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Mesopotamia — ‘The Promised Land’: The Jewish Territorial Organization Project in the *Bilād Al-Rāfidayn* and the Question of Palestine, 1899–1917

GUR ALROEY*

There are very few refereed journals that break out of the narrow academic circle and also address the wider, educated public. *Middle Eastern Studies (MES)* is known as an academic journal with a very wide circulation reaching large numbers of the reading public, yet it does so without detriment to the quality of the studies published in it. Many scholars who have published their work in *MES* have received both academic and public acclaim. The editors of *MES* should be congratulated for the meticulous work they have invested in their journal over the years which has contributed to the advancement of the discipline. I have no doubt that these are merely the first 50 years of its existence.

At the beginning of the twentieth century attempts were made by the Zionist Organization and the Jewish Territorial Organization (JTO) to promote Jewish settlement in the region between the two rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris. This was a settlement initiative in which prominent persons in the Jewish world and the Zionist Movement took part, and it was discussed seriously and with much deliberation. But the settlement plans never attained the practical stage, and it disappeared without a trace. One hundred thousand Jews from Russia were not sent by train as planned from Odessa to Iraq, and Jewish settlements were not established there. Nevertheless, although the settlement plan was never carried out, it had great import not on the practical level but on the ideological one.

The attempt to turn Mesopotamia into the ‘Promised Land’ for the Jewish people is interesting especially because of the centrality of Palestine in the Zionist narrative. The initiators of the idea were those in the ranks of the Zionist leadership of the early twentieth century. These were European Jews who had become integrated into European society and had adopted its colonialist values prior to the First World War. These Zionists were prepared to wait for a certain period in order to obtain Palestine.

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and to set up a Jewish autonomous entity in certain areas of the Middle East under British protection.

During the years 1903–5 pogroms occurred in the southern part of Russia and more than 3,000 Jews were murdered. Jewish migration to the United States increased year by year and the living conditions of the Jews in Eastern Europe became more severe. In view of this gloomy situation there were some who thought that a quick territorial solution was required for the Jewish people even at the price of forgoing Palestine. The historical reasons raised by those in favour of Mesopotamia on the one hand, and the arguments on the other hand as to why not Palestine, allow for a renewed and critical examination of the Zionist narrative with regard to Jewish settlement in the area of the Ottoman Empire in general and in Palestine in particular at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part is an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of Territorialist ideology and of Zionist thinking. Contrary to the accepted Zionist narrative which stressed the centrality of Palestine in Zionist ideology, I shall show that until the Balfour Declaration there were a good many prominent activists within the Zionist Movement who wished to promote initiatives to settle Jews in countries outside Palestine. These people were termed by their opponents in the Zionist Organization as ‘Territorialists’. For a number of years the Territorialists were part of the Zionist Organization, but later on they separated from it to set up an alternative, rival organization which searched throughout the world for a tract of land for Jewish settlement. After the Balfour Declaration the Territorial Organization disbanded and returned to the Zionist Organization in order to participate in the promotion of Jewish settlement in Palestine. The second part traces the efforts of the Zionist Movement and of the Jewish Territorial Organization to promote a comprehensive settlement plan in Mesopotamia. The third and last part examines the system of arguments and explanations of the Territorialists against Palestine and for Mesopotamia and other territories in East and Southwest Africa, Canada and Australia. Since the Territorialists regarded themselves as Zionists in every respect and as those who continued the historical path of the Zionist leader, Theodor Herzl, it is also possible through their perspective of the Middle East in general and Palestine in particular, to learn about Zionist thought and position vis-à-vis the peoples of the Middle East during the first three decades of the Zionist Movement.

Territorialist ideology is simply the establishment of an autonomous entity or alternatively a state for Jews in a tract of land that is not Palestine. This ideology came into existence together with Zionist ideology. From the moment that Judah Leib (Leon) Pinsker (1821–91), the founder of the Hibbat Zion movement, wrote in his formative and influential work, Auto-Emancipation (1882), that ‘the goal of our present endeavors must be not the Holy Land, but a land of our own’, there were those in Jewish society who adhered to the idea of ‘our land’ and wished to set up a state or an independent, autonomous entity in a territory other than that of Palestine.

Pinsker was the first thinker who gave significance and depth to the Territorialist idea. He asserted that the spiritual quality of the Jewish people was more important than territory, and therefore a Jewish homeland could be established wherever it was possible and not specifically in Palestine. Since working to obtain a territory was liable to be a difficult and complex task, he thought that there was no necessity to
attach ourselves to the place where our political life was once violently interrupted and destroyed...we need nothing but a large piece of land for our poor brothers; a piece of land which shall remain our property, from which no foreign master can expel us'.

In his pioneering work, Pinsker detached Palestine from the morally justified demand of the Jews for their own land. He claimed that it was not the geographical location of the land that was important but what it symbolized for the Jewish people. Pinsker wrote that when setting out to the designated territory ‘we shall take with us the most sacred possessions which we have saved from the shipwreck of our former fatherland, the God-idea and the Bible. It is only these which have made our old fatherland the Holy Land, and not Jerusalem of the Jordan’. Since Palestine was unobtainable, Pinsker was prepared to compromise on another territory that was capable of giving those Jews who were forced to leave their homes a safe refuge that was undisputed and that could provide a livelihood to its residents.

From the moment that Pinsker did not make the territorial solution to the Jewish question conditional upon Palestine, he paved the way for the development and consolidation of Territorialist ideology. The Territorialists considered him as their founding and spiritual father, and in their arguments with their Zionist rivals they frequently quoted his words in Auto-Emancipation. His assertion that a land of refuge was needed for the Jewish people, that efforts should not be concentrated solely on Palestine, and that the character of the new homeland need not be determined by its geographical location but by the spiritual quality that the Jews would pour into it, would 20 years later turn into the foundation stones of Territorialist ideology.

Pinsker held on to this view till the end of his life. In 1891, just before he died, he wrote in his will that he had not retreated from the principles laid down in his Auto-Emancipation, and that the national centre for the Jewish people need not be established exclusively in Palestine. From his estate, which was estimated at 100,000 roubles, he willed only 2 per cent to Hibbat Zion, as if it was merely a charitable enterprise. Those close to him heard him say before his death:

We will have two ‘national centres’ [spiritual and physical centres], just as we now have ‘two Torahs’ (which are one), ‘two Talmuds’, ‘two prayer versions’, and a few other ‘doubles’ that will not prevent us from being ‘one people’...since the Holy Land cannot be the ‘physical centre’ except for a small number of our Jewish brethren, it is better for us to divide the work of revival for our people into two, so that Palestine will be our national (spiritual) centre and Argentina will be our cultural (physical) centre [Author’s translation].

Herzl’s book The Jewish State, which was published five years after the death of Pinsker and 14 years after the publication of Auto-Emancipation, was the additional and main link in the chain that led to the consolidation of Territorialist ideology and to the strengthening of the ideational trend within the Zionist Movement that Palestine was a possible territory for it but not the mandatory one. In Auto-Emancipation as well as in The Jewish State, the territorial issue was not a decisive one, and instead of ‘our land’ and ‘our holy land’, Herzl was undecided between Palestine and Argentina:
Is Palestine or Argentina preferable? ... Argentina is one of the most fertile countries in the world, extends over vast area, is sparsely populated, and has a temperate climate. It would be in its own highest interest for the Republic of Argentina to cede us a portion of its territory ... Palestine is our unforgettable historic homeland. The very name would be a marvelously effective rallying cry. If His Majesty the Sultan were to give us Palestine, we could in return undertake the complete management of the finances of Turkey. We should there form a part of a wall of defense for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism.7

The indecision of Herzl is especially interesting since, unlike the work of Pinsker, which was published before the Zionist settlement enterprise in Palestine, Herzl’s Jewish State was written after 14 years of Zionist activity when there were 20 settlements in Palestine with Jewish farmers tilling the land. This was no longer the early period of the Zionist Movement, and the colonies — in spite of all the difficulties of the settlers — were already an integral part of the Palestine landscape. Yet, in spite of Jewish settlement in Palestine during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Palestine was not perceived as the sole solution for the Jewish people.

