

Early History of the Israel/Palestine Conflict

NOTE: This fact sheet was written for those (like me) who grew up thinking Israel had always been a small Jewish country in the Middle East which was often attacked by Arab states because its people were of a different religion.

ZIONISM

The Zionist movement was a movement to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. It began among Russian Jews in the early 1880s. At the time, Palestine had a population approximately 86% Muslim, 9% Christian, and 5% Jewish.

EARLY INTENTIONS

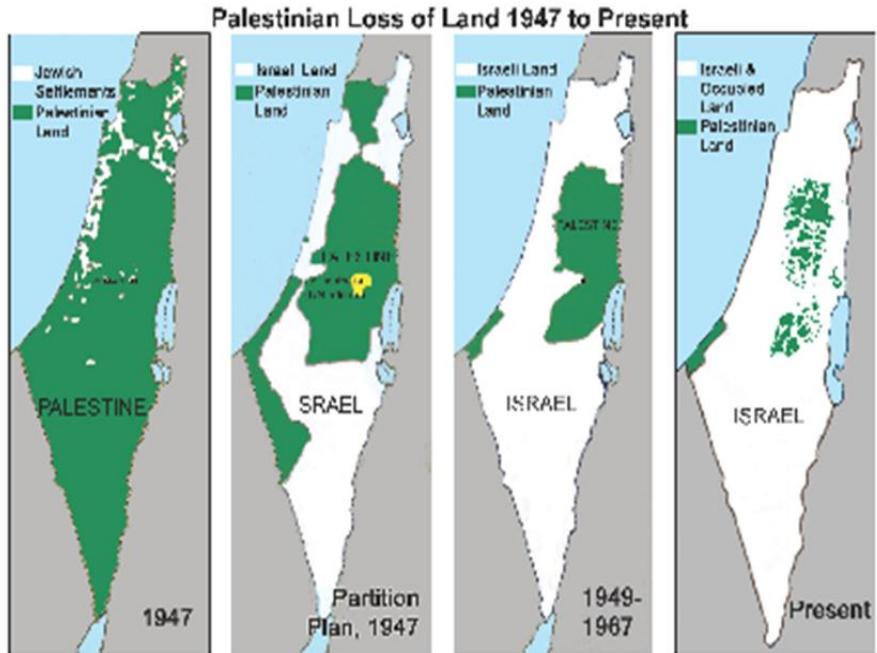
In 1919, a U.S. commission to Palestine reported that “the Commissioners began their study of Zionism with their minds predisposed in its favor, but the actual facts in Palestine... have driven them to the recommendation here made” that Jewish immigration be severely limited. They found Zionist leaders intended “a practically complete dispossession” of non-Jews. A 1921 British commission reported Zionist leaders openly claiming there was room for *only* a Jewish state.

BOYCOTT OF ARAB LABOR

While many Jews tried to co-exist with Arab Palestinians, by the 1910s, the dominant strain of Zionism held that Jews should hire only Jews. A Zionist leader described the policies he had had to defend in the 1920s: “to defend preaching to housewives that they should not buy at Arab stores; to defend the fact that we stood guard at orchards to prevent Arab workers from getting jobs there ... to pour kerosene on Arab tomatoes; to attack Jewish housewives in the market and smash the Arab eggs they had bought...”

THE UN PARTITION PLAN

After WWI, Britain became the administrator of Palestine under a League of Nations mandate. Under the Mandate, Palestine’s “existence as [an] independent nation” was to be “provisionally recognized”, while at the same time Britain was to “facilitate the achievement” within it “of a national home for the Jewish people, it being clearly understood that nothing should be done which might prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”. In early 1947, the British declared the Mandate unworkable, and asked the UN to come up with a solution. On November 29, 1947, the UN passed a nonbinding resolution recommending the partition of Palestine into two states “with economic



union”, with Jerusalem carved out as a separate international area. When it appeared a few days before the vote that the resolution would not pass, as Dean Rusk wrote, “the pressure and arm-twisting applied by American and Jewish representatives in capital after capital to get that affirmative vote are hard to describe”. The plan was striking:

- The Jewish state was to be allocated 56% of Mandate Palestine, while Jews at the time owned less than 7% of the land and made up under one-third of the population. The Jewish state would include the most fertile land and almost all the citrus groves, which were the main source of exports and over half of which were then owned by Palestinians.

