

FACT, FICTION AND FACTION ON CUBA'S OPPOSITION TO JEWISH STATEHOOD IN PALESTINE, 1944–1949

Ignacio Klich*

Nearly half a century after the plan to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states received the support of thirteen Latin American countries at the United Nations (UN), Cuba's presence among the seven who cast non-affirmative votes on 29 November 1947,¹ as well as her consistent opposition to the scheme, have begun to receive more detailed scholarly attention.² A better understanding of the contradiction between Cuba's anti-partition vote and the otherwise favorable attitude towards Jewish statehood evinced by important sections of her ruling coalition and society cannot, however, possibly be reached without consulting Cuban archives. Nevertheless, other diplomatic documents, as well as oral and published accounts — whether Arab and Israeli, British and North American, or Latin American —

* Research for this paper was funded by the Foundation for Canadian Studies in the United Kingdom, and the Rockefeller Archive Center. Margalit Bejarano is gratefully acknowledged for supplying transcripts of interviews she recorded for the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry [some of which have since appeared in her compilation *La comunidad hebrea de Cuba: La memoria y la historia* (Jerusalem, 1996)], as is M. Belt for data on her late husband's Yorkshire ancestors. Thanks are also due to Eduardo Azize, Alejandro Hales Jamarne, Robert Levine, Gladys Perdomo Lorenzo, Rosa Perla Raicher, and Jacobo Serruya for seven other useful items. Earlier versions of this paper benefited from the valuable comments of the already mentioned Bejarano, the now deceased Maurice Halperin, María Encarnación Varela and Lawrence Whitehead.

1. Partition's Latin American supporters included Brazil, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. The non-affirmative votes — all, except Cuba's, abstentions — came from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico.
2. Ignacio Klich, "Cuba and the Partition of Palestine: A Contribution to the History of Latin America's Single 'No' to Jewish Statehood," (paper presented at the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1989). See also, Margalit Bejarano, "Antisemitism in Cuba under Democratic, Military and Revolutionary Regimes, 1944–1963," *Patterns of Prejudice* (London), vol. 24 no. 1, 1990, pp. 33–36; Robert M. Levine, *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba* (Gainesville, 1993), pp. 219–20.

certainly yield sufficient material for a richer and more factual explanation than those based exclusively on peppered or unspiced *petites histoires*, i.e. the anecdotal accounts of some of the actors of the day.

Whether happy or bitter, most such reminiscences tend to pin responsibility for Cuba's opposition to partition on the country's top diplomat in Washington and at the UN, Guillermo Belt y Ramírez, a man of distinguished Yorkshire ancestry. Paradoxically, there is no dispute as to Belt's front seat role between two such former antagonists as Isa Nakhla, a member of the Palestinian Arab Higher Committee (AHC) observer delegation at the UN, and Moisés Toff (later Moshe Tov), the Jewish Agency's Latin American department head, charged with gaining the region's support for Jewish statehood.³ Seduced by oral accounts of Belt's lack of enthusiasm for Zionist aspirations, Edward Glick, a one-time aide within the Israeli delegation to the UN and the author of the first academic study on Latin America and the partition of Palestine, postulated that the absence of such enthusiasm, together with the "individual discretion on [the Palestine question on] the part of Latin American diplomats," were, perhaps, representative of "a more complete explanation why Cuba[...] voted against partition."⁴ While Belt's unbending attitude towards partition is hardly a secret, his firm stand, and by implication that of his country, has been disdainfully explained away by some of the actors as merely the result of an alleged anti-Jewish animus (which this Cuban diplomat reputedly shared with the island's then head of state), and of a well-rewarded bias in favor of the Arabs, both exacerbated by Belt's Americanophilia and particularly powerful position within the Cuban government of the day.

Naturally, other no less authoritative sources have been more generous towards Cuba, their country. They have seen things in a perfectly principled and respectable light. For example, Manuel Antonio de Varona Loredó, a legislator of President Ramón Grau San Martín's Cuban Revolutionary Party (Auténtico) and Prime Minister in the Auténtico government that recognized Israel's independence in January 1949, ascribed "our party's opposition [to partition] to [the principle of] non-intervention and the rejection of any country's division just to please a minority." "Aware of the

3. Isa Nakhla, interview by author, New York, 1987; Moshé A. Tov, *El murmullo de Israel: Historial diplomático* (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 152. On Belt's English ancestry, see "Account of the Belt Family, of Bossall, in the County of York," *Gentleman's Magazine*, June 1828.
4. Edward B. Glick, *Latin America and the Palestine Problem* (New York, 1958), p. 110; idem, "Latin America and the Palestine Partition Resolution," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 1 no. 2, 1959, pp. 215–16.

need to find a territory for [the State of] Israel," many years later De Varona reasoned that this could not have been done at any cost, otherwise "an indefinite state of war, as actually occurred, would ensue."⁵ Despite its attractiveness, De Varona's dignified explanation, one which appears to rely on interpretations of past events on the basis of later developments, is also problematic. For one thing, it conceals the fact that the ruling Auténticos had no party policy on Palestine. For another, it fails to acknowledge that in the absence of such a policy some Auténtico politicians saw no conflict between party allegiance and support for the Zionist cause. Thus, De Varona and other Auténtico politicians may legitimately have viewed partition as an infringement of the principle of non-intervention, and even have proclaimed as much with praiseworthy integrity when living in exile in Miami (despite such an admission's potential to harm their recruitment of US Jewish backers against Fidel Castro's rule). But the Grau government was apparently ready to countenance Cuban leadership at the inter-American conference in Chapultepec, seeking the meeting's approval for a pro-Zionist statement in February-March 1945, while Auténtico politicians supported similar pronouncements by the Cuban Senate in October 1945 and September 1947.⁶ They also joined the Jewish Agency-inspired pro-(Hebrew)

5. Manuel de Varona Loredó, interview by author, Miami, 1989. Emilio Núñez Portuondo, a former Cuban Liberal Party Senator and pro-Israeli publicist, explained that his country did not support partition because this was not in Cuba's best interests. For a more succinct version of the same, see the recent Cuban study by Domingo Amuchástegui Álvarez and Emilio Arias Castillo, "Posición de los países de América Latina y el Caribe en la ONU ante la crisis del Medio Oriente (1947-1982). Condicionamiento y variaciones," in Domingo Amuchástegui Álvarez, Emilio Arias Castillo, Olga M. Rufins Machín and Jorge Manfugás Lavigne (eds.), *Problemas actuales del mundo árabe* (Havana, 1988), p. 7.
6. Central Zionist Archives (CZA), Jerusalem, Z5/11160, Ramón Zaydín to Natán Bistrizky, 3 February 1944; Zaydín to Louis Lipsky, 29 February 1944; Rochelle Sefaradi Yarden to Zaydín, 6 April 1944; S25/7504, Desiderio Weiss to Jewish Agency, 12 February 1944; S5/805, Charles Schwartz to Jewish Agency, 27 November 1945; Z5/1296-I, Sefaradi to Felipe Pazos, 10 July 1946; Z5/11192, Arthur Lourie to Moisés Toff, 5 June 1947; Toff to Lourie, 8 June 1947; Z5/11143, Sender Kaplan to Moisés Toff, 14 November 1947; Elías Seroussi and Pedro Grzywacz to José Serrato, 27 February 1945, in Haim Avni, Rosa Perla Raicher and David Bankier (eds.), *Historia viva: Memorias del Uruguay y de Israel* (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 76; Israel State Archives (ISA), Jerusalem, 2274/37, Resolution of the Cuban Senate, 29 October 1945; 2276/7, Ofelia Domínguez Navarro to Sefaradi, 3 and 5 November 1946; Sefaradi to Domínguez, 7 November 1946; Washington National Record Center (WNRC), Suitland, Md., US embassy in Havana, 800 Zionists 1947, R. Henry Norweb to George Marshall, 25 September 1947. *Havaner Lebn Almanach* 5707 (1946), p. 22; A. Kritshmar-Yizreali, "Latáin Amerikaner Tсионизм als a Politisher Faktor," *Dos Yiddishe Folk*, February 1947, p. 7; *El País* (Havana), 15 May 1947; *Mañana* (Havana), 25 November 1947; Natán Bistrizky, *Del judaísmo y el sionismo en Latinoamérica* (Buenos Aires, 1949), p. 126. Cuban readiness to take a

Palestine committee and the Cuban lower house pro-(Hebrew) Palestine group.⁷ The shortcomings of De Varona's retrospective explanation notwithstanding, it dovetails with Palestine's demographic reality at the time of partition and the advice Grau is likely to have received from Belt, and also ties in well — perhaps too neatly however — with the Arab-Israeli conflict that followed.

Like other Latin American diplomats of the day, whether those who were always unfavorable to the Zionist cause or others who later appear to have reconsidered their earlier pro-Zionist stance,⁸ Ambassador Belt was

leading role in support of Jewish national aspirations at Chapultepec can be traced back to the dinner which the previous administration's Prime Minister, Ramón Zaydín, offered in honour of a Zionist envoy, Natán Bistrizky. Sefaradi's letter to Pazos, the Jewish appeal to Uruguayan Foreign Minister Serrato for his country's support of the Cuban initiative, as well as Bistrizky's book convey the clear impression that the Grau government actually did so. For his/her part, Kritshmar reveals that the initiative was quashed through US Secretary of State Edward Stettinius' intervention.