The echo in response to Herzl’s work and his magnetic power over those around him turned the question of the non-Palestine territory into one of the focal points of intense and bitter disputes within the Zionist Movement. Herzl was a charismatic leader who raised the Jewish question on the world agenda and the creator of a real revolution within the organizational structure of the movement, but it was he who brought to the Sixth Congress the controversial proposal that led to a split in the Zionist camp. The Jewish State became the formative document and Herzl became the visionary prophet of a Jewish state. The Zionist Movement regarded him as the founding father, and when the State of Israel was established, his grave was exhumed and his bones were reburied on the mountain that bears his name. However, even among the Territorialists, Herzl was perceived as a mythological figure, and like the Zionists, they saw him as the father of the Territorialist idea and themselves as his followers treading in his path.

The idea of Jewish settlement outside Palestine as an overall solution for the Jewish problem was thus an inseparable part of the political experience of the Zionist Movement from the time of Pinsker until the death of Herzl. Many Zionists did not see any contradiction between their membership in the Zionist Movement and their aspiration to establish a Jewish state that was not in Palestine. Although the platform of the Zionist Organization that was formed after the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 had determined that ‘Zionism aims at establishing for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine’, yet this platform as it became clear in later years was subject to alteration.

In 1902 Herzl examined the possibility of setting up a Jewish state in El Arish. In February 1903 a delegation of seven men set out to investigate the Sinai area. This delegation surveyed 598 square miles and collected data on the soil, water, plant life, quarries, fishing and the climate in Sinai. In addition, it examined the possibility of an anchorage and transport on the Red Sea. The El Arish plan was not carried out and a short while afterwards it was dropped from the agenda. At the Sixth Congress
that assembled in Basel in 1903, Herzl presented the British proposal to establish a Jewish settlement on the Guas Ngishu plateau in East Africa.

This controversial proposal led to a deep and irreparable split in the Zionist Movement. The ‘yea sayers’ in the Zionist Organization supported Herzl’s plan and were willing to forgo Palestine in exchange for the establishment of an area of Jewish autonomy in East Africa. The ‘nay sayers’ on the other hand opposed the plan and claimed that it was necessary to concentrate Zionist activity in Palestine alone. The decision which was accepted at the Sixth Congress was that an investigative expedition would be sent to the designated area to examine whether it was suitable for settlement, that its conclusions would be presented to the Zionist Executive Committee, and that the final decision would be made at the Seventh Congress to be held in Basel in August 1905.

This proposal, which was later on called the ‘Uganda Plan’, engaged the Zionist Organization for two years. Two camps fought against each other. The Jewish street was noisy and in turmoil, the newspapers of that time published articles for and against Uganda, prominent activists from both camps traversed the length and breadth of the Russian Empire with the aim of persuading and recruiting supporters for the decisive Congress, and an attempt was even made to assassinate the Vice-President of the Zionist Organization, Max Nordau, who supported Herzl and his plan. In June 1904, in the midst of the dispute, Herzl unexpectedly died; in December 1904 the expedition set out to tour the designated land; in May 1905 — two months before the opening of the Severn Congress — the head of the expedition submitted his report to the Zionist Executive Committee so that they could discuss its conclusions and hold a vote on whether to accept the British proposal or reject it.

Herzl died at the peak of the controversy over Uganda and before the territorial question was clarified and a decision was made on the final location of the Jewish state. His death left behind a leadership vacuum as well as an ideological crisis that led to a schism in the Zionist Organization and the establishment of a rival Territorial Organization. Two years after Herzl presented the Uganda Plan to the delegates of the Congress, the Zionist Organization rejected it by a majority vote, and passed an additional resolution that prohibited any future tabling of proposals for Jewish settlement outside Palestine. These two decisions that were made at the Seventh Zionist Congress in August 1905 brought about the secession from the Zionist Organization of a group of Zionists who identified themselves with the path of Herzl and the establishment of an alternative organization called the Jewish Territorial Organization.

The secessionists were an integral part of the Zionist Movement and members of the Zionist Organization who participated in its leadership until their resignation from it. Israel Zangwill, the President of the JTO, was a close friend of Herzl and his right hand, and was one of the prominent activists among the British Zionists. David Eder, who resigned from the Zionist Organization but then returned to it after the First World War, was a member of the Zionist Executive in Jerusalem and Chairman of the Zionist Federation in England after the First World War. Max Mandelstamm was an eye doctor and a veteran Zionist, and was among the leading East European Zionists. Nahman Sirkin was the founder of the Zionist-Socialist trend in the Zionist Organization. Judah Hazan was a prominent Zionist activist in Warsaw. And there were many more.
Zangwill was one of the most fascinating and controversial figures in the Zionist Organization, one of the shapers of the Territorialist ideology, and the person who headed the JTO from the day it was founded until it was disbanded. Zangwill was born in London on 21 January 1864 to a poor Jewish family that had migrated from Russia to England. His father, Moses Zangwill, was a Cantonist who managed to escape by the skin of his teeth from the Czarist army and arrived in England in 1848. His mother, Ellen-Hannah Marks, was the daughter of a miller from a small town in Poland, and migrated with her cousin apparently at about the same time in order to join her relatives in London. His parents had a Jewish wedding in 1861, and three years later their eldest son Israel was born. His brother, Lewis, was born in 1869, and the two Zangwill brothers grew up in an orthodox home and were educated in Jewish schools in Plymouth, Bristol, and then at the Jews’ Free School in London where they were exposed to the poverty of the Jewish migrant community in the East End. His daily contact with this community and intimate familiarity with an impoverished Jewry are the key factors for understanding the spiritual world of Zangwill and his political Zionist outlook and later on his Territorialist affiliations. This is well reflected in his plays and novels, such as *Children of the Ghetto* (1892) and *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898), the two works that were the most identified with the life of Jewish migrants in London, and *The Melting Pot* (1909), which is about Jewish migration to the United States. In his descriptions of the suffering and poverty of Jewish migrants in England, Zangwill exposed the English reader to the backyard of Jewish society.

The aim of the Territorial Organization was clear and simple: ‘To obtain a territory on an autonomous basis for those among the Jews who cannot or are not willing to remain in their countries of residence’. In the platform it was written that in order to achieve the desired goals, the organization would strive to unify all the Jews who supported this aim, to create contact with governments and with private and public institutions, and finally to establish financial and other institutions necessary for the realization of its goals. The term ‘autonomous basis’ was defined as a territory that was obtainable and in which Jews would be the outstanding majority. This platform was the ‘Basel Plan’ of the Territorialists and served as the basis for the activities of the JTO during the entire period of its existence.

The Territorialists did not negate Palestine in principle. They claimed that Jewish distress had increased exponentially whilst Zionist activity increased at the mathematical rate, and therefore the Zionists did not have sufficient time to set up a Jewish state in Palestine. So instead of concentrating Zionist activity in Palestine alone, they thought that it would be easier and faster to establish a Jewish state under its own authority in any land area that would be given to them. It was not essential opposition to Palestine that guided them, but on one hand a catastrophic world outlook that negated any possibility for Jewish existence in Europe and on the other hand the unsuitability of Palestine to become the land of refuge for the persecuted Jewish people.

The JTO began its activities during a fateful period for the Jews in the Russian Empire. In the years 1905–6 about 650 pogroms occurred in the south and southwest of Russia during which more than 3,000 Jews were murdered and the number of orphans was estimated at about 1,500, of which 800 had lost one parent; 2,000 people were badly wounded and about 15,000 had moderate to light wounds. Heavy damage was caused to property, and according to estimates it ranged between 57 and...
Figure 1. Israel Zangwill and his family toil the land of Mesopotamia.