- The Palestinian state was to be allocated 44% of Mandate Palestine, while Palestinians at the time owned or “traditionally owned” 93% of the land and made up over two-thirds of the population. According to the British Mandatory’s Survey, Palestinians in 1944-45 grew most of Palestine’s produce, producing 92% of its grain, 77% of its vegetables, and 99% of its olives.

POPULATION UNDER THE UN PLAN

While Palestinians lived throughout the country, 80% of the Jewish population outside Jerusalem was concentrated in two urban subdistricts. Only one subdistrict in Palestine had a Jewish majority. It was therefore impossible to

create a viable Jewish state that did not include a large Palestinian population. Under the UN plan, the Jewish state would be 47% Palestinian (or 42%, including the Jews of Jerusalem, who could vote in the Jewish state), and the Palestinian state would be 1% Jewish.

DID ZIONISTS ACCEPT THE UN PLAN?

The Palestinians rejected the UN plan as being an unjust division of their land, as well as illegal under the UN Charter. The latter view was shared by the US State Department, although not by President Truman. In public, Zionist leaders claimed to accept the plan, and contrasted their acceptance to the Palestinians’ rejection. However, many private statements of David Ben-Gurion, the dominant Zionist leader and future first prime minister of Israel, revealed far different intentions. Ben-Gurion accepted neither the borders nor the large Palestinian population in the Jewish state. In 1938 he told the Zionist Executive why he favored even a partial state: “... after the formation of a large army in the wake of the establishment of the state, we will abolish partition and expand to the whole of Palestine.” Four days after the UN vote in 1947, he announced to the Zionist Labor Union, “the total population of the Jewish state, at the time of its establishment, will be... almost 40% non-Jews... This fact must be seen in all its clarity and acuteness... only a state with at least 80% Jews is a viable and stable state.”

REFUGEES CREATED BEFORE ARAB ARMIES ENTERED

Fighting escalated following the UN vote. In the 1930s, Jewish forces had collected detailed files on Palestinian villages. By March 1948, under "Plan Dalet", Jewish brigade commanders had been given specific orders for the fate of each village: occupation, destruction, or expulsion. Many atrocities were committed. By the end of May 1948, approximately 29% of the Palestinian population, about 390,000 persons, had become refugees. Zionist leaders later claimed that Arab leaders had broadcast orders telling the population to flee, and thus were responsible for the refugees. The claim of orders has been thoroughly disproved, though is sometimes still repeated. Among other evidence, an Israeli intelligence report covering December 1947 - May 1948 found that almost 75% of villages were evacuated due to direct or nearby "hostile Jewish [army] operations" or "expulsion orders", another 10% were evacuated due to "general fear", and only 5% due to Arab "orders and decrees".

THE UN ADJUSTS ITS PLAN

By early 1948, it was clear partition could not be implemented peacefully. The UN began to consider its next steps. The US announced in February that the Security Council (UNSC) had no power to impose a political recommendation, e.g., partition, by force under the UN Charter. The UNSC further refused to approve or commit to the resolution. The CIA, with the concurrence of other US intelligence agencies, wrote that "Arab opposition automatically invalidates the UNGA partition recommendation, whose basic assumption is Arab-Jewish cooperation". In March 1948, the US proposed a suspension of partition efforts and a temporary trusteeship for Palestine, termed "a shocking reversal of its position" by the Jewish Agency. With time running out until the end of the Mandate at midnight May 14, the UN took several actions pulling back from partition. A UN Special Session was called to "consider further the question of the future government of Palestine". The UNSC requested all parties refrain from prejudicial "political activity", such as declaring independence, over this period. A UN resolution was introduced for the creation of a "temporary regime for Palestine as a whole under a UN mediator". It was under debate when, on May 14 at 6 p.m. NY time, the Mandate ended, Israel declared independence, and President Truman gave Israel de facto recognition. Truman's action shocked the