7. The Cuban pro-(Hebrew) Palestine Committee started agitating early in 1944, and served as a model for similar bodies elsewhere, while the legislature's pro-Palestine group was established in November 1946. CZA, Z5/737, Leib Jaffe to Latin American committee, 8 October 1943; Latin American department to Lipsky, 9 March 1944; Z5/11056, Undated statement on Cuba and the Palestine question by Domínguez; Rabbi Isaac Algazi to Sefaradi, 5 June 1944, in Avni, Raicher and Bankier, op. cit., p. 74; Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, Foreign Office (FO) 371/40130/E 1584, Sefaradi to Sir George Ogilvie Forbes, 21 February 1944; Robert F. Wagner papers, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., Palestine, Gustavo Gutiérrez (Alvarez) to Wagner, 8 May 1944; ISA, 2277/2, Memorandum on the Latin American departments, 31 January 1946. *El Avance Criollo* (hereafter *Avance*) (Havana), 14 April 1944; Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), Havana, 17 April 1944; *Havaner Lebn Almanach 5705 (1944)*, pp. 29c–31c; “Dos de noviembre 1917–1946,” Comité Cubano Pro-Palestina, Havana, n.d., p. 27; Ofelia Domínguez, *50 años de una vida* (Havana, 1971), p. 467. Although set up in March 1944, the pro-(Hebrew) Palestine committee's date of inception varies in accordance with the source/s consulted. For example, the autobiography of its former Secretary General, Domínguez, traces this back to 1942 despite Jaffe's reference only to the existence of seeds for the blossoming of such a pro-Palestine committee in his communication of October 1943. For its part, the memo on Latin American departments, (presumably penned by Sefaradi, at the time the Secretary of the World Committee for Palestine's Latin American Department), claimed that the Cuban body was established in January 1944. Nevertheless, Sefaradi's letter to the British ambassador in Havana, hoping to enlist his good-will for “the creation of a pro-Palestine movement and the organization of a Cuban pro-Palestine Committee,” reveals that the latter had not yet happened by late February 1944. Moreover, the cable to Lipsky and letter of Committee President Gutiérrez confirm that it was not set up before the end of March 1944; the same is the case with the abovementioned committee publication. The two press clippings, the *Almanach*, as well as the committee publication, date the official inauguration of pro-Palestine committee activities to April 1944. This, however, is contradicted by the undated memo of Domínguez, which places such an initiation on 13 October 1944. If not an oversight, references to committee activities being inaugurated in October 1944 can be interpreted as attempts to make it appear that this happened during Grau's, rather than Batista's,

unenthused by the Zionist solution to the Jewish question. That much the Zionists learned, but failed initially to believe, from a June 1946 conversation with Felipe Pazos, a one-time Commercial Attaché under Belt.⁹ Moreover, once the UN came to consider the Palestine question Belt steered Cuba into joining with Colombia and El Salvador in support of a formula conciliatory to the Arab side. According to this formula, "the termination of the Mandate over Palestine and the declaration of the independence of that country," as pressed for by the Arab states, constituted a mandatory topic for investigation by the special committee (UNSCOP). Moreover, together with the representatives of Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Nicaragua, Belt supported a resolution granting a hearing to the AHC, the representative body of Palestinian Arab nationalism, thereby providing it with an international platform. Later, in line with his reputation for sincerity and outspokenness,¹⁰ Belt made no bones about his view of the UNSCOP majority recommendation in favor of partition as "unjust and inequitable;" he also sought to win over other Latin American delegates to his point of view. Finally, Belt told those who solicited Cuban support for partition that the proposed map for the Jewish state represented a threat to its people. Put differently, a partition scheme rejected by one of the interested parties was unerringly foreseen as rendering the Jews destined to live in three triangular

incumbency. The same reason seemingly explains the discrepancy between the committee's founding members listed in "Dos de noviembre," and those named in the *Almanach*.

8. According to a former associate of Enrique Rodríguez Fabregat, one such case was that of this Uruguayan representative at the UN Special Committee on Palestine and at the General Assembly. Several decades later, Rodríguez reputedly reached the conclusion that insufficient attention had been given to those who had something to lose as a result of partition. Whereas some observers are inclined to ascribe such a shift to Rodríguez's affiliation with the Frente Amplio, Uruguay's left-leaning electoral coalition, his reassessment may have started as far back as 1956. No such coalition existed then, but in the eyes of liberals and progressives Israel was tarred by her teaming up with two colonialist powers, Britain and France, in the tripartite war against Egypt. *Desafío* (Buenos Aires/Montevideo), 21 December 1985; Benno Weiser Varon, "I Might Have Given the World Another Spin," *Midstream* (New York), November 1982, p. 40. Contrast both sources with the partial transcript of the Uruguayan diplomat's impressions as an UNSCOP member as spelled out in Enrique Rodríguez Fabregat, *Sión: Rebelión y cumplimiento* (Jerusalem, 1992).
9. CZA, Z5/1291, Dorothy Adelson to Nahum Goldmann, 19 June 1946.
10. Nelson A. Rockefeller papers, Rockefeller Archive Center, Pocantico Hills, N.Y., CIAA Background Material — Latin America 1943–1944 Sub-Series, Political Data on Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Venezuela (Including Biographies of Prominent Men), November 1944.

pieces of Palestinian territory vulnerable to Arab attack, thereby sowing the seeds of protracted conflict.¹¹

Nevertheless, a review of the considerable evidence that has since entered the public domain suggests that if reports of Belt's inimical attitude towards a Zionist homeland in Palestine cannot be ignored, no convincing explanation for Cuba's opposition to partition can be based on this alone. While the time seems ripe to consign to the dustbin of history anything not scrupulously based on all the available evidence, this paper is primarily concerned with the identification of the facts, fictions and factions that some of the main actors and their supporters have since woven together into self-serving legends about the Cuban players and the overriding considerations which influenced their decisions. It will argue first of all, that President Grau was primarily responsible for the decision to cast Cuba's negative vote. Moreover, it will contend that as far as Grau and Belt were concerned, anti-Jewish and pro-Arab considerations (or for that matter sheer venality, in combination with, or devoid of, Americanophilia), irrespective of their ultimate role, can hardly provide a convincing explanation for a far more complex situation, in which the state of US-Cuban relations, anti-communism and the health of the Auténtico ruling party had leading roles. This said, a discussion of the international and domestic factors behind Cuba's opposition to Jewish statehood in Palestine is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, it focuses on a critical evaluation and unravelling of the aforementioned Arab, Cuban and Israeli myths, rather than on a blow-by-blow account of Cuba's performance on the Palestine question.

Grau sí

Ramón Grau succeeded General Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar in October 1944. Four months earlier, his unexpected victory at the polls highlighted the enthusiasm and confidence elicited by Auténtico populism, with its assertions of nationalist pride and pledges of honesty in government. Cuban

11. CZA, Z5/1335, Adelson to Toff, 13 March 1947; Z5/11056, Domínguez to Toff, 26 April 1947; ISA, 2276/7, Sefaradi to Domínguez, 18 November 1946; Domínguez to Dorothy Loos, 24 April 1947; 2270/9, Arthur Lourie to Sumner Welles, 9 April 1947; National Archives (NA), Washington, D.C., Record Group 59, 501.BB Palestine/10-3047, Memorandum on Cuban delegation to the UN; Sender Kaplan, interview by author, Miami, 1985. Jacob Robinson, *Palestine and the United Nations: Prelude to Solution* (Washington, 1947), pp. 79–80 and 135.

workers, peasants and professionals had good reason to be enthusiastic. During Grau's earlier ill-fated presidency (September 1933–January 1934) a large number of measures favorable to them had been introduced, including “the eight-hour day; compulsory organization of professionals; creation of a ministry of labor; repatriation of foreign agricultural workers; compulsory arbitration of labor disputes; a weekly indemnified rest period; the requirement that 50 per cent of all workers in a given category be Cuban, and that officers of syndicates be native-born; improvements in the industrial accident law; a reaffirmation that all wages must be paid in legal tender; declaration of the non-attachability of all salaries of workers and employees, and the establishment of a minimum wage.” Although his first period in office was too brief to tackle two additional issues, Grau had also been sensitive to the calls for agrarian reform and rural housing.¹²

Once inaugurated, Grau sought to differentiate his second government from the Batista regime's more unsavory practices. Nevertheless, for all his good intentions, his record in office discloses that he continued some of his predecessor's worst practices. Two years after Grau's inauguration, various newspaper and diplomatic analysts concurred in emphasizing that whatever changes Grau had introduced in the handling of public affairs had been for the worse: the regime seemed to them more presidential than ever. Although overstated, this evaluation is not totally without basis. Overriding the legislative and judicial powers, and ignoring the Constitution, Grau tended to rule in autocratic fashion. Consequently, the president appeared to combine his role as head of state with that of government, while his prime ministers seemed to have an even smaller part in cabinet than their predecessors under Batista.¹³