84 million roubles-worth. Fire was the main cause of property loss. Towns, synagogues, factories, and shops were consumed by fire, and the sources of livelihood for many Jews were cut off.\textsuperscript{11}

The worse the condition of East European Jewry the stronger the Territorial Organization grew on the Jewish street. Many of the persecuted Jews in Eastern Europe hung their hopes on Zangwill and a quick solution that he proposed to find for the Jewish question. Territorialists conducted negotiations with the British government over East Africa, with the Australian government on the Northeast Territories of Australia, with Canada over the Alberta and Saskatchewan provinces, and with Portugal on Angola. After the Young Turks revolution in July 1908 the Territorialists thought that the time was ripe to promote a settlement initiative in Mesopotamia and began to advance the idea both on the diplomatic level and on the level of Jewish public opinion.

The idea of Jewish settlement in Mesopotamia arose for the first time on 28 December 1899 during a meeting between Herzl and the American Ambassador in Constantinople, Oscar Strauss. In his diary, Herzl defined Strauss as a man who was ‘neither for nor against Zionism’, and noted that the ambassador had sworn him to silence about the conversation and the idea of Jewish settlement in Mesopotamia that was raised in it.\textsuperscript{12} During that same meeting that was held in the Imperial Hotel, Constantinople, Strauss told Herzl that he thought Palestine was not within reach. He claimed that the Greek Church and the Catholic Church would not permit the Zionists to receive a charter on Palestine, but, on the other hand, Aram Naharaim (Mesopotamia) was obtainable.\textsuperscript{13} Strauss told Herzl that ‘There is no rivalry here between the churches, since this is the ancient homeland of Israel’, and added that ‘Abraham came from Aram Naharaim. One can create a mystic connection here’.\textsuperscript{14}

The suggestion made by Strauss to Herzl was not fortuitous, and was preceded by a dialogue that the ambassador had held with two prominent American Jews, Mayer Sulzberger (1843–1923) and Cyrus Adler (1863–1940). Sulzberger was a jurist who had arrived in the United States from Germany during the second half of the nineteenth century and served as a judge in Philadelphia from the year 1895. Adler was an Orientalist and a former student of Paul Haupt (1858–1926), a professor in Baltimore who had researched Mesopotamia and neighbouring countries. In 1892 Haupt published a memorandum called *Ueber die Ansiedlung der russischen Juden im Euphart und Tigris-Gebeit: Ein Vorschlag* (On the Settlement of Russian Jews in the Area of the Euphrates and Tigris: A Proposal), and found adherents to his proposal among leaders of American Jewry, including Cyrus Adler and Oscar Strauss.

Ever since that meeting with Strauss at the end of 1899, Herzl constantly raised the plan for Jewish settlement in Mesopotamia with the sultan and with Jewish bankers whom Herzl hoped would contribute to the Zionist enterprise. Sultan Abdul Hamid II was prepared to open his kingdom to the Jews, but set down certain conditions that Herzl could not accept. This is what Herzl wrote in his diary:

His Excellency the Emperor will allow Jews to migrate to his lands in Asia Minor and Aram Naharaim on condition that the migrants receive permission from their governments to accept Ottoman citizenship. The migrants will be required to accept the Ottoman laws currently in force and to serve in the army. The migration will not be *en masse* nor will settlement be massive, but only in
accordance with imperial decisions in the regions to which the migrants will be
directed ... In exchange for this, His Imperial Excellency requests that a Jewish
financial syndicate be established to assist the government in the regions to
which the migrants will be directed.15

Herzl politely declined the proposal of the sultan, which did not correspond to his
aspirations for independence in one of the territories within the realms of the Ottoman
Empire. About half a year after the discussions with the sultan, Herzl tried to engage
Lord Rothschild in the Mesopotamia settlement plan. In his letter, Herzl mentioned
two possible settlement plans in Cyprus and in El Arish, and a third plan ‘that may be
carried out at the same time with the first one but separately from it. This is totally
confidential. It refers to Aram Naharaim’. Herzl told Rothschild that the Sultan had
offered him ‘settlement in Aram Naharaim (in February of this year when I went to
Constantinople at his invitation). I rejected his proposal because he excluded Palestine
from it. I can return to it tomorrow because my relations [with the sultan] remain
excellent’.16 Rothschild, who was sceptical about the chances for success of the plan,
rejected the proposal and it was taken off the Zionist agenda. In August 1903 at the
Sixth Congress, Herzl presented the Uganda Plan that engaged his attention until his
death on 3 July 1904 and led to the split in the Zionist Movement.

Towards the end of 1905 a change occurred in the situation of the Jews in Eastern
Europe. During the months of October/November 1905 violent pogroms broke out
in Southern Russia and 3,000 Jews were murdered. Jewish emigration from the Rus-
sian Empire reached an unprecedented peak. In 1905 about 130,000 Jews migrated
to the United States and in 1906 more than 153,000 migrants arrived there.17 In view
of the dramatic events in Eastern Europe, the Mesopotamia Plan was raised once
again on the agenda of the Jewish people. This time, in addition to the Zionist Move-
ment which tried to revive the Mesopotamia Plan, the Territorial Organization under
the leadership of Israel Zangwill also showed interest in this land area.

The pressure on the two organizations — the Zionist and the Territorialist — to
find a quick and immediate solution for the persecuted Jews grew greater during the
pogrom period. The Zionists thought that it was possible to divert the large migra-
tion stream that was moving westward in an eastward direction, and that Mesopota-
mia could absorb a significant number of migrants who would draw geographically
closer to Palestine.18

Otto Warburg (1859–1938), a member of the Zionist Executive Committee, and
from 1911 until 1921 the third President of the Zionist Organization, was the one
who tried to advance the Mesopotamia Plan in the Zionist Movement.19 He con-
tacted the famous English irrigation engineer, Sir William Willcocks (1852–1932)
and asked for his assistance. In his letter to the President of the Zionist Organization,
David Wolffson (1856–1914), Warburg requested him to study in all seriousness the
proposed plan and to persuade the Great Powers in its favour:

If we were not so much in a hurry, and if instead of engaging in political sport
and in self-inflicting tactics, we would be engaged in serious and broad-ranging
economic politics, since we surely could now, with the name of Willcocks at the
head, obtain from England and America the necessary funds for a large Aram-
Naharaim Foundation on a commercial basis. But I am afraid, especially after
the experience [the Brussels Conference] that in the view of our ‘politicians’ this will not be sufficiently political, even though it will be necessary to conduct negotiations of all sorts and with the Sultan. I think that we really must begin with this matter, especially when there is no doubt that the British Government will support us in Constantinople, and certainly the Germans and also the French as well — because of the Baghdad railway line and because of cotton cultivation. The very beginning of this enterprise will already strengthen our status to a great extent.20

Willcocks, who is mentioned in Warburg’s letter, was considered one of the greatest irrigation engineers of his time. During the years 1872–82 he worked in India, and from there he moved to Egypt. He planned the Aswan Dam and oversaw its construction. In 1903 he published his book, *The Restoration of the Ancient Irrigation Works on the Tigris or the Re-creation of Chaldea*. After the Young Turks revolution, the new government invited Willcocks to examine the possibilities of economic development in Mesopotamia. In 1909 he proposed wide-scale plans to utilize the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris to make the arid areas flourish by means of a network of irrigation canals and the construction of a railway line running from Baghdad across the desert to the Syrian coast on the Mediterranean.21 In the framework of this plan he suggested settling Egyptian fellahin or farmers from India in Aram Naharaim, without negating the settlement of Jews there.

