, rather than run roughshod over it.

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A Sunni Arab from Hama who had ably led a division of volunteer troops in Palestine during the 1948 war, Shishakli was keenly aware of the growing Arab nationalist sentiment among Syrians that Za`im ignored and often belittled. He made every effort not to get too far ahead of public opinion or to resort to dictatorial and extra-legal measures. Despite their many differences in temperament, origin, and style, Shishakli and Za`im pursued similar strategies. Shishakli wanted money to develop Syria’s economy. He pushed forward on projects to improve agriculture, irrigation and transportation. Most of all though, he wanted to strengthen Syria’s military; in particular, he wanted jet fighters.

During the first years of Shishakli’s rule, U.S. and U.K. came to believe that Shishakli could deliver on the refugee issue if he were offered enough money and arms. He was a strong leader, they determined, who could cajole the Syrian parliament and people into accepting a deal to settle large numbers of Palestinians in Syria without being overthrown as Za`im had been. They realized that the issue was a sensitive one because leftist politicians and public opinion equated any such deal with capitulation to western imperialism and acquiescence to Israel. Syria’s minister of national economy, Ma`ruf al-Dawalibi, explained that the “Syrian Government would find it difficult to cooperate with the U.S., especially in realizing any projects envisaging refugee resettlement instead of repatriation;” though, he hoped that if both countries understood “the difficulties each faces in present circumstances,” the influence of the Palestine situation could be “minimized to permit economic collaboration.”

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11 FRUS 1950, (Damascus) Keeley to Secretary of State, February 24, 1950, p. 1206.
In an attempt to diffuse the dangers such a deal presented to Shishakli and the Syrian government, U.S. and British officials tried to convert what was a political problem into a technical and economic one. As the British representative to UNWRA explained, the trick was to treat the Arab refugee problem “as a non-political one” even though, in his view, it was “fundamentally a political problem.” Western governments encouraged UNWRA, the International Bank, the Export/Import Bank and other development agencies to take the lead in offering Syria aid and in pushing for refugee settlement. They reiterated in their meetings with Syrians that assistance from UNWRA for the settlement of Palestinian refugees “would be regarded as being of a strictly provisional nature.” UNWRA “did not concern itself with the permanent settlement of the dispute with Israel,” they insisted, and any attempt to “improve” the living conditions of the refugees would not prejudice their right to return.

The State Department and Foreign office were most optimistic about closing a deal with Syria on the refugee issue during 1951 and 1952. A number of factors contributed to this positive assessment. President Truman displayed a renewed interest in Middle East and placed “particular emphasis on the problem of the Arab refugees” and on helping the British to establish a regional defense organization to contain the Soviet Union, problems which were understood to be linked. He demonstrated this by allocating substantial sums of money for economic and military aid to the region.

As for the Syrians, Colonel Shishakli had begun his second year in power and had every reason to believe that he had Syrian politics well in hand. Opposition to his rule

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12 PRO, “Minutes of a meeting held at the Foreign Office,” November 30, 1951, FO 371/91218.
was negligible. He had successfully pitted the two major conservative parties in parliament against each other. The left, including the Ba’th Party and Akram Hawrani’s Arab Socialist Party, continued to support him. It was not until December 1951 that these two parties merged in order to overthrowing Shishakli. The coup attempt was broken up even before it started because Shishakli moved quickly and decisively to suppress it and because few senior military officials were willing to join the conspiracy.

Within the larger arena of Middle East politics, Shishakli also faced few important challenges in 1951 and 1952. The Arab League seemed amenable to revising its resolutions on refugee settlement in order to pave the way for large-scale settlement in Syria. The Egyptian monarchy faced serious internal disturbances in 1951 and was unable to stand in the way of an independent Syria policy toward the West. Gamal Abdul Nasser did not take power in Egypt until the summer of 1952 and it was some time before he had consolidated his power in Egypt. Once Nasser began to champion Arab nationalism and to throw his full support behind the Syrian left in opposing any possible rapprochement between Syria and the West chances for a Syrian deal on the refugees diminished considerably.