Of particular importance in ascertaining the president's role in the formulation of Cuba's position on Palestine is the fact that early on Grau assumed responsibility for the conduct of the country's international affairs. This prompted the departure of Foreign Minister Gustavo Cuervo Rubio from his cabinet. Described in the US as honest, Cuervo presided over the Republican Party, the Auténticos' conservative coalition partner. He resigned in disgust in October 1945, alleging that his position had become

12. Hugh Thomas, *Cuba or The Pursuit of Freedom* (London, 1971), pp. 650–88; Harold Dana Sims, “Cuban Labour and the Cold War,” in Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough (eds.), *Latin America from the Second World War to the Cold War* (Cambridge, 1991).
13. *Diario de la Marina* (Havana), 15 and 16 October 1946; *Carteles* (Havana), 20 October 1946; PRO, FO 371/51535/AN 3292, J. Dodds to Ernest Bevin, 22 October 1946.

untenable as the president never consulted him. Later events confirm that despite first appointing Alberto Inocente Alvarez Cabrera and later Rafael González Muñoz to the vacancy, Grau continued to function as his own foreign minister. Hence, two years after Cuervo's resignation, the US ambassador in Havana contended that Cuban foreign policy was not directed by the *ministro de Estado* (foreign minister) but handled, "certainly insofar as its main issues are concerned, by President Grau himself and Ambassador Belt."¹⁴ This prompts two conclusions. On the one hand, Grau's personal role in foreign policy decision-making was certainly undiminished by the time Cuba was asked to take a stand on Jewish and Arab statehood in Palestine; on the other, Belt had a greater say in the management of the country's foremost diplomatic priorities than might otherwise have been the case.

The question, though, is whether Palestine was one of the issues which Grau and Belt coordinated among themselves, to the detriment of others, or was among those which the president was all too happy to leave to his diplomats. Although documentary evidence of Grau's involvement in the Palestine question in general, and the decision to oppose partition in particular, is relatively scanty, what we do know seems to show that the president himself intervened and did not leave the matter entirely to Belt's "individual discretion." Several elements support the notion that Grau could have steered Cuba in a different direction, or that the scenario of complete delegation of authority is quite unlikely.

First, a March 1947 report by a Zionist campaigner, Sender Kaplan, editor of the Yiddish-language *Havaner Lebn* and later Israel's first Honorary Consul in Havana, advised the Jewish Agency that Cuban stances at the UN were coordinated by Grau and Belt exclusively. It follows that Cuba's foreign minister had little or no input in determining policy on Palestine, while Ya'acov Levi, Cuba's Haifa-based Honorary Consul, had no role whatsoever. Indeed, the foreign minister's near complete exclusion from the decision-making process was spelled out by a Zionist envoy, Charles Chapler, who visited Havana on behalf of the Jewish Agency in April–May 1947. Having met with González, Cuervo's second successor at the foreign ministry, Chapler completely discounted promises to issue instructions favorable to Zionism and to arrange an audience with Grau.

14. Spruille Braden papers, Columbia University, New York, N.Y., Correspondence Diplomatic 1944 A-Bo, Braden to Norman Armour, 29 November 1944; Rockefeller papers, Political Data on Cuba, November 1944; PRO, FO 371/51535/AN 492/28/14, Dodds to Bevin, 23 February 1946; NA, 501.BB/11-1447, Norweb to Marshall.

Totally devoid of expectations, Chapler argued that González did “not have much influence in the present government.”¹⁵ Unfortunately for the supporters of Jewish sovereignty, González and Angel de la Solana, Cuba’s Foreign Under-Secretary, appeared friendlier to the Zionist cause than Belt.

Second, the Chapler mission illustrates the fact that once the Palestine question entered the UN agenda the Jewish Agency appealed to Grau directly. As a result, the president reportedly conferred with his ambassador more than once during the UN debates on Palestine, in particular during September–November 1947. Moreover, owing to Zionist pressures and/or Belt’s unwillingness to be held solely responsible for Cuba’s negative vote, the ambassador returned to Havana for consultations on 27 November 1947 and failed to go back to New York before partition was passed two days later without Cuban support.

Third, in the lead up to the crucial ballot, Grau was approached by influential Cuban and US supporters of partition who sought to persuade him to cast his country’s vote in favor, or at the very least abstain. This, and Cuban delegation alternate Ernesto Dihigo’s unwillingness to commit himself on his own advisement, suggest that, directly or indirectly, the latter’s final instructions on the partition vote came from Havana when Belt was already there, and emanated from the highest authority in the island.

Unless one assumes that both Kaplan and Chapler were utterly wrong, it seems reasonable to conclude that the president neither unloaded all the burden on Belt’s shoulders nor washed his hands completely regarding the Palestine question. At the same time, though, Grau could not have given his undivided attention to Palestine, thereby allowing Belt considerable leeway. This said, the ambassador sung from the president’s hymn sheet and invoked Grau’s instructions to justify his pronouncements on Palestine. “A loyal and personal friend” of Grau’s, Belt is not known to have been rebuked for his anti-partition stance despite several instances when the president reportedly telephoned Belt to talk to the ambassador about Palestine. Of course, Grau did not confer with Belt in earnest in the presence of third parties. Hence, the exact nature of his instructions on the subject remains unknown. Until such time as it can be conclusively established that the ambassador strayed from presidential guidelines, reports by pro-Zionist Cubans that Belt was directed to adopt a more positive stance towards Jewish national aspirations in 1947

15. CZA, S25/7504, Ya’acov Levi to Jewish Agency, 21 April 1940 and 7 April 1947; Z5/11143, Kaplan to Toff, 23 March 1947; Z5/1347, Charles Chapler to Toff, 5 May 1947. *El País*, 15 May 1947.

are surely only evidence that Grau and Belt discussed Palestine, rather than a guide to the content of these discussions.¹⁶

Hence, the unavoidable conclusion is that Grau was “the foremost culprit” of Cuba’s anti-partition vote, as colorfully posited by Kaplan.¹⁷ Unlike other oral history-based evidence, not only is Kaplan’s argument a logical extension of the 1947 reports, it is also consistent with the president’s performance after being voted into office, in particular his vast accumulation of powers and the watered down roles of his ministers, as well as De Varona’s assertion that “Grau delegated nothing.”¹⁸ Hence, even if such supporters of Zionism as Carlos Prío Socarrás and Cuervo, both of them enrolled in the Cuban pro-(Hebrew) Palestine Committee, had stayed on as Grau’s Prime Minister and Foreign Minister respectively, and had steadfastly argued in favor of a less antagonistic attitude to Jewish statehood, that the outcome would have been vastly different is far from certain.¹⁹

Inflating, Deflating or Reflating the Arab Dimension?

Soon after partition’s passage, Benno Weiser (later Varon), the Bogotá-based Jewish Agency representative for South America’s Northern Cone countries and Panama when the vote was taken, perceptively wrote that “the political and economic strength” of the Arabs in Chile, Cuba and Mexico was decisive in explaining these countries’ non-affirmative votes. Decades later, Alejandro Hales Jamarne, a Chilean actor of Transjordanian descent who was familiar with Arab efforts to sway President Gabriel González Videla’s government to abandon the supporters of partition, independently concurred with Weiser’s early judgment. Hales ascribed the unwillingness of Latin American states with large Zionist contingents to take sides “to actions largely undertaken by the Arab communities,” in an oblique yet bitterly critical reference to insufficient lobbying on the part of the Arab states that was certainly not far off the mark.²⁰

16. CZA, Z5/11063, José Kates to Adolph Kates, 23 October 1947; Z5/11056, Statement by Domínguez upon her return from Lake Success, 24 November 1947. *Alerta* (Havana), 28 October 1947.

17. Kaplan, interview by author, 1985.

18. De Varona, interview by author.

19. On Prío’s intercession on behalf of the Zionists, CZA, Z5/11063, Abba Silver, Chaim Weizmann, Stephen Wise and Toff to Prío, 20 October 1947; Adolph Kates to Toff, 26 November 1947.

20. Benno Weiser, “The Pro-Zionism of Latin America,” *Jewish Frontier* (New York), October 1948, p. 18; Alejandro Hales Jamarne, “América Latina y la causa palestina,” (paper delivered at the Seventh Congress of FEARAB Chile, Concepción, 12–14 October 1984), pp. 3b, 8.