US and other UN delegations, and "pandemonium broke loose". The UN then passed its resolution, and a week later appointed Count Folke Bernadotte as UN mediator. He was seen by Zionists as an obstacle and assassinated by members of the Jewish militia Lehi in September 1948 in Jerusalem.

DID ARAB ARMIES OUTNUMBER JEWISH FORCES?

The British Mandate ended May 14, 1948 at midnight. On May 15, armies from five Arab states entered Palestine, called upon by Palestinian leaders seeking "outside help in order to resist this Jewish aggressive invasion of their country." The Arab League noted then that "more than a quarter of a million Arabs have been compelled by Jewish aggression to seek refuge in other Arab countries". The UNSC declined to condemn the Arab states; Britain refused any "measures to stop military action by the Arab states only." Fighting continued, with almost all battles fought on land allocated to the Palestinian state. The Arab armies were outnumbered at every stage of the war: in mid-May Palestinian irregulars plus Arab forces numbered fewer than 25,000, while the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fielded 35,000. By mid July the IDF had mobilized 65,000 and by December, over 95,000. Arab forces grew more slowly and were unorganized and outgunned. As in many wars, the stronger side won.

"GREEN LINE" ISRAEL

By July 1949 when the final armistice was signed, Jewish forces had taken control of 78% of Mandate Palestine. This included all the land for the Jewish state and over half the land for the Palestinian state, as well as West Jerusalem. The 22% of the land which Israel did not control was divided between Egypt, which held Gaza, and Jordan, which held the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The 1949 armistice lines are known as "the green line" or "pre-1967" borders.

TOTAL REFUGEES

The UN estimated that by the end of the war, over 50% of the total Palestinian population, or about 726,000 persons, had been made refugees. Israel never allowed them to return to their homes. Many of the homes were given to Jewish immigrants within a few months after being vacated; by the end of July 1948, 170,000 Jews had been placed in vacant Palestinian homes. Israel did not abide by the December 1948 UN resolution requiring that all refugees willing to "live at peace" be allowed to return to their homes, and those not returning be

compensated. Roughly 150,000 Palestinians remained in the Jewish state, about 20% of its population.

David Ben-Gurion, First Prime Minister, on "Liberating the Whole Country"

Ben-Gurion biographer Michael Bar-Zohar reports that shortly after the final 1949 armistice, "Ben-Gurion was asked: 'Why didn't you liberate the whole country?' The Old Man replied: 'There was the danger of getting saddled with a hostile Arab majority... of entanglements with the United Nations and the Powers... Even so, we liberated a very large area, much more than we thought. Now, we have work for two or three generations. As for the rest - we'll see later...'".

OCCUPATION AND ILLEGAL SETTLEMENTS

In 1967, Israel captured the remaining 22% of Mandate Palestine (Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem), and took the Golan Heights from Syria. Today there are over 500,000 settlers in Jewish-only settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, connected by Israeli-only roads, living under civilian law, and voting in Israel's elections. The settlements repeatedly have been declared illegal by the international community, including the US and the International Court of Justice, but they remain. Palestinians, given nominal control of parts of the West Bank and Gaza (see map), live under Israeli military law. They have no vote in Israel's elections, although Israel has ruled them for 45 years. The Israeli army and settlers continue, at gunpoint, to confiscate their land and water resources, and destroy their homes and crops. Thousands have been imprisoned without charge.

US ROLE

The US has pledged a minimum of \$3 billion per year in military aid to Israel for 2009-2018. It has used its UN Security Council veto unilaterally 42 times to protect Israel from sanctions. In 2011, the US voted against its own stated policy when