The appeal by Warburg to Willcocks did not go unanswered, and the English engineer was willing to cooperate with the Zionist Organization:

Now if you are really serious about your irrigation colony or colonies for Jews, and mean to take the matter up thoroughly, I offer my services to your Association and am prepared to thoroughly thresh out the irrigation and agricultural side and try to make them a success . . . I am free now to take up any work in Asiatic Turkey at it is the ambition of my life to see Mesopotamia on the high way to regain its ancient fertility. In Asiatic Turkey I wish to work and would work gladly for your society as your irrigation and agricultural adviser.22

The meeting between Warburg and Willcocks was summed up in a detailed memorandum which was presented to the President of the Zionist Organization, David Wolffson, who was asked to act upon it and discuss it with the institutions of the Zionist Movement. Wolffson rejected Warburg’s plan and was not prepared to retreat from the ‘only Palestine’ principle, and thought that it should not be substituted by any other territory, even one that adjoined it. In a meeting of the Zionist Executive Committee held in Paris he informed him ‘that they [the members of the Executive Committee] did not agree to accept the Cyprus proposal, and had even less desire to enter into the Aram Naharaim matter; they have no faith in the practical ability of Willcocks to raise the funds, etc.; and generally speaking it was not possible to take on such a great burden without first receiving the required licence’.23

In July 1908 the Aram Naharaim Plan was given a boost when the Young Turks revolution led to a change in the government and opened new political horizons. The indefatigable Oscar Strauss drew the attention of Zangwill to the Mesopotamia Plan and informed him that Willcocks was in Iraq to examine the possibilities of irrigation
for the Turkish government. Zangwill, who was at that time searching for territories for the Jewish people and was negotiating with the governments of England, Canada, and Australia for territories in their land, showed great interest in the idea and began to advance it in the institutions of his organization.24

At the beginning of February 1909 the JTO began actively advancing the plan for Jewish settlement in Mesopotamia and applied to the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) — which had accumulated much experience in organizing settlements both in Argentina and in Palestine — and proposed cooperation with them if and when the plan was activated. Zangwill held a meeting in Paris with Narcis Leven (1833–1915), the President of the JCA and the Alliance Israélite Universelle, in order to ensure the participation of both organizations in the settlement plan. In addition, he applied to the Jewish banker Jacob Schiff (with whom he had cooperated on the Galveston Plan) and tried to persuade him to invest in the plan on a business basis.25 Schiff was afraid to undertake the settlement project alone and suggested a general cooperation among various Jewish organizations.26

Unexpected support for the plan was given by Ahmed Riza, the previous Chairman of the Turkish Parliament and a leader of the Young Turks in Paris. He was quoted as saying to the new Hacham Bashi in Constantinople at the beginning of April that the Ottoman Empire would gladly accept Jewish migrants from Russia and Romania. Zangwill hurriedly sent him a letter in which he presented the aims of the Territorial Organization, and noted that it was headed by prominent Jewish leaders among the Jewish people who could take upon themselves a settlement project of this scope and range. Zangwill noted the contribution that the Jewish settlers could bring to Mesopotamia both in capital revenue for the country and in the quality of the settlers. However, he wished to make it clear that the final aim of the JTO was to set up a land of refuge for the Jewish people, and therefore the land should be large enough to absorb hundreds of thousands of migrants who would enter it every year:

Dear Sir. By the same post I am sending Your Excellency a copy of the Report of an Expedition sent by our Organization to Cyrenaica in accordance with the proposal of the late Redjeb Pasha that a large Jewish settlement should be established in that country . . . A speech by Your Excellency has been circulated here purporting to be made by you to the Grand Rabbi Nahum of Turkey, in which you invite the Jews to Mesopotamia. If you really gave such an invitation, then our Organization which is supported by the leading Jews of the world and could undertake the unify all Jewish Organizations in favour of a concrete project, would be willing to go into the matter provided Turkey was ready to set aside definite territory within which the Jews should be able to form the predominant majority. . . . A mere general invitation, however, to the individual emigrant to enter Mesopotamia does not interest our organization which has set itself the task of building up a final land of refuge for those Jews who are unable or unwilling to live in the lands in which they at present live. 27

Because of the proximity of Mesopotamia to Palestine, Zangwill thought that it would be possible to harness the Jewish people in this settlement effort. In his enthusiasm, he linked it with the land of origin of the Patriarch Abraham, and stressed that it was on the borders of the biblical Land of Israel. Like the Zionists who quoted
the scriptures for their return to Palestine, and taking hold of it, Zangwill also quoted from the Book of Deuteronomy the historical borders of the Land of Israel in order to justify why Mesopotamia was ‘the land of destination’:

The Lord our God spake unto us in Horeb . . . Turn you, and take your journey, and go to the Mount of the Amorites, and unto all the places nigh thereunto, in the plains, in the hills, and in the vale, and in the south, and by sea side, to the land of the Canaanites, and unto Lebanon, unto the great river, the River Euphrates.28

According to Zangwill, the territorial borders of Mesopotamia began across the river from Palestine and ends in the east at the River Tigris. In this place ‘the great empire of the Assyrians flourished, and here was the mighty Babylon with its hanging gardens. To-day the whole region is largely swamp and desert’.29

In order to revive Mesopotamia and restore it to its former state, Zangwill called for English–Ottoman cooperation with all the Jewish organizations which wanted to solve the Jewish problem in Eastern Europe. He believed that it was in the power of the Jewish settlers from Russia to bring about this resurgence:

This wonderful country, however, is not necessarily suitable for Europeans. Of twelve thousand Circassian families that tried to colonize here, only a hundred now remain. But seeing that our forefathers flourished here for generations and that numerous Jews still live in Abyssinia and Arabia, it may be that the Jewish stock is more adaptable to the summer heat than the average white race. The South Russian Jew, who would be the first to feel the attraction of the new land lying on the other side of the Black Sea, is already used to a very warm summer.30

Even Zangwill’s right-hand man in Eastern Europe, Dr. Max Mandelstamm, spoke in praise of Mesopotamia and said: ‘This historic land that was once the centre of great kingdoms, cannot be left a deserted wasteland in the future. According to its climate and fertility, the land should return to its former greatness and have an energetic influence on the future revival of Western Asia’.31 Because of the link between Mesopotamia and Palestine, Zangwill expected cooperation with the Zionist Organization which had some personalities within it showing interest in the matter:

If it is not possible to ascend then one must descend; each one should concede to the other, and if not nothing will be done. The JTO and also the others [the Zionists] must make concessions! We know that only by uniting all our forces can we achieve our goals, and we shall do all that is liable to lead to our general collaboration. The Jewish people does not have to be destroyed once again by internal dissent and disintegration. Its freedom should not be the work of one party but of the entire Jewish nation. We hope that Mesopotamia will coordinate all the large Jewish organizations as well as the Zionist Organizations, the JCA, and the JTO programme which is national unity.32
As with the plans for settlement in East Africa and Australia, in the case of Mesopotamia Zangwill tried to take advantage of the interest of European countries, especially England, in the Ottoman Empire. The reasons given by Zangwill in favour of Mesopotamia attest to his colonialist and Orientalist world outlook that was the main moving force behind his search for territory for the Jewish people. The inferiority of the native population was for him a good reason for removing them from their source of livelihood and replacing them with Russian Jewish settlers. In the summer of 1909 he told his followers in Leeds:

You are aware that JTO has chosen the old country of Mesopotamia as the land we recommend that Jewish people to look into first. What and where is this Mesopotamia? It is a neglected portion of the Turkish Empire with few cities and few inhabitants, some settled peacefully, but majority wild nomads and only nominally under Turkish control ... Unpopulated land, you see, is worth nothing in the market. And who is to cultivate the land of Mesopotamia? Who is to build the railways, and, still more important, who is to ride on them? Is it the Kurds and Bedouins? Will they sell their Arab steeds and settle down into farm labourers? Turkey can only get the money from the foreign investor, and who would invest countless millions in waterways and railways for such a remote return?33