Evidently, in some Latin American states the Zionists encountered Arab competition, with prominent members of the Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian communities in the region — for instance Juan Yarur in Chile, the Buenos Aires-based Moisés Azize in Honduras, and Miguel Simón Abed in Mexico — using their connections in government and/or opposition circles to counter, as best they could, Zionist efforts. In Cuba's case, the Arab dimension to its opposition to partition is suggested by Arab-Cuban coincidences at the UN; Lebanon's Arab League-inspired lobbying of Grau, especially after July 1946 when the Washington-based Charles Malik was accredited as Lebanon's non-resident Minister to Cuba; and the belated agitation of an activist minority within the island's Arab community.²¹ Nevertheless, according to the experienced Hales, a former Chilean legislator and cabinet member at the time when he made such comments, Arab world efforts on the subject of Palestine were "none too skilful." For example, an Arab League-sponsored delegation, in Latin America since July 1947, arrived in Havana in February 1948, i.e. more than two months after the crucial partition vote. Granted that its primary purpose was to rally the support of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian expatriates for the Arab cause, rather than that of these countries' rulers; nevertheless, wherever possible, the Arab League envoys also engaged in diplomatic contacts with Latin American governments.²² To the extent that such Arab League exertions, as well as those of their human assets in Cuba, took off rather late and were, more often than not, inadequately followed up, their effectiveness appears to have been largely dependent on other factors, including the setbacks encountered by their Zionist adversaries. This is attested by diplomatic and public relations initiatives by both sides on the Cuban scene.

Whereas the first Zionist envoy to try to secure Cuban support for Jewish statehood in the crucial post-war period was received by Batista's Prime Minister, Ramón Zaydín, in 1944, it was not before August 1947 that Victor Khouri, the Spanish-speaking Lebanese Minister in London, arrived in Havana on an Arab League-sanctioned good-will mission (not to be confused with the League delegation that visited Cuba in February 1948). Accompanied by Malik and another Lebanese diplomat, Khouri was granted an audience by Grau. Officially described as a tour of the various Latin

21. Eliahu Elath, *Zionism at the UN: A Diary of the First Days* (Philadelphia, 1976), p. 173. NA, 701.90E37/7-3146, Robert Woodward to James Byrnes.

22. CZA, Z5/11054, Kaplan to Toff, 8 February 1948. JTA, Havana, 8 February 1948; Hales, art. cit.

American countries which had earned the Lebanese government's appreciation, Khouri's main aim, nonetheless, was to familiarize the region's governments with the Arab consensus on the Palestine question.²³ The accuracy of this perception, expressed by British and US diplomats of the day, as well as by their Zionist contacts, has since been confirmed by two Lebanese sources, Ambassador Nadim Dimishqia and Ambassador Joseph Shadid. At the time, the former served under Khouri as Lebanon's Commercial Attaché in London while the latter, a junior diplomat, accompanied Beirut's representative at the court of St. James throughout Latin America.²⁴

Whereas the Jewish Agency-inspired Cuban pro-(Hebrew) Palestine Committee was set up in 1944, a rival Pan-Arab Committee only came into being some three years later, in September 1947. Unlike the Zionist body, which was almost exclusively made up of front line non-Jewish public opinion molders, its Arab counterpart included distinguished members of the Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian community.²⁵ In a country with a government relatively impervious to public opinion, however, it mattered little that the Pan-Arab Committee was nowhere near as articulate and successful with the island's more than two hundred media outlets as its pro-(Hebrew) Palestine opposite number.²⁶ At a time when, according to the fictionalized account of Dorothy Adelson of the Jewish Agency's UN department, "the Cubans had gone deaf on Zionist arguments," what really counted was that one of the Pan-Arab Committee's leading members, Havana University Professor Pedro Kouri (described by Cuban youth leader Max Lesnick as a former colleague of Grau's at medical school), would have been better placed than pro-Zionist campaigners to bring the Arab viewpoint to the president's attention. Such connections were probably much more significant than the suspected Falangist affiliation of some Pan-Arab Committee members. In effect, if we can deduce from US embassy suspicions

23. NA, 701.90E41/9-247, Thomas Maleady to Marshall; ISA, 2267/20, Shabtai Rowson to Eliahu Epstein (later Elath), 17 July 1947; PRO, FO 371/60846/AN 2882, Dodds to Bevin, 12 August 1947.

24. Nadim Dimishqia, interview by author, London, 1986; Joseph Shadid, letter to author, 2 June 1988.

25. For the Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians in Cuba, see, for example, NA, OSS report, 1 January 1944. Euridice Charón, "El asentamiento de emigrantes árabes en Monte (La Habana, Cuba), 1890–1930," *Awraq* (Madrid), vol. 13, 1992.

26. On the Cuban press and radio, Rockefeller papers, CIAA Coordination Committee 1942–1945 Sub-Series, Coordination Committee for Cuba: Operations as of October 1944.

concerning the right-wing associations of José Azar, Sami Salman and Joseph Simon that this pro-Arab body was more attuned than its Zionist-inspired rival to the rising anti-communist atmosphere prevalent in Cuba, a 1940 Havana police file on a fourth member of this Arab body, José Chelala Aguilera, who had been kicked out of university for Communist activities several years earlier,²⁷ suggests that the Pan-Arab Committee may have had its drawbacks too.²⁸

In summary, despite the early start of Jewish Agency efforts to assess and counter the lobbying potential of Cuba's Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians among other things, some prominent Arab community members, once roused, gave the Arab states an edge over the Zionists. They helped to erode the comparative advantage garnered by the latter since 1944. Whether their exertions were decisive in securing Cuba's vote against partition at the UN, however, is, perhaps, an altogether different matter.

During his meeting with the Lebanese delegation, rather than avoiding any premature commitments, the Cuban head of state let it be known, according to Shadid, that his country would oppose partition.²⁹ It is worth stressing that the meeting predated the Pan-Arab Committee's establishment. If by then Grau had already made up his mind — something which has yet to be verified by Cuban and Lebanese diplomatic records — Shadid's evaluation of the achievements of the Khouri mission, like the importance of the Arab committee's later activities, needs to be reassessed. Without belittling their definite attainments for the Arab cause, their main success was undoubtedly to have strengthened Grau's resolve. But insofar as chronology is not

27. Like his colleague Eduardo Chibás, Chelala was expelled from Havana University in the late 1920s, during General Gerardo Machado's incumbency. Two decades later, Chelala's activities still appear to have attracted the attention of US diplomats in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Braden papers, Correspondence Diplomatic 1944 B, Braden to Ellis O. Briggs, 7 November 1944. Luis Conte Agüero, *Eduardo Chibás, el adalid de Cuba* (Mexico, 1955), pp. 343–44.

28. On anti-Zionist campaigning by an activist minority among the island's estimated 30,000 Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians, see CZA, S25/451, Epstein to Uriel Heydt, 23 August 1945; S25/4153, (Isaac?) Algazi to Epstein, 9 November 1945; Z5/11054, Moisés Shlesinger to Marcos Roitman, 3 October 1947; Z5/11056, Domínguez to Toff, 11 October 1947; WNRC, 800 Countries 1947, V. Lansing Collins, Jr. to Marshall, 25 September 1947; Institute of Contemporary Jewry (ICJ), Hebrew University, Oral History Interview with Max Lesnick, (171)125. *El Crisol* (Havana), 16 September 1947; *Havana Post*, 21 September 1947; *El Mundo* (Havana), 22 October 1947; Teófilo Haded, *Cuba y Libano* (Havana, 1957), p. 9; Dorothy Adelson, *Operation Susannah* (New York, 1982), p. 113; Gladys Perdomo Lorenzo, "Sociedades Arabes de Cuba: Sociedad Palestino-Arabe (1919–1954)," (mimeo), Unión Árabe de Cuba, Havana, 1991.

29. Shadid, letter to author, 17 October 1988.

accidental, neither Khouri's visit nor the Pan-Arab Committee would have had a role in the process that pushed the Cuban leader towards the anti-partition camp in the first place.

Furthermore, the fact that the Pan-Arab Committee's natural gratitude to Grau for Cuba's anti-partition stance had far from long-lasting consequences for the Arab cause affords additional food for thought on the alleged decisiveness of the Arab community's exertions. In effect, the Arab committee's gamble in calling on that community's Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian voters to support Prío, Grau's candidate in the 1948 election, did not pay off; the latter's policy towards Israel was reversed. Not one of the most active pro-(Hebrew) Palestine committee members, Prío, nonetheless, had been part of that body's leadership. Once elected, his government recognized Israel's independence, with *de facto*, rather than *de jure* recognition possibly meant to smooth the transition between the two *Auténtico* administrations, among other things. Curiously, two of Prío's cabinet members, Primitivo Rodríguez and Mariblanca Sabas Alomá, were of Arab descent, though ostensibly not part of the Pan-Arab Committee. A man close to Grau, Rodríguez was seen by Jewish community members as an antisemite. While this is clearly reflected in recent historiography, Sabas' apparent role as one of the presidential hopeful's informal channels of communication with Israel and her supporters has been less noticed. Endeavouring to clear Prío's path of stumbling blocks related to the anti-partition vote, Sabas told her pro-Zionist interlocutors that, if victorious, the incoming president would dismiss Belt, and recognize the independent Jewish state.³⁰

Without jumping to hasty conclusions, the existence of Arab-descended members in Prío's entourage tends to prove that not all Cubans of Arab parentage acted in accordance with Pan-Arab Committee objectives. Likewise, the suspected Falangist links of three of its members does not constitute automatic proof that most of the committee's Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian community members were right-wing, or that all anti-Zionist campaigning was little more than an emulation of the AHC leader's questionable record during the Nazi era. To indulge in such extrapolations may be politically expedient for those who at one time or