In 1951, however, U.K. and particularly U.S. officials believed the likelihood of settling refugees in Syria was good. President Truman pushed for increased aid of various types to the Middle East. Point Four money, which was earmarked for technical assistance, was continued. The Foreign Aid Bill of 1951 authorized $160,000,000 for economic assistance to the Middle East with increased levels for Syria. In recognition of the particular needs of refugees, Congress allocated $50,000,000 for Arab refugees, the same amount allocated to Israel for settling Jewish immigrants. This was a considerable
increase from the allocation in 1950 of $27,000,000 and from 1949’s allocation of $16,000,000. As the British recognized, these increases in refugee aid indicated “the United States had played its part well in dealing with the problem.” The fact that congress specifically designated half the money for the resettlement of the refugees and expressed its willingness to “increase appropriations for a second and third year” of a three year program, also cheered officials in the field.\textsuperscript{15}

Just as important, Truman successfully shepherded the Mutual Security Program through congress. This assistance was specifically designated for arms and defense spending in the region. This permitted the U.S. to provide Arab countries with large-scale military assistance for the first time. The 1952 allocation for the Middle East was $196,000,000, a considerable sum. President Truman’s speech to congress in May 1951 urging the passage of the Mutual Security Program was summarized as follows:

No part of the world is more directly exposed to Soviet pressure than the countries of the Middle East. He stated further that the incessant pressure on the Middle East could be overcome only by a continual build-up of armed defenses and the fostering of economic development…. This would permit the United States for the first time to assist those countries directly in building up their defensive capabilities.\textsuperscript{16}

The willingness of the U.S. and U.K. to supply substantial quantities of arms and military aid was key to any success with settling the refugees. As the Chief of the British Legation in Damascus explained in March 1951, “If we are to influence Syria to come out in favour of the Western powers we must show that we are prepared to help her build

\textsuperscript{15} PRO, “Minutes of a Meeting Held at the Foreign Office,” November 30, 1951, FO 371/91218.

\textsuperscript{16} PRO, “Transcript of Acheson’s Summary of Truman’s Message to Congress,” May 21, 1951, FO 371/91195.
up her defences. This we can best do by supplying arms and equipment to the Syrian Army.”

British representative in Syria,

Early U.S. attempts to interest Shishakli in small amounts of Point IV money and economic aid for refugee resettlement as “confidence building” programs failed miserably. The Syrian government rejected one offer of $150,000 in seed money for a project in 1951 out of hand. “Syria expected something far more generous,” the British Chief of Legation explained. U.S. and British officials groused that the Syrians did not understand the realities of congress, government funding, and project development; nevertheless, the Western powers did revise their approach to winning Syrian confidence. By the beginning of 1952, it was agreed that “an alternative” policy to “reinforce resettlement” would have to be made. “Such a generous offer of economic aid to Syria” must be made that it would “enable the Syrian government to over-ride the political objections to resettlement. But such an offer would have to be on an impressive scale, for the reason that in general political consideration weigh far more strongly with the Syria people than do economic ones.”

Military aid also had to be increased. As the British Legation Chief observed, “trying to conduct diplomacy in Syria without military goods was akin to producing bricks without straw.” He described his meetings with Shishakli and General Silo, the nominal leader of Syria in 1951, to be centered around discussions of arms and jet aircraft, in particular.