The Middle East as it was portrayed in the eyes of Zangwill was uncultured, neglected, and inhabited by savages and backward people. This perspective of the Orient and Oriental society was rooted among the Europeans and often found expression – as we shall see later on in this article – in Zionist and Territorialist thinking. It should be noted that even the Jews of Baghdad did not support the idea of East European Jewish settlement in Mesopotamia. In July 1909, Sasson Haham Yehezkel (1860–1932), one of the leaders of Baghdad Jewry and a member of the Turkish parliamentary delegation to England and France, visited Europe. During his visit he declared that the Turkish government would not be prepared to grant autonomy to a Jewish settlement in Aram Naharaim.34 Yehezkel, as an Iraqi Jewish intellectual, believed that it was possible to be a Jew from the religious aspect, an Arab from the cultural aspect, and an Iraqi from the national aspect. Judaism, from his perspective, was not perceived as an obstacle for his Arabism, and therefore one can understand his opposition to the Territorialist initiative in Mesopotamia.35

Schiff showed a certain interest in the plan at first, but quickly realized its disadvantages and the enormous monetary investment required to turn this tract of land into a place that could absorb settlers. He explained to Zangwill that without government support it would be difficult to carry out the Mesopotamia Plan. The capital funds required to turn the land into a fertile region for settlement was beyond his power and those of other wealthy capitalists in the Jewish world.36

Since the JTO did not have the means to bear the expense alone, its leaders decided to wait and see what the position of the JCA would be on the matter. In October 1909 the JCA council decided to send a research expedition to Mesopotamia to examine the possibilities of settlement there. The members of the expedition began
their work in November 1909 and remained in the area until June 1910. Zangwill found himself dependent upon the conclusions of an expedition that was unrelated in any way to the JTO, with members that were distant from Territorialist ideology, and in the midst of a process for the acquisition of territory over which it had no control. Disconcerted, Zangwill consulted Strauss as to what he should do to quickly activate the Mesopotamia Plan. Strauss told him that he had met with Willcocks and that what he heard from him was not particularly encouraging, and that the land between the two rivers was not suitable for European settlers. He even suggested sending him the full report of Willcocks, but asked him to be discreet and not to say how he obtained it. However, Strauss urged him to wait for the JCA report and its conclusions:

You ask me, ‘What should I do now’; I advise you to cooperate with the JCA, to wait for the results of their investigation, and not to stand up for the JTO Mesopotamia Plan. Even if a small scale settlement there is decided upon, I still recommend that you cooperate with them. Since even large oak trees grow from small acorns. Especially if they are planted in good earth and environment.

The conclusions of the JCA research expedition which was published at the beginning of 1910 was not a positive one. The report said that as long as there was no improvement in the security situation in Mesopotamia and Willcocks’ irrigation plan was not launched, it was too early to begin thinking about Jewish settlement. The agronomist Akiva Ettinger (1872–1945), a member of the JCA expedition, who went out to examine whether Mesopotamia was suitable for Jewish settlement, summarized his conclusions as follows:

1. The north part of Aram Naharaim is destined to be the focal point of a clash between various nations and powers; 2. There is nothing in the region that will attract Jews in particular, and good land also can be found in Russia and in North and South America; 3. Settlement in Aram Naharaim in parallel with Jewish settlement in Palestine will constitute a division of forces and a waste of resources; 4. Aram Naharaim will not arouse national sentiments among Jews; 5. Settlement in Palestine can be more rapid than in Aram Naharaim if efforts were only concentrated in it.

Since it was improbable that these conditions would be met in the foreseeable future, the members of the expedition thought that there was no point in continuing to promote the settlement plan in this region:

The mission sent by the Jewish Colonization Association to Macedonia visited not only that region, but also Adana, Aleppo, Damascus, Beyrut, and other localities in Asia and Asia Minor. The southern part of Macedonia was found unsuitable for settlement by immigrants from Europe. On the other hand there are tracts in Northern and Central Mesopotamia, which, although very hot, deserve consideration for this object owing to their dryness and salubrious climate. The soil is very fertile, but its cultivation would necessitate a heavy expenditure, as extensive irrigation works would first have to be carried out. Without
these preliminary operations and construction of roads, as well as the enforcement of the Constitutional regime, an immigration of Jews, whose number would have to be limited to 10,000, would be impossible.41

As soon as it became clear that the JCA would not undertake the settlement enterprise in Mesopotamia, the plan was filed away and taken off the agenda of the Territorial Organization. Zangwill the indefatigable began searching for other territories for the Jewish people. The last and significant negotiations he conducted was with the Portuguese government over Angola, but this also ended in failure.

The main aim of the JTO was to obtain ‘a territory on an autonomous basis for those among the Jews who were unable or unwilling to remain in their countries of residence’. For this purpose, Zangwill began searching for territories large in size and fertile which were capable of absorbing the Jewish masses.

The main motive of the Territorialists in searching for a territory was, as mentioned before, the physical and economic distress of East European Jewry. The poverty of the Jewish society, the pogroms during the years 1903–5, and the large migration from the European continent led to the resignation of Zionist activists from the Zionist Organization and to the understanding that they should not wait any longer for Palestine because the problems of the times demanded an immediate solution that could not suffer any further delay. In view of their search for an alternative territory to that of Palestine, it is worth examining how the Territorialists explained why not Palestine. And why the time at the disposal of the Zionists to set up a Jewish entity within it was insufficient and the alternative they proposed better and quicker. Moreover, how did it happen that after the Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917 their arguments against Palestine were reversed in favour of it, and they returned to the Zionist Organization after having left it 12 years earlier?

One of the central arguments in Territorialist ideology against Palestine was the question of the Arab population that inhabited it. The Territorialists drew the attention of the Zionists to the fact that Palestine was populated by Arabs and that it was forbidden to ignore this. This claim was not a new one.42 The Zionist philosopher Asher Ginsberg (Ahad Ha’am) was the first to address this issue in 1891. In his article ‘Truth from Palestine’ he claimed that the Jewish farmers who had arrived in Palestine and had settled in it tended to despise the local population and regarded it as composed of benighted boors who did not understand what was occurring around them:

We are used to believing abroad that the Arabs are all talking savages, a people resembling donkeys who see but do not understand what is taking place around them. But this is a big mistake. The Arab, like all the Semitic peoples, has a sharp mind full of cunning. All the cities of Syria and Palestine are full of Arab merchants who know how to exploit the masses and to follow whatever business concerns them, as is the practice in Europe. The Arabs, especially those living in the cities, see and understand our actions and desires in this country, but they keep silent and pretend as if they do not know since they do not regard our actions as posing any danger at present to their future and therefore try to exploit us as well, to derive whatever benefit they can from the new guests, while laughing at us in their hearts.43
Ahad Ha’am also expressed his opposition to the violence and brutality that the Jewish settlers showed towards the local population, and warned them of repercussions in the not too distant future. He compared the Jewish farmers to ‘the slave that rules’, taking advantage of the weakness of the central government in this area of the land in order to exploit and harm the Arabs:

We could surely learn from our past and present history how we must be careful not to arouse the anger of the natives by despicable acts, and how careful we should be in our dealings with a foreign people among whom we have come to reside again, to treat them with love and respect, and needless to say fairly and justly. And what are our brothers doing in Palestine? The very opposite! They were slaves in their land of exile, and suddenly they find themselves in a state of unlimited freedom, a wild freedom that can only be found in a country like Turkey. This sudden change generated within them a tendency to despotism which always occurs in a ‘slave who rules’, and they treat the Arabs with hatred and cruelty, unjustly encroaching upon them, beating them shamelessly without sufficient reason, and take pride in doing so, and no one stands up to stop them from this despicable and dangerous tendency.44