30. CZA, Z5/11054, Weiser to Kaplan, 14 October 1948; Kaplan to Weiser, 21 and 27 October 1948. Berta Singerman, *Mis dos vidas* (Buenos Aires, 1984), pp. 263–64; Margalit Bejarano, "HaAntishemiut beKubah biTkufat haShoah — Peilut Germanit beEmtzaut Ochlusiah Sfaradit," *Iahadut Zmaneinu* (Jerusalem), vol. 5, 1989, pp. 322–23; Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

another have sought hastily to equate Palestinian nationalism with Nazism. But it is also indicative of a monolithic view of Cuba's Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian community, one that requires the dismissal of Chelala's left-wing credentials, ignoring the documented fact that during 1942–43 elements of that very same community sought to establish a Palestinian Committee in Aid of the Democracies,³¹ and disregarding the fact that prior to the first Arab-Israeli war, a Middle Eastern Jew, Isaac Garazi, presided over one of the island's Arab institutions.³² In fact, if it is legitimate to suspect that an unsophisticated admixture of ignorance and anti-Jewish prejudice lurks behind monolithic views on Jews, the same combination can be seen as true for those holding similar views on the Arabs. Lastly, the incompatibility of Cuban recognition of Israel's independence with Pan-Arab Committee lobbying in support of Prío's candidacy means that such influence as this body was able to muster on two successive Cuban governments should not be overstated. By the same token, it is equally legitimate to caution against exaggerations with respect to the larger Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian community, even if Cuban recognition of Israeli independence was not, in the end, as straightforward as forecast by Sabas (as will be seen below).

Belt's Americanophilia under Scrutiny: The Reality and its Limits

References to Belt as US Secretary of State Edward Stettinius' "boot-licker" and the State Department's "voice and interpreter" are not hard to come by; they form part of the wider — and unconvincing — claim that the US failed to deploy any of its diplomatic muscle, or did very little to line up Latin American support for partition³³ (which makes it possible to attribute

31. Perdomo, art. cit.

32. ICJ, Oral history interview with Salomón Garazi. The presence of Arabic speaking Jews among the leadership of institutions created by Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian immigrants in Latin America certainly raises doubts about the legitimacy of calling such institutions, or their leaders antisemitic. Without denying the existence of anti-Zionists and even anti-Jews in their midst, the charge of antisemitism, however, is more often than not a better indication of the Jewish Agency's frustration at its inability to enlist greater support among Jews from Arab and Muslim countries; numbers of the latter were among the membership and leadership of institutions created by fellow Middle Easterners of other faiths, especially before Israel's birth. Ignacio Klich, "Arabes, judíos y árabes judíos en la Argentina de la primera mitad del novecientos," *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* (Tel Aviv), vol. 6 no. 2, 1995.

33. While the Zionists had expected more from the Truman administration, it would be quite wrong to imagine that State Department and White House officials, in addition to others — for example, former administration functionaries, legislators and other politicians, as well as businessmen, all of them acting with or without the chief executive's authority — did not lobby the Latin Americans in favour of Jewish statehood. On the contrary,

Cuba's vote to Belt's alleged kow-towing to Washington figures more sensitive to other US interests than to Zionist aspirations).³⁴ Though not the only ones to say so, such undiplomatic utterances concerning Belt belong to the first head of the Jewish Agency's Latin American Department and her successor respectively. Although accurate up to a point, such crude references to an aspect of Belt's personality seem quite inadequate to explain Cuba's "thumbs down" to Jewish statehood; granted that Willie, as Belt was known to some US diplomats, was favorably disposed towards their country. That much was highlighted by his duel with Eugenio de Sosa, Jr., an editor of the conservative Havana daily *Diario de la Marina*, who denounced US Ambassador Spruille Braden's increasingly well-known penchant for interfering in the domestic affairs of the countries in his bailiwick. Paradoxically, though, the duel is likely to have been inspired by the political need to allay Washington's concern that bilateral cooperation under the incoming Grau administration would be "less assured than during the period of President Batista," rather than Belt's personal feelings towards the US. Also, according to a State Department biographical sketch, Belt had done "yeoman service [...] to have our views accepted by the [Cuban] delegation" at the inter-American conference at Chapultepec, as well as on other occasions.³⁵ Moreover, Belt's inimical attitude towards Zionism may

without the relative upsurge in US activity behind the scenes it is not unlikely that several of partition's Latin American supporters would have abstained and some of the abstainers would have opposed the scheme altogether. The different phases of US intervention in support of Zionism among the Latin Americans are discussed in Ignacio Klich, "Latin America, the United States and the Birth of Israel: The Case of Somoza's Nicaragua," *Journal of Latin American Studies* (Cambridge), vol. 20 no. 2, 1988, pp. 409–13. See also Martin Jones, *Failure in Palestine: British and United States Policy after the Second World War* (London, 1986), pp. 303–307.

34. A probably incomplete list of those soliciting Cuban support for partition includes the chairman of the US House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee, congressman Sol Bloom; former New York Governor Herbert Lehman and past US Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr.; financier Bernard Baruch (who approached Belt), as well as the Havana-based *azucarero* Philip Rosenberg. The Jewish Agency also requested former US Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles' help with Belt but it is not known whether Welles obliged. Against this backdrop, the AHC later listed Cuba as one of three Latin American states that were subjected to heavy US pressure prior to the partition vote. CZA, Z5/11192, Lourie to Toff, 11 November 1947; Harry S. Truman papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Mi., PSF, Undated note on target countries, (presumably written on 11–20 November 1947); Herbert H. Lehman papers, Columbia University, New York, N.Y., General Correspondence 1947, C53/5 Palestine, Herbert Lehman to Grau, 28 November 1947; ISA, 2270/9, Epstein to Welles, 10 October 1947; Welles to Epstein, 13 October 1947; 2267/30, Henry Morgenthau to Grau, 29 November 1947; Llewellyn Thompson to Loy Henderson, 18 December 1947, in *The State Department Policy Planning Staff Papers* (New York, 1983), II, p. 48. Sender Kaplan and James Knopke, interviews by author, Miami, 1989.

have received a shot in the arm from certain US diplomats, for instance H. Bartlett Wells. Thoroughly conversant with Zionism and its influence among Cuban Jewry since his stint in Havana as Second Secretary under Braden, as well as among the US diplomats who attached a higher priority to other American concerns, Wells was the State Department's political liaison officer with the Cuban delegation at the UN in 1946.³⁶

These important facts aside, Belt was known to carry out his boss' instructions faithfully. Having served as Grau's election campaign manager in 1944, Belt was seen as "thoroughly loyal." Presumably, his adherence to presidential guidelines, during the second part of the UN General Assembly in 1946, led the ambassador to fail to restrain one of his aides within the Cuban delegation. Indeed, the secret report of the aforementioned Wells noted that "Belt did not play an important part in the Assembly" while Enrique Pérez Cisneros was "one of the most active members of the Assembly." Unhappily for Wells, however, Pérez's position on a number of matters "did not agree with our own."³⁷ If this is anything to go by, and it

35. ISA, 2277/36, Sefaradi to Adelson, 28 June 1946; CZA, S25/7502, Toff to Shertok, n.d.; NA, 710.ESC/1-2546, Biographic Report on Belt; Sir Harold Beeley, interview by author, London, 1989. *Miami Herald*, 30 June 1944; *Evening Star* (Washington), 26 July 1944; *San Francisco Examiner*, 5 August 1944. Bearing in mind Zionist references to Cuba's readiness to propose a pro-Zionist statement at Chapultepec, (an initiative consistent with the pro-(Hebrew) Palestine affiliation of Foreign Minister Cuervo and delegation members Chibás and Gutiérrez), as well as Belt's reported deference to the US at this conference, future research may help establish the latter's actual role on the subject of the proposed pro-Zionist resolution. For the Cuban delegation at Chapultepec, see Rockefeller papers, Mexico City Conference-General 2/ 1944-2/ 1945, 24 February 1945.
36. Braden papers, Correspondence Diplomatic 1946-7 W-Z, H. Bartlett Wells to Braden, 30 October 1945. In this illuminating memorandum Wells unveiled his advocacy of the political and social assimilation of Jews into the life of "the communities in which they reside," (with their Judaism continuing as a religious faith and ritual), and acceptance "without question (of) the obligation to make the process of assimilation practicable, and as easy as may be." Written "not without due sympathy, as distinguished from favor, for the point of view of those who uphold the Jewish nationalist cause," and conceding that "many Jews who have established themselves in Palestine have doubtless found contentment in their daily lives earlier than would have been the case elsewhere," it also outlined Wells' belief that part of US revenues, "and a certain portion of the energies and acumen of our statesmen are being devoted to the resolution of questions which are beyond the proper sphere of concern of the US as a nation. Insofar as we may be set at odds with friendly territorial powers over the issue of Jewish national statehood in Palestine, such expenditure is even contrary to our national interests." Hence, Wells' serious concern "for the danger to the interests of the US which might be inherent in the spread within its borders of doctrines of a politically nationalist character," as was the case of Zionism, and his prescription of making US advocates of Jewish nationalism aware of the incompatibility of this with their political allegiance to the US.
37. Rockefeller papers, Political Data on Cuba, November 1944; NA, 710.ESC/1-2546, Biographic Report on Belt; 501.BB/2-747, Braden to American Diplomatic Officers in the Other American Republics.

obviously requires the corroboration of Cuban diplomatic records, whatever his personal sympathies towards the US, Belt was not so unprofessional or weak-kneed as to fail to implement his government's instructions vis-à-vis the US, or the US-supported partition plan.