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17 PRO, (Damascus) Montagu-Pollock, “Internal Situation in Syria,” October 1951, FO 371/91842/EY 1015/10/G.
18 PRO, (Damascus) Montagu-Pollock to Geoffrey Furlonge, November 12, 1951, FO 371/91840/ EY 1016/24.
19 PRO, (Damascus) British Legation to Eden, December 10, 1951, FO 371/91852 EY 1051/16.
20 PRO, (Damascus) Montagu-Pollock to Rapp, May 22, 1951, FO 371/91865/ EY 1192/12.
These talks are never exactly easy going. Silo keeps in the middle of his desk a large and shiny model of a jet fighter, which he strokes from time to time while eyeing me in a rather meaningful way.\(^2^1\)

Renewed efforts by the West in 1951 to settle refugees in Syria were matched by positive indications about the possibility of a deal on the part of the Syrians. Syrian government officials asked for aid with increasing persistence throughout 1951. Shishakli deliberately held out the possibility of resettlement as an inducement for Western aid. Early in 1951, the Syrian ambassador to Britain told the Parliamentary Under-Secretary that the Americans could win resettlement for a substantial sum of money and quantity of arms. As the Under-Secretary reported:

He said that none of the Arab States could begin to cooperate freely with Israel until the question of the Arab refugees had been settled…. The Arab countries would be only too pleased to absorb them but it was not sufficient simply to set them down on the land and tell them to start life again as peasants. Many of them were artisans, merchants and members of the professional classes and in order to reestablish them a good deal of capital would be required…. The Ambassador suggested that America might provide the money… then said that Syria was in urgent need of arms for self-defence.\(^2^2\)

The Syrians continued to tantalize western officials with possibility of large-scale resettlement if only the West would talk real money and weapons.

Negotiations proceeded throughout 1951 and the early part of 1952 with ever larger numbers being put forward by both sides. General Robertson of the British army reported in 1951 that the Americans were considering large-scale military support for Syria for purely political reasons. He wrote:

Mr. McGhee is impressed with the importance of giving arms to the Syrians. In the case of Syria we are asked to give the arms first, and we are told that the political position will depend upon an adequate supply of arms being received. This may be quite a logical attitude from the Syrian point of view, but it

\(^{2^1}\) PRO, (Damascus) Montagu-Pollock to Geoffrey Furlonge, July 2, 1951, FO 371/91867/ EY 1195/15.

means that we are being asked to buy Syria’s friendship with arms. This may be a proper thing to do.²³

General Robertson was quite explicit that he believed the Syrian army to be rotten and incapable of providing much help to the West in halting a Soviet invasion through Turkey. So long as everyone was clear that military assistance to Syria would be undertaken for political and not military reasons, he would not oppose it. A Foreign Office official explained Britain’s position on aid to Syria as follows: “We are only considering supplying military and economic aid to Syria insofar as this will bring her to our way of thinking and persuade her to carry out such projects as may assist in the major problem of the resettlement of refugees.”²⁴

Shishakli inquired about Western aid with increasing persistence throughout the first half of 1952. Montagu-Pollock, Chief of Legation in Syria, reported that Shishakli “professed to be wholeheartedly in favour of a practical scheme for the resettlement of the refugees,” and that he had commented that “all aid from the West would be welcome, provided the West was prepared to support Syrian independence.”²⁵ Following the failed anti-Shishakli coup of December 1951, Iraq increased its support for Syria dissidents and renewed its call for a united Fertile Crescent, which was to begin with Syrian unification with Iraq. In order to counter Iraqi ambitions in Syria, Shishakli sought to curry favor with the Western powers that had influence over Iraq and could restrain Hashemite unification schemes.

During the early months of 1952, Shishakli called a number of meetings with the Director of UNRWA, Mr. Blanford, and was able to convince him that “the Syrian

²³ PRO, (Damascus) General Brian Robertson, GHQ Middle East Land Forces to Under Secretary of State, War Office, April 19 1951, FO 371/91867/ EY 1195/15.
²⁴ PRO, (Damascus) P. A. Rhodes, “Arms Aid to Syria,” March 5, 1952, FO 371/98921/ EY 1102/7.
Government meant business in its approaches to foreign authorities for funds.”