At the same time, in spite of the sharp eye of Ahad Ha’am, this was merely an incidental remark that was not given expression in his later works or in the writings of other Zionist leaders. The Territorialists were the first not only to warn about the implications involved in Jewish settlement in Palestine, but thought that for this reason there should be no settlement there and searched for an alternative territory with a sparse population. In 1904, during the height of the debate about Uganda, Zangwill claimed in one of his speeches that since Palestine was already populated the Zionists should cope with one of the two following solutions: ‘Either to be ready to expel the Arab tribes with the force of the sword, as our forefathers had done, or to cope with the problem of a large hostile population, mainly Muslim, which is accustomed to despise us’.45 In August 1905 he claimed that the Jews would find it difficult to become a majority in Palestine, and therefore it should be given up and a search made for a sparsely populated land:

There is, however, a difficulty from which a Zionist dares not avert his eyes, though he rarely likes to face it. Palestine proper has already its inhabitants, the pashalik of Jerusalem is already twice as thickly populated as the United States, having fifty-two souls to the square mile. And not 25 per cent of them Jews; so we must be prepared either to drive out by the sword the tribes in possession as our forefathers did or to grapple with the problem of a large alien population, mostly Mohammedan and accustomed for centuries to despise us.46

It was not only the numerical ratio between Jews and Arabs that Zangwill regarded as a problem that the Zionists would have to cope with, but also the Arab ownership of most of the lands in Palestine which he saw as a real concern:

At present we are only 12 per cent of the population, and hold only 2 per cent of the land. A good deal of the holy soil is in the hands of private proprietors, and
would not be ours even if we got the Charter, while the Crown lands, which belong to the Sultan, and might, therefore, be negotiated for as a whole, are, unfortunately, low and swampy and fever-haunted.47

Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942) also referred to the question of the Arab population in Palestine. Zeitlin grew up in a strictly religious Hassidic family, was exposed at a young age to the Haskala (Enlightenment) movement and was captivated by its charms. He left the Torah and its commandments and began learning modern Hebrew and publishing articles on various subjects in the Jewish press — in Hebrew and in Yiddish — at the end of the nineteenth century. He was one of the enthusiastic supporters of Herzlian political Zionism and even served as a delegate of the Homel Zionists at the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901. After the Uganda affair, he resigned in frustration from the Zionist Organization and joined the JTO. In 1905 he was appointed the editor of the journal Hazeman which was in those years the mouthpiece of the Territorial Organization.48

In his article ‘The Crisis: Territorialist Notes’, Zeitlin expressed his concerns about the Jewish people following the decisions that were made at the Seventh Zionist Congress: ‘It is not the division that I am worried about, it is not about the split that I care about, and not about the ban that troubles me, but about the destruction of the nation. Awake and in dreams the words that always stand before me are the Third Destruction — the destruction of the nation’.49 The reason for his anxiety was the Zionist position that pinned all its hopes on Palestine and regarded it alone as the national homeland of the Jewish people. Zeitlin pointed out the intellectual failure of Zionist ideology as overlooking the fact that Palestine was inhabited by Arab ‘Palestinians’, as he phrased it:

And who has given you Palestine or will give it to you? Or perhaps you are able to take Palestine? . . . What all the Palestinians forget either by accident or intentionally, is that Palestine is in the hands of others and is completely inhabited. I have as much right to dream about Palestine as I would have to dream about Paris or London.50

Zeitlin countered the claim frequently made by the Zionists that the Territorialists were ‘floating in the air’ while the Zionists were more practical. Zionism, as he argued, could not be realized because of the Arabs living in Palestine: ‘In what way will you eject half a million Arabs residing in Palestine? In what way will you oust the large numbers of Christians living in it?’ His questions were left unanswered by the Zionists, and since this was so, Zeitlin thought that one should regard Zionism as a utopian movement that would find it hard to achieve its goals. ‘We are optimists’, Zeitlin asserted, ‘until the time comes to realize our idea and until a real settlement arrives . . . You [the Zionists] are optimists of a totally different kind. You want what has once existed and that can never be again. You are creating for yourselves your utopia in a place which is not your own and cannot be yours.’51

The outcome of the First World War created a new political reality which narrowed the range of activity for the JTO. However, within the Palestine arena new political opportunities were generated that allowed the Zionist Movement to attain impressive diplomatic achievements. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the
interest that Britain had in the Middle East were the basis for lengthy, exhausting and tiresome negotiations between the Zionist leadership and the British authorities which evolved into the official recognition by the British government of the right of the Jewish people to a national homeland in Palestine.

The Territorialists received the achievement of the Zionist Movement with acclaim and enthusiastic support. This was not a surprising reaction since from the beginning of the First World War Zangwill thought that the overall Jewish interest should be linked with the interests of the Allied states. In 1915 the President of the JTO proposed grouping the Jews into separate fighting battalions, and when the Mule Drivers Battalion was formed, he expressed the hope that the British Army would allow the battalion to conquer Palestine. He thought the British should divert the war to the Palestine front, to seize it from the Turkish Empire and to transmit it to the Jews who would guard British interests in the region. In May 1917 – half a year before the Balfour Declaration – Zangwill published an article entitled ‘The Future of Palestine’ in which he emphasized the natural bond between the Zionist Movement and England. According to Zangwill, even though there were Zionist institutions in Germany and Austria, England was the spiritual centre of the Zionist Movement, and stressed that from the very beginning of his diplomatic efforts Herzl thought that only under British patronage would it be possible to realize the dream of a Jewish state, and he anticipated that the Zionist Organization would continue on this path.

In view of these positions, it is not surprising that on 2 December 1917 in a ‘thanksgiving assembly’ that was held in London to celebrate the publication of the Balfour Declaration, Zangwill gave a speech in favour of it and congratulated Weizman and Sokolow for their impressive achievement. He noted that the JTO could not oppose the Balfour Declaration and it would be a betrayal of its principles if it did so. The aim of the JTO, he claimed, was to ‘obtain a territory on an autonomous basis for those among the Jews who could not or did not wish to remain in their countries of residence’, and the Balfour Declaration ‘in the spirit of the JTO’ conditioned the establishment of a national homeland upon the preservation of the rights and political status of the Jews in their countries of residence.

From his point of view, this was the other side of the same coin and an ideal solution around which World Jewry should and even must unite. On one hand the equal rights of Jews who did not want to come and settle in Palestine would be preserved, and on the other hand the possibility would be given to those who could not or did not wish to remain in their countries to come to Palestine and settle it. However, in spite of the explicit promise of the British government, there remained certain groups among the Jewish people, especially in England, who opposed the declaration and were afraid of it. Zangwill asserted that it was the duty of the JTO to become the bridge that would form a link between the Zionists and their opponents.

In order to minimize the fears of the opponents, Zangwill suggested renaming Palestine as ‘Judah’ and the Jews living there as ‘Judeans’. All the others who did not go to Palestine would be called Jews. In this way there would be a clear division between the Jews of Palestine and the Jews of the Diaspora who felt threatened by a Jewish state. He ended his speech with an emotional call upon nations of the world which were suffering and repressed to learn from the longstanding patience of the Jewish people and that the power of the spirit was stronger than the power of the
sword, ‘and the prophet who envisioned the resurrection of his people was not less prophetic when he declared peace upon all nations in Jerusalem’.56

Zangwill’s speech in favour of the Balfour Declaration reflects the position of the JTO towards Zionism during the years of struggle between these two movements in the period that preceded the declaration and the First World War. It shows that this position was not due to any opposition to Palestine in principle but to the realization that during those years of pogroms and mass migration the Zionists would not succeed in attaining any real achievements. In addition to all these, Zangwill thought that the Ottoman Empire would raise difficulties and would not allow the Zionist enterprise to strike root in Palestine and to take shape and form. However, the moment the obstacles were removed and the rights of the Jewish people to a national homeland was recognized, Zangwill no longer had reason to continue searching for a suitable territory for Jewish settlement.57 In his support for the Balfour Declaration Zangwill put an end to the activities of the Jewish Territorial Organization. The practical expression for this was his absence from the Peace Conference that was held in Paris in January 1919 and the non-presentation of a plan by the JTO for the Jewish question. Zangwill left the political arena to the leadership of the Zionist Organization and allowed it to meet with the leaders of the Allied nations to discuss the position of Palestine within the new post-war political order:

The Jewish Territorial Organization did not present any rival plan to the Great Powers that gathered in Paris — solely to give the Zionists a free field of operation. The Jewish Territorial Organization was forced to miss the opportunity given to it — to formulate some other request regarding one of the areas owned by the British Empire in Canada, Australia or even in America. The request for improving the situation of the Jews was left to the Zionists alone.58

Yet alongside the support, Zangwill was also critical of the Zionist leadership with regard to the way it had conducted the negotiations that led to the declaration. In his view, the compromise over the term ‘national homeland’ instead of ‘Jewish state’ was a mistake. Zangwill totally rejected the explanations of Weizman that if the Jews had demanded a state they would not have received it. He called Weizman’s conduct ‘cowardly’ and a ‘forfeiture of Zionism’.59 In his words, any solution that does not lead to the creation of a Jewish state is unacceptable and should be opposed since our eternal aspirations as expressed on the night of the Passover Seder is not only ‘Next Year in Jerusalem’. We always said at the same time ‘Next Year as free men’. But if we are represented as a minority in the governing council of Palestine that, as I heard, will be set up in the Holy Land — this will not mean freedom.60

Zangwill was the most trenchant (Zionist) critic of Weizman and the Zionist leadership at the beginning of the 1920s. In a comparison which he made between the Balfour Declaration and the contents of the British declaration given to Herzl in 1903 regarding East Africa, Zangwill judged that the space to manoeuvre for the Zionist Movement was far greater in the Uganda Plan, and this showed to what extent ‘Zion-directed Zionism had been reduced’.61 The Balfour Declaration, which Zionist leaders tended to shower with ‘a flood of messianic manifestos — political,
spiritual and financial’, was in fact a limited declaration that would make it difficult for the Zionist Movement to attain real political achievements. Balfour, as Zangwill argued, is ‘the kind of politician who favoured vagueness and avoided any positive definition’, and his declaration of 2 November is a faithful expression of this. ‘No doublespeak of Mr. Balfour to Lord Rothschild’ will ever give the declaration more than it contains. ‘This document does not mention anywhere about Palestine as the national homeland of the Jews, but only as a Jewish national homeland in Palestine.’

Since this was the case, Zangwill claimed that it was not clear ‘what would be the status of the Jew’ in Palestine. ‘Would he become a citizen of a new (or now nascent) British Arab state in Palestine? Would his nationality be British, Jewish or Palestinian?’ It seemed the Jew would be ‘Palestinian’, but the nations of the world would regard him as British in every respect, Zangwill asserted. This situation was liable to endanger the system of relations with the majority society for Jews who did not go to Palestine. And since the Jews of the Diaspora will send money to help their brothers living in Palestine, they are liable to create the impression of being pro-British. In a situation of hostilities between Britain and other powers that have a Jewish population, the local Jews will be portrayed as having double loyalty in the best case and as traitors in the worst case. Therefore only a Jewish state, which means a sovereign political entity, can define the identity of the Jews in their country and normalize their relations with other nations in the world and with Diaspora Jewry.

Zangwill also had strong criticism against the Zionist leadership for ignoring the Arab question, for making light of the matter and not realizing that Jewish settlement in Palestine would be met with fierce opposition by the Arab population. The problem of the system of relations between the Jews and the native population was of central importance in Territorialist thinking. In all the negotiations conducted by Zangwill, the first condition was that the designated territory would be uninhabited (or sparsely populated). This was the case in the negotiations over the Guas Ngishu Plateau, Alberta in Canada, the Northwestern Territories in Kimberley, Australia, and the Benguela Plateau in Angola. The Arab population in Palestine was large and therefore he regarded it as a bad kind of territory, prophesying that it would not succeed in bringing about a real solution to distressed Jewry. The famous saying – which is wrongly attributed to Zangwill – ‘Give us a land that has no people for a people without a land’ was totally disavowed by Zangwill, who noted that it was not he but the philanthropist, Lord Shaftesbury, who said it.

In his article ‘The Policy of the Zionist Leadership’ of February 1919, Zangwill wrote that ‘The Jewish Territorial Organization had never stung its critics in reprisal. We always recognized that if there was a possibility of obtaining Palestine, it would be our duty to exchange our territory for Zion, and we would do this gladly’. However, he stressed that, ‘I cannot understand how we can realize even our social and economic ideals in the political conditions that have now been created’. The Jews in Palestine were a minority in a majority Arab society which would not welcome the masses of Jews arriving in it. Therefore, ‘If a Jewish state has to be established by Jewish immigration, you have an incalculably difficult task facing you – to overcome the decisive majority that presently exists in a ratio of six to one’. The delight of the Jews at the Balfour Declaration was matched by the fears it caused among the Arab population. The Arabs, just like the Jews, treated the declaration seriously and
therefore ‘could not understand — and justifiably — how that same meagre territory could provide enough space for two national homelands’.

Although Zangwill showed sensitivity to the Arab issue, he did not recognize their national rights. He viewed the Land of Israel as the historic land of the Jewish people and recognized the right of the Jews to settle there, but refrained from recognizing the rights of the Arabs. ‘Their numerical majority’, claimed Zangwill, ‘still does not give them the right over the land which they are destroying more that settling it.’ Large parts of the countryside were neglected and are unsuitable for settlement. They ‘were formed during the time of the Arabs and the Turks who together took the trouble to devastate it’. Since the responsibility lay with the Arab population it had no right over Palestine. However, the presence of the Arabs in Palestine was a fact that had to be dealt with and given attention.

In view of this demographic reality, the conclusion of Zangwill was that only one people could be settled in Palestine and that the Jews should strive to remove the Arab population from it. ‘It seems to me that if logic and good will cannot provide a solution — and of course it is necessary first of all to try and use them — the single act of enforcement is good for both sides rather than eternal friction; just as the extraction of a sick tooth is better than endless toothache’. Zangwill recommended that the Arab leadership should be satisfied with ‘the revival of Arab glory in the Hejaz and in Damascus’, and not to become entangled ‘in a protracted and exhausting dispute with the Jewish on one tiny claim’. In his view, the Arabs of Palestine should not wait until they become a minority after the expected migration of the Jewish masses, and therefore he recommended that they gradually migrate to countries outside Palestine, since in any case ‘this is our own undisputed territory’. The land that Zangwill recommended to the Arabs of Palestine was Mesopotamia:

The Arabs should recognize that the road of their renewed national glory lies through Baghdad, Damascus, and Mecca, and all the vast territory freed for them from the Turks, and be content so far as Palestine is concerned to be politically submerged. The powers which freed it and them have surely the right to ask them not to grudge the petty strip necessary for the renaissance of a still more down-trodden people.

Zangwill changed his basic position from the period of his activities as President of the JTO when he claimed that it was not possible to settle in Palestine because it was populated. He still held the position that two peoples could not share the same territory, but this time instead of settling Jews in an alternative territory he called for the transfer of the local population. Thus Mesopotamia, the land of origin of the Patriarch Abraham located on the borders of the biblical Land of Israel, would become the land of refuge for the Arabs of Palestine. Instead of Jewish refugees from Russia that would go there to till the soil, Arab refugees from Palestine expelled by the Zionists would move there. From the Promised Land for the Jewish people, Mesopotamia would become the Land of Refuge for the Arabs of Palestine.