On the Purported Role of Judeophobia: Some Notoriously Unexplored Gaps

The insinuation of anti-Jewishness, which is not exclusively limited to the ambassador, is less credible than the alleged role of Belt's Americanophilia. That this is a priori inconsistent with the ambassador's earlier record is highlighted by the fact that in September 1935, while Belt was Mayor of Havana, he had played a leading part in the capital city's celebration of the 800th anniversary of the birth of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, the outstanding Iberian philosopher, theologian and physician, better known as Maimonides. While Belt may subsequently have changed his stance, at the time, Cuban Jews viewed his participation at these events as a definite mark of friendship towards the Jewish community.³⁸ Even without a shift from Judeophilia to Judeophobia, underscoring past Jewish achievements, as opposed to more contemporary ones, can on occasion carry subliminal elements of anti-Jewishness. Could Cuban Jewry's assessment of Belt's part in the commemoration of Maimonides birth have so miserably misjudged this fine point? In considering the likelihood of a flawed evaluation on the part of the island's Jews, what can be said with absolute certainty is, that two years after Adolf Hitler's rise to power, Latin Americans with anti-Jewish inclinations were not in the business of honoring Jews, past or present.

Allegations of anti-Jewishness, though, gained currency when voiced by Senator Eduardo René Chibás Ribas, who levelled the same charge mainly against the Cuban head of state. Nonetheless, several things should not be overlooked. Firstly, during the UN Special Session on Palestine (April-May 1947), principled and/or tactical considerations led Belt to table a resolution endorsing the Jewish Agency's right to be heard. Secondly, like his honorary presidency of the Cuban-Armenian Alliance,³⁹ the Cuban president's post-inauguration declaration that the struggle for political and economic self-

38. Kaplan, interview by author, 1985; *Mundo Hebreo* (Havana), October 1935, pp. 22–23.

39. Archivo del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto (AMRECIC), Buenos Aires, Political Division (DP), United Nations 37/946, José Halachian and S.K. Nigolian to Juan Perón, 12 August 1946.

determination inspired Cubans to support Jewish aspirations, and his vow two years later to forward the reparation of the injustices “suffered by the Jewish people” (which he considered as “a respected and excellent community, and one which so often has been a source of inspiration in our great works and those of mankind”),⁴⁰ suggest that Grau was not insensitive to the plight of the victims of two of this century’s worst genocides, the Armenians and the Jews. Furthermore, Chibás’ interest in gaining supporters for his newly formed Cuban People’s Party (Ortodoxo), an offshoot of the ruling Auténticos, may have impelled him to take advantage of his position as a prominent member of the pro-(Hebrew) Palestine committee to capitalize on Jewish distrust of Grau, which dated to his first presidency’s anti-foreign (initially anti-Spanish) labor legislation. Lastly, prior to May 1947, Chibás was not known to have drawn the Zionists’ attention to any such anti-Jewish inclinations on either Grau’s or Belt’s part, neither when he belonged to the coterie of presidential insiders nor when he began to distance himself from Grau.

We cannot view as coincidental the fact that Chibás first interpreted Cuba’s unsympathetic attitude to Zionist requests as a manifestation of anti-Jewishness the same month that the Ortodoxo party came into being. Thus, as political adversaries, Chibás, Lesnick and other Ortodoxos must be seen as too interested a party for their depiction of the president and his ambassador as Jew-haters to be taken at face value. In principle, such a portrait is inconsistent with Grau’s apparent green light for Cuba’s pro-Zionist motion at Chapultepec and his sympathetic statements of 1946, if such utterances are anything to go by, as well as with Belt’s previous organization of the Maimonides’ celebration. Obviously, substantiation of these claims against Grau and Belt, preferably from less partisan sources, is imperative to overcome the suspicion that they may have been inspired by political pugilism, rather than hard facts. The crucial nature of such evidence is obvious. All too often the supporters of Jewish statehood have understandably, though not always justifiably, almost automatically equated anti-Zionism with Jew-hatred. Hence, their proclivity to discredit those inimical to the cause of Jewish statehood with the overused sobriquet of Jew-hater, paralleled by their ability to ignore distasteful anti-Jewish episodes involving those who helped Israel achieve and consolidate

40. CZA, Z5/11143, Statement by the Central Council of Jewish Institutions in Cuba, 27 October 1947; Kaplan, interview by author, 1989. “Dos de noviembre,” art. cit., p. 5; *Havener Lebn Almanach 5707 (1946)*, p. 21.

statehood. The debatable extension of the definition of Jew-hatred to include anti-Zionism notwithstanding, it would be foolhardy not to consider anti-Jewishness as a plausible factor in the stand taken by Latin American and other players vis-à-vis partition; the latter should by no means be taken lightly or dismissed out of hand.

Although allegations that Grau was anti-Jewish were also made by Lawrence Berenson, the Jewish chairman of the New York-based Cuban-American Chamber of Commerce, his claim is no more convincing than Chibás'. In fact, if anything, it is less credible because of Berenson's closeness to Batista and poor relationship with Grau. Considered by the US embassy in Havana as someone involved in "lucrative and at times questionable activities," and more bluntly as a "crook" by Kaplan, according to the latter Berenson had no first-hand knowledge about Grau. Like the seasoned Hales' brutally candid comments on the skilfulness of Arab anti-partition lobbying, the well-respected Kaplan was not one to clothe his judgment of a fellow Jew in euphemisms. Hence, Berenson's claim that Grau was antisemitic is more a reflection of his resentment for the loss of business and/or other advantages previously accruing from his close association with Batista, than of his successor's attitude towards Jews.⁴¹

In summary, cast-iron proofs of Belt's and/or Grau's anti-Jewishness remain, at least for the time being, conspicuous by their absence. As a factor in Cuba's anti-partition stand, the available evidence suggests that their anti-Jewishness is at best an unsubstantiated possibility. Granted, the Jewish community had held back when approached by two Auténtico campaigners seeking Cuban Jewry's support for Grau's election in 1944. Indeed, the Jewish leadership proclaimed that it would leave the decision for whom to vote to the conscience of each Jew. Jewish concern about the anti-foreign implications of Grau's earlier slogan "Cuba for the Cubans" and ensuing legislation were not allayed by these emissaries' assurances that naturalized foreigners had nothing to fear. Nevertheless, until solid evidence sustaining the allegations of anti-Jewishness is uncovered it would appear quite odd that Cuban politicians who had not shown their alleged true colors earlier donned these overnight. This at a time when the defeat of Nazism and its genocidal policies had elicited a considerable measure of sympathy for the

41. CZA, Z5/11192, Lourie to Toff, 16 April 1947; Z5/11056, Domínguez to Toff, 10 May 1947; Z5/11063, Unsigned memorandum on Cuba's position at the UN on the Palestine question, 17 November 1947; Braden papers, Correspondence Diplomatic 1944 A-Bo, Albert Nufer to Cordell Hull, 29 August 1944. ICJ, Oral History Interview with Lesnick; Kaplan, interview by author.

Jews, and set their enemies on the run (or at some considerable disadvantage). And, curiously, their supposed anti-Jewishness did not affect the daily life of Cuban Jewry but expressed itself selectively, and in the opposition to partition principally.⁴² Even if one assumes that Grau resented the pro-Batista bias of the voters among the island's estimated 10,000 Jews,⁴³ the notion that this alone explains Cuba's anti-Jewish statehood vote, or dwarfs all other inauspicious factors affecting the Zionist cause, seems simplistic, if not patently absurd.