In April 1952, Blanford announced that there had been a breakthrough. UNRWA had reached an agreement with Shishakli. The plan was to resettle 500,000 refugees in Syria at the cost of $200,000,000. Shishakli demanded a further $200,000,000 in order to improve the Syrian standard of living, or as he phrased it, “parallel development.” Shishakli argued that it would cause problems in Syria if only the Palestinians were to receive assistance. He insisted that Syrians receive an equal amount. “The new programme,” the British Legation reported, “was to help the refugees to obtain adequate housing and employment. They would be transferred from camps and temporary shelter to suburban housing projects and rural villages… The cost of such a programme… would be about $220 m. over three years.” The British report concluded that, “Negotiations for the implementation for the three year plan are now proceeding between U.N.W.R.A. and the Arab Governments…. The prospects of a solution of the problem are now less discouraging than at any time since the Palestine war resulted in the exodus of the refugees.”

In 1952, Congress approved a much-augmented package for the Mutual Security Program, which in conjunction with other aid programs and World Bank funds came close to meeting the Syrian request for parallel development and resettlement costs.

Further momentum to the resettlement plan was provided by the Arab League, which moved to include Syria among the places mentioned in the League’s resolution where it approved of the resettlement of the refugees. As the Foreign Office reported, “The other Arab Governments have been discreetly informed of the Syrian negotiations

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25 PRO, (Damascus) Montagu-Pollock to R. J. Bowker, January 7, 1952, FO 371/98925/ EY 1102/1/E.
26 PRO, (Damascus) Minutes of a Meeting in Foreign Office,” June 27, 1952, FO 371/918520/ EE 18126/10.
and have reacted quite favourably. Leading officials of the Arab League have also given it informal support.”

Shortly after the Egyptian revolution of July 1952 Shishakli shelved his agreement with UNWRA and the Western powers. The British legation cabled the Foreign Office in September that “we have heard no further mention of this programme from the Syrian side and, as you know, Colonel Shishakli recently asked that the plan for re-settling refugees from outside Syria should be postponed indefinitely.” Shishakli returned to complaining about the pressures put upon him by public opinion and his political opponents. British representatives in Damascus explained that Shishakli had been “at pains to exculpate himself in public and private statements. You will remember that Hourani accused him of suppressing freedom, of shackling Syria to the imperialist organizers of Western Pacts and to the oil companies, and also of selling the refugees.”

By the end of 1953, Shishakli’s opponents had grown in number and courage. Iraq called for Shishakli’s removal and supported his right wing opponents while Egypt supported his left wing opponents and fanned the flames of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialist and Zionist sentiment in Syria. In such an environment, Shishakli found it impossible to accept Western aid or to resettle Palestinian refugees. In February 1954, Shishakli was driven from the country by a military insurrection. Neither western countries nor Syria raised the issue of the resettlement of refugees again.

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30 PRO, (Damascus) Samuel to Ross, January 30, 1953, FO 371/104967/ EY1015/5.
In reviewing early Western efforts to solve the Palestine question by resettling refugees in Syria, we can come to several conclusions. Although modern scholarship ignores resettlement negotiations, they were a foreign policy priority for the U.S. and Great Britain during the early 1950s. In particular, the Truman administration was much more active in trying to find a solution to the Palestinian problem than previously suspected for it was ready to bankroll the lion’s share of $400,000,000 resettlement project. The U.S. was unwilling to pressure Israel on the subject of returning refugees. Instead, it believed that the Palestinians could be syrianized, underestimating the importance of nationalism in the region and overestimating the extent to which local problems could be solved by money and offers of economic development. The primary motive of the Western powers in finding a solution to the Palestinian problem was their interest in organizing a Middle East defense plan to fight to Cold War and to contain the Soviet Union.

Syria sought to use the refugee issue for its own interests. Overlooking the welfare of the refugees, Syria tried to use them to squeeze money and weapons out of the West. Instability in Syria ultimately undermined efforts at negotiating an improvement in the living conditions and economic prospects of the Palestinian refugees. The unwillingness and inability of the Arab states to cut a deal on refugee resettlement led the West to turn further toward Israel rather than to pressure Israel to make concessions.