This article has traced the attempts of the Zionist Organization and later on the Jewish Territorial Organization to set up an autonomous Jewish entity in Mesopotamia during the years 1909—10. This tract of land was supposed to provide a solution for
the persecuted Jewish masses trying to flee from their countries of origin and to reach a new territory where they could begin a new and independent life. The Territorialists set down three criteria for the choice of a territory for the Jewish people: 1. The land should be large enough to allow for the absorption of masses of Jewish migrants; 2. the territory should be fertile so that it could support the Jews arriving there; 3. it should be sparsely populated so that ethnic friction would not be created between the Jews settling there and the local inhabitants. Palestine, from the Territorialist viewpoint did not meet these three conditions and therefore it was thought necessary to search for an alternative territory.

The Mesopotamia Plan failed and the chances for its success in view of the geopolitical realities of the early 1920s were low from the very start. Nevertheless, its importance does not lie in its success or failure but in the fact that through it one can better understand the Zionist position in principle towards the peoples of the Middle East in general and Palestine in particular. The Territorialists seceded from the Zionist Organization after the Uganda affair and returned to it after the Balfour Declaration. Throughout this period they regarded themselves as Zionists in every way and as followers in the historic path of Herzl. In many senses the JTO was the alter-ego of the Zionist Movement and whoever tries to understand Zionist ideology in all its aspects and variations can do so through the Territorialist thought that emerged from within the Zionist Movement and was an inseparable part of it.

Four insights emerge from this article both with regard to the centrality of Palestine in Zionist thought and the relationship of Zionism to the native population in the Middle East.

1. Until the Balfour Declaration there was no consensus in the Zionist Movement about the solution to the Jewish question in Palestine. Herzl was the one who took an interest in Mesopotamia for the first time in 1899; he sent an expedition to investigate Sinai at the beginning of 1903; and in August 1903 he presented the delegates at the Sixth Zionist Congress with the proposal he had received from the British government to settle Jews in East Africa. Even after his death, there were still central figures in the Zionist Movement such as Otto Warburg, who later became President of the Zionist Organization, who tried to revive the plan for settlement in Mesopotamia. The JTO continued the Herzlian line, and the Territorialists went in search of a territory for the Jewish people outside Palestine. Throughout this time, there were activists in the Zionist Movement who regarded Palestine as the sole solution and were in opposition to both Herzl and the Territorialists. Yet it is this very dispute that shows us how the Basel Plan that had been accepted at the First Zionist Congress in 1897 and that aspired to establish for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine was subject to change. Only after the Balfour Declaration, when the British gave their imperial patronage to the establishment of a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine, did those voices that had called for the establishment of a Jewish state outside Palestine vanish. The Jewish Territorial Organization was disbanded and its members returned to the Zionist Organization.

2. The Mesopotamia plan shows that it was possible to find historical justification for the rights of Jews to settle in a land that was not Palestine. Like the Zionists, Zangwill also had recourse to the Holy Scriptures, to the father figure of the
Jewish people — Abraham, and the ancient Jewish settlement in Babylon. The Territorialist attempt to portray Mesopotamia as part of the biblical Land of Israel shows that every national movement needs a historical-mythological basis to recruit the masses. This was the case for the Territorialists and in many senses also for the Zionists.

3. In order to obtain a territory for the Jews — whether Mesopotamia or Palestine — both the Zionists and the Territorialists relied on the European colonial powers and tried to exploit European interests in areas under their control for the sake of Jewish interests. However, it should be noted that the main motivation of the Zionists as well as the Territorialists was not the dispossession of the local population and the exploitation of its natural and human resources for the sake of this or that colonial power; it was an attempt to solve the Jewish problem in countries where the Jews were in distress (mainly in Eastern Europe) with the growing number of pogroms and the fear that the gates of the United States would close. It was a pragmatic attempt to resolve a concrete problem that was not hidden behind any complex ideology.

4. However, even if there was no intention to exploit the local population, neither the Zionist nor the Territorialist movements considered the needs and desires of the native population. The attitude of the founding fathers of the Zionist Movement, Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, Ahad Ha’am, and Ber Borochov was clearly a European attitude towards the Orient and its inhabitants which found expression in the general European consensus about the non-European world as peopled by backward nations and savages. According to this approach the entire Orient was an uncivilized region far distant from Western progress. ‘Territorial Orientalism’ was similar in many ways to Zionist Orientalism, but differed from it in one thing only. Contrary to Herzl and Nordau who believed in co-existence between Jews and Arabs, Zangwill was very pessimistic about the degree of cooperation between the two populations — the Jewish European and the natives — in sharing the same piece of land. This pessimism led Zangwill to the solution of population transfer in order to avoid ceaseless ethnic friction.

The Zionist and Territorialist settlement plan to establish a state for the Jews in the area that extended between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers was not realized. However, the importance of this plan did not lie in its success or failure but in the fact that Mesopotamia first and foremost mirrored the attitude of the Zionist Movement towards the Arab population in Palestine and the attempts to establish a Jewish state. Through it one may reassess the system of Zionist justifications for Palestine and examine the settlement enterprise in it.

Notes
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.154.
9. Constitution of the ITO, Central Zionist Archives (CZA), A36, file 1, 1.
10. Ibid.
13. The term Aram Naharaim is the biblical name for the region which is usually identified as the land of origin for Abraham located in the northern part of Syria near the Turkish border.
15. Ibid., 19 Feb. 1902, pp.388, 393.
16. Ibid., 12 July, 1902, p.34.
19. Ibid., p. 15.
23. Sefer Varburg, p.43.
25. The Galveston Plan (1907-1914) wanted to divert Jewish migration from the densely crowded cities in the eastern part of the United States (New York, Philadelphia and Boston) towards the western states of the country where employment was low. The plan was the product of a meeting of interests between Israel Zangwill, President of the Jewish Territorial Organization and the Jewish banker Jacob Schiff, for whom the concentration of Jews in New York aroused his great concern. During the years 1907–14 about 10,000 migrants were sent to the port of Galveston in Texas. On the Galveston Plan, see B. Marinbach, Galveston: Ellis Island of the West (New York: SUNY, 1982). See also G. Alroey, ‘Galveston and Palestine: Immigration and Ideology in the Early Twentieth Century’, American Jewish Archives, Vol.LVI (2004), pp.129–50.
26. Letter of Jacob Schiff to Israel Zangwill, 29 March 1910, CZA, A36, file 64.
27. See Letter of Israel Zangwill to Ahmed Riza, 30 April1909, CZA, A36, file 64, pp.1–2.
29. Zangwill, Be Fruitful and Multiply.
30. Ibid., p.12.
31. See ‘Havat Da’to shel ha-Profesor Mandelstam ‘al dvar Mesopotamiya’ [The Opinion of Professor Mandelstam on Mesopotamia], Hed Hazeman, 117 (11 June 1909), p.3 [in Hebrew].
33. Zangwill, Be Fruitful and Multiply, pp.11, 13.
34. Heymann, Ha-Tenua ha-Zionit, p.45.


38. See Letter from Oscar Strauss to Israel Zangwill, 10 Jan. 1910, CZA, A36, file 64, p.1


40. Quoted from: Heiman, Hatemuva ha-Zionit, p.51. See also the letter in full in Appendix 5, pp.67–71.

41. Mesopotamia, CZA, A36, file 64.


43. A. Ha’am, ‘Emet mi-Eretz Yisrael’ [Truth from Palestine], in Ahad Ha’am: Al Parshat ha-Drakhim [Ahad Ha’am: On the Crossroads] (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1923), p.28.

44. Ibid., p.40.


50. Ibid., 264.

51. Ibid., 265.

52. See Zangwill, Voice of Jerusalem, p.96.


54. Ibid., p.334.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., p.338.


59. Ibid., p.175.

60. Ibid.

61. See I. Zangwill, ‘Miksam ha-Shav shel ha-Medina ha-Yehudit’ [The False Hope of a Jewish State], in Zangwill, Ha-Derech le-Atzmaut, p.223.

62. Ibid., p.224.

63. Ibid., p.228.


66. Ibid., p.185.

67. Ibid., p.187.

68. Ibid., p.193.

69. Ibid., p.189.