42. Shooting from the lip, Enrique Ventura Corominas, Argentina's pro-Zionist alternate at the UN, described José Arce, his country's pro-Arab permanent representative, as having "a secret anti-Jewish tendency" and "an antisemitic spirit." Tov hinted at the same in his memoirs and more explicitly so in an oral history interview. While it would be idle to pretend that Arce was a man devoid of all prejudice, Harry Torczyner, who served as a special counsel to the Jewish Agency observer delegation to the UN Special Session on Palestine in April–May 1947, and later came to know the Argentine diplomat even better, candidly asserted that it was "wrong to say that Arce was antisemitic." In Torczyner's view Arce was always "ready to listen to us." Although it is impossible to say whether Arce was exempt of all prejudice, he was certainly no Jew-hater. According to Torczyner, "he held the same views on Jews as myself." Lending support to the search of an explanation for Arce's opposition to partition elsewhere, Torczyner revealed: "If I had not been a Zionist I would have had certain reservations about a Jewish state too." By way of contrast, Oswaldo Aranha, the Brazilian chairman of the 1947 General Assembly session, is among Zionism's Latin American heroes for his adroit postponement of the partition vote, thereby affording the supporters of Jewish statehood more time to seek favorable votes. Aranha, nonetheless, is credited with having said at a Jewish function in his honor that, after securing statehood, the Jews should consider "returning" the Rio de Janeiro neighborhood of Copacabana, a middle class area densely populated by Jews, and therefore called "Copacabanovich" by some. Although a single statement would be insufficient to brand Aranha as a closet Judeophobe, disinterring such facts throws light on the impossibility of using an individual's record vis-à-vis Israel as the sole, or single most important parametre to judge his/her attitude towards Jews. Disagreeable as this may be to some, anti-Zionism is not always akin to anti-Jewishness, even if the former can spill over into the latter. On the other hand, the evidence in Brazilian archives on Aranha's ambassadorship to the US (1934–38) and subsequent takeover of the foreign ministry (1938–44), was deemed sufficient by two Brazilianists, Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro and Jeffrey Lesser, to brand him respectively a xenophobe and antisemite, albeit a pro-US one, and to hold him responsible for the Brazilian foreign ministry's interdiction on Jewish refugees. Unaware of Aranha's abovementioned outburst of candor, Tucci concluded that Aranha's pro-partition stand was not only coherent with his government's pro-US instructions, but was also in line with "his own principles: to offer Jewish war refugees an option, an alternative outside Brazil." Against this backdrop, it is reasonable to assume that if Belt was anti-Jewish, he was probably less so than Aranha. Corominas to Juan Atilio Bramuglia, 15, 16 and 20 October 1947, in Israel Jabbaz, *Israel nace en las Naciones Unidas* (Buenos Aires, 1960), pp. 69, 73 and 77; Tov, op. cit., pp. 95 and 108; ICJ, Oral History Interview with Moshe Tov, 17(112); Harry Torczyner, letter to author, 27 April 1987. On Aranha's outburst, Latin America expert of a US Jewish organisation, interview by author, Buenos Aires, 1984. See also Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro, *O Anti-Semitismo na Era Vargas: Fantasmata de Uma Geração (1930–1945)* (São Paulo, 1988), p. 295; Jeffrey H. Lesser, *Welcoming the Undesirables: Brazil and the Jewish Question* (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 83–145.
43. Kaplan, interview by author, 1991.

After all, the events leading to Grau's brief term in office in the 1930s, as well as the latter's nationalistic legislation, had also left their mark on the Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians in Cuba; its effects were not just to create a negative impression among the predominantly European and Turkish Jews. Indeed, 156 returning migrants landed in Beirut on 6 October 1933, some of the more than two hundred Lebanese and Syrian families in Cuba who had reportedly been "reduced to poverty thanks to the revolution," their businesses destroyed. Not surprisingly, therefore, the island's Lebanese and Syrian community sought French intercession "with the Cuban authorities to safeguard their assets and interests."⁴⁴

Bribers and Bribed, Accusers and Accused

Zionist sources have long asserted that Mrs. Belt received an expensive piece of jewellery from the Saudis, inferring that pecuniary motives fanned Belt's preferences. Probably the least important of all the accusations hurled at the Cuban diplomat, this putative episode, however, must be addressed here — even if only to be dismissed — precisely because it figures as fact in the memoirs of Moshe Tov and Berta Singerman, two supporters of Jewish statehood, as well as receiving mention in the first volume of *Political and Diplomatic Documents*, the Israel State Archives-produced equivalent of the *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Hence, the relevance of devoting attention to the oft-repeated, though rather anecdotal, claim that Belt was bribed to adopt his anti-partition stand.

To begin with, the existence of such a jewel is contested both by its alleged recipient and by a Palestinian observer.⁴⁵ Moreover, since there is no available press coverage of the ceremony where the alleged gift,⁴⁶ either a

44. *L'Asie française* (Paris), September–October 1933, p. 289.

45. Nakhla, interview by author, London, 1988; M. Belt, interview by author, Washington, 1991.

46. For a reference to a hitherto elusive press clipping showing Saudi Prince Faysal al-Saud bestowing the jewel on Belt's wife, see Tov, *op. cit.*, p. 152. Without ruling out the existence of such photographic evidence, so far the only photo found of the Amir Faysal and a Belt family member is that printed in the Havana daily *Mañana* four days before the crucial partition vote. Used in conjunction with statements by Domínguez, the Cuban pro-Zionist committee secretary, the picture shows the Saudi royal, another member of the Wahabite kingdom's delegation to the UN, and Guillermo Belt in one of the latter's so-called "frequent *pourparlers* with leaders of the antisemitic Arab national movement." *Mañana's* aforementioned caption, like the heading "Belt Confers with Arab Antisemites," was not attributed to Domínguez, who only questioned Belt's "invariable pro-Arab stance." This said, there is no record of the pro-Zionist campaigner distancing herself from *Mañana's* generalizations or qualifying them.

diamond or pearl necklace,⁴⁷ was offered, it is unclear whether such a gift was actually given and, if so, of what it consisted. To further complicate matters, Argentine *diseuse* Berta Singerman, like an Israeli diplomat before her,⁴⁸ identified the recipient as Cuba's foreign minister — not Belt. Singerman, an acknowledged player in Israeli efforts to secure Cuban recognition of the Jewish state's independence, also referred to the necklace as an inducement for the Grau government not to abandon its unobliging attitude on the subject.⁴⁹ If Singerman's dating is correct the implications are twofold. Firstly, she implies that the Saudi present post-dated 14 May 1948, Israel's independence day, and was therefore not meant primarily as a reward for Cuban opposition to partition. Secondly, Singerman's later date rules out the possibility that the Belts' whistle-blowing on some unorthodox vote-catching condoned by the Zionists prior to the UN partition vote, which the Cuban couple reported to State Department officials in December 1947,⁵⁰ was meant only to deflect Zionist insinuations that they had been bribed by the Arabs.

Lending a degree of support to Tov's version, however, are the acknowledged facts that Cuban politics was permeated by corruption and, more specifically, that the Saudis did offer lavish presents. UN Assistant Secretary General David Owen, for instance, received an embroidered robe and jewel-encrusted dagger at about the same time. Like Owen, Mrs. Belt admits that after the partition vote King Ibn Saud presented her husband with an embroidered robe and accompanying headgear. There was even talk of pure bred Arabian horses.⁵¹ However, in the absence of conclusive evidence as to the date of the necklace episode, or for that matter of its existence, it is quite possible that the allegation — an indication of the bad blood aroused by someone who enjoyed great prestige among his Latin American peers — may have been an attempt to smear an anti-Zionist foe, while at the same time diverting attention from the Jewish Agency's own somewhat unorthodox maneuvering *in extremis*.

47. For the pearl necklace version, see Singerman, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

48. Michael Comay to Bernard Gering, 3 December 1947, in *Political and Diplomatic Documents, December 1947–May 1948* (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 8. At the time Comay was in charge of the Jewish Agency's New York office. Nevertheless, it would be imprudent to ignore Comay's remoteness from the Agency's Latin American affairs when considering some of his comments on the region's voters at the UN session devoted to partition, as well as the fact that at the time the Agency's Latin American department operated from this office.

49. Singerman, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

50. Thompson to Henderson, 18 December 1947, and Gordon Merriam to Henderson, 23 December 1947, in *Policy Planning Papers*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–48.

51. Roger Owen, letter to author, 13 October 1989; Belt, interview by author.

Still, even if one assumes that Belt's wife received a substantial Saudi present either before or after the partition vote, the fact remains that such an unflinching opponent of Jewish statehood in Palestine is unlikely to have allowed any such gratuity to affect his judgment on partition. Hence Kaplan's assertion that such a sweetener, although by no means counter-productive, would have been far from crucial.⁵² Finally, while all gratuities are meant to buy good-will, there is a world of difference between presents accepted in public, as Tov claims was the case with the Saudi gift, and underhanded deals or bribes. Desperate not to miss the opportunity to achieve Jewish statehood first and Israeli admission to the community of nations next, Israel supporters were themselves often prepared to use underhand means in a few Latin American states,⁵³ as the Belts themselves recorded. According to Guillermo Belt, one of the Latin American representatives voted for partition because of a \$75,000 payment while another, believed to have been from Costa Rica, allegedly accepted \$40,000.⁵⁴

Despite an initial unwillingness to exploit the venality of certain politicians, the Jewish Agency's data bank on influential Latin Americans did accumulate information about their foibles, among other things. This would eventually prove useful. For example, the card on Alvarez, first Grau's Commerce Minister, and then Foreign Minister until January 1947, rightly recorded that he was a businessman of doubtful integrity, with a "price tag."⁵⁵ The usefulness of such information on Alvarez's corruptibility is highlighted by his part in Cuba's recognition of Israel's independence in January 1949, when he was his country's representative to the UN. The job earned Alvarez — already known as a second-rate lawyer and politician in the days of Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs⁵⁶ — a handsome Israeli reward, which he gladly accepted.⁵⁷ Long

52. Kaplan, interview by author, 1985. Kaplan's reference to Mrs. Belt's father as the informant on the Saudi gift does not obviate the need to find the relevant photo and/or other evidence, among other reasons to verify the validity of the proposition that the absence of media coverage is certainly no proof that such events never took place.

53. For an assessment of claims and counterclaims about Zionist bribes in some of the other Latin American states, see Klich, "Latin America, the United States and the Birth of Israel," art. cit., pp. 397–98, and 403–405; idem, "Arms for the Middle East and Argentina's Efforts at a Balanced Approach to the Arab World and Israel," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* (London), vol. 7 no. 3, 1996, p. 723.

54. Thompson to Henderson, 18 December 1947, in *Policy Planning Papers*, op. cit., p. 48.

55. CZA, Z5/1359, Jewish Agency data card system.

56. Rockefeller papers, Political Data on Cuba, November 1944.

57. Former head of the Jewish Agency's Latin American Department, interview by author, Jerusalem, 1989.

before this, money also changed hands to secure Alvarez's approval of Cuban documents for a huge number of Jewish refugees. Not surprisingly, therefore, a Canadian review of developments concerning Cuba reported that Alvarez had been "notorious for his private transactions" when serving as Grau's minister of commerce as well as when holding the foreign affairs portfolio, without however alluding specifically to any of his deals.⁵⁸

Dismayed by Belt's unhelpfulness during the UN General Assembly session in 1946, the Jewish Agency first sought to find an important client of the ambassador's law practice who would be willing to use his position to Zionism's advantage. Although a former Cuban diplomat suggested in February 1947 that such a client should not be difficult to find among the "considerable community of substantial Jewish businessmen," this plan proved overly optimistic. A few months later, a Zionist envoy reported that he had "investigated all angles concerning Mr. Belt and a possible source of influence on him." "Strange to relate," he added with unconcealed disappointment, "such is not to be found in Havana. He does not have any friends that could influence him at all. Nor does he have any important clients in Havana as he never reached the stage of having an important law office there." This was so, the envoy reported, because Belt had begun "to mix in politics at the early stage of his career." As for the law practice of Belt's brother, this was "of the mediocre type without clients of any importance." Hence, the most hopeful piece of information the visitor relayed was that an unidentified individual in New York "may be the person I am seeking." A card in the Jewish Agency's data bank plausibly suggests that this was Benjamin Schrift, manager of New York's Modern Industrial Bank, later suspected by US diplomats of having used his position as the Haitian government's chief economic adviser to enable the Jewish Agency to secure that country's unexpected pro-partition vote.⁵⁹

Unpleasant though the entire issue of bribery undoubtedly is for anybody wishing to retain a reputation for probity, by May 1947 the Jewish Agency had already countenanced the use of cash gifts to Cuban pressmen to augment their not insubstantial genuine friendly feelings towards Zionism. That the Jewish Agency was not as yet prepared to offer financial

58. National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Record Group 25, 10463-AH-40, E.H. Coleman to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 6 February 1950. For Alvarez's role in the visa affair, see Kaplan, interview by author, 1991.

59. CZA, Z5/458-I, Adelson to Shertok, 6 February 1947; Z5/1347, Chapler to Toff, 5 May 1947; Z5/1359, Jewish Agency data card system; Z5/11054, Shlesinger to Jewish Agency, 28 October 1947.

inducements to Grau's inner circle is suggested by the same envoy's reported difficulties in reaching "the people who do have power at the present time." Access could be gained only "in a manner that we are against employing."⁶⁰ Later, as the decisive vote drew nearer and a two-thirds majority in favor of partition seemed elusive, the Jewish Agency shed its scruples. Thus, Cuban, Jewish, and Palestinian sources either mention that the Belts were enticed with gratuities and other interesting propositions, or did not rule out the possibility that such inducements were proffered in their respect and that of others.

Evidence of this change of tack comes from, among others, the State Department's Gordon Merriam, who reported Mrs. Belt's disclosure that her husband was promised "all the money and other facilities necessary to bring about his election" as Cuba's president in exchange for a pro-partition vote.⁶¹ For his part, Nakhla alleged that the Zionists sent Mrs. Belt an expensive fur coat which she refused to accept. Essentially confirming the implication of Nakhla's claim, Mrs. Belt's recollection is, nonetheless, quite different. Asked by a member of a Zionist delegation that visited her husband in New York whether she had such a coat, Mrs. Belt's answer that she did not possess one led the visitor to say that such a situation ought to be remedied, to which the ambassador's wife rejoined that her husband would not allow her to accept such a present.⁶² Likewise, Belt himself summoned Tov early in 1948 to bring to his attention an offer of \$30,000, made in exchange for an anti-Arab stand during the UN meeting in Paris. While this episode is derisively portrayed in Tov's memoirs as a possible indication of Belt's asking price for such an unexpected pro-Zionist volte face, the Jewish Agency official's robust and credible denial of having personally offered any such reward clearly does not rule out the possibility that there were pro-Zionists who may have been directed to do so. Nothing illustrates this more conclusively than Toff's earlier authorization of the leader of Argentine Jewry to use "cash" if such an inducement would yield a pro-partition vote.⁶³

In addition, a US Jewish body's Latin America expert, entrusted with delivering a material reward to Paraguay's representative before the crucial

60. CZA, Z5/1347, Chapler to Toff, 24 and 29 April, and 5 May 1947.

61. Merriam to Henderson, 23 December 1947, in *Policy Planning Papers*, op. cit., p. 47. On Belt's alleged presidential aspirations, as relayed to the Argentine ambassador in Rio de Janeiro by his US counterpart, see AMRECIC, DP, US 2/947, Nicolás Accame to Juan Atilio Bramuglia, 5 August 1947.

62. Nakhla, interview by author, 1988; Belt, interview by author.

63. CZA, Z5/11184, Toff to Moisés Goldman, 28 November 1947. Tov, op. cit., pp. 153–54.

partition vote, has suggested that Adolfo Kates, a prominent Cuban Jewish community member, offered Dihigo a substantial payoff in return for Cuba's abstention or absence from the ballot.⁶⁴ Kates' cable informing Toff that he was "working," sent after Belt's premature return to Havana on 27 November 1947, confirms that this businessman was one of those entrusted with the Jewish Agency's last ditch attempts to wean Cuba away from the anti-partition camp.⁶⁵ Kates' credentials to do so hinged on his business endeavors as representative for a large number of US firms, all of them important advertisers on the Cuban scene, and his relatively close links with Belt's alternate, Ernesto Dihigo. Among the influential clients of Dihigo's law practice was the island's association of advertisers.⁶⁶ Unlike the Belts' allegations, recorded in State Department documents and in Tov's memoirs (or the conclusive evidence of cash inducements in the case of two other Latin American states, as well as in the matter of Cuban recognition of Israel), thus far, Kates' attempts to suborn Dihigo in the interest of a Cuban abstention or absence from the partition vote remain hypothetical. While any such improprieties have been denied by Dihigo's widow (probably merely an indication that she was simply not in the know), Kates' exertions on behalf of the Jewish Agency still need to be proven.⁶⁷

Conclusions: Caution and the Peeling away of Myths

Irrefutable answers to the question of what really motivated Cuban opposition to the decisive UN vote on partition will possibly have to wait until Cuban archival material is made available. While it has been said that all the relevant files of the Cuban mission were destroyed before Alvarez took over Belt's position at the UN,⁶⁸ further research, nonetheless, is justified to achieve a coherent and conclusive picture of Cuba's record on Jewish statehood in Palestine, one that may completely peel away the veritable mythology created by some of the Arab, Cuban and Zionist actors, especially the latter, in the course of their struggle, as well as totally discredit some of the currently accepted wisdom on the subject.

Meanwhile, the above discussion strongly suggests that Havana's anti-partition vote was far from Belt's exclusive responsibility. Moreover,

64. Latin America expert of a US Jewish organization, interview by author, 1984 and 1989.

65. CZA, Z5/11063, Kates to Toff, 27 November 1947.

66. Kaplan, interview by author, 1985 and 1991.

67. C. Dihigo, interview by author, Miami, 1991.

68. ICJ, Partial transcript of oral history interview with Sender Kaplan.

undeniable as the American, Arab, and Zionist dimensions of Cuba's performance on the Palestine question were, it is more than apparent that explanations based solely on conflating her ambassador's well-known deference to leading State Department officials, as well as allegations that he was in the Arabs' pocket, or, like Grau, anti-Jewish, are, unfortunately for those peddling such notions, either unconvincing, misleading or both. As for speculation on Belt's personal ambition to lead "a possible Latin American-Asiatic bloc,"⁶⁹ did we not hear similar concerns voiced regarding Argentina's Juan Perón? Recalling the caution with which the latter needs to be judged,⁷⁰ such a proviso would probably be insufficient in Cuba's case.

69. Moshe Tov, interview by author, Kiryat Ono, 1983.

70. Ignacio Klich, "Towards an Arab-Latin American Bloc? The Genesis of Argentine-Middle East Relations: Jordan, 1945–54," *Middle Eastern Studies* (London), vol. 31 no. 3, 1995, p. 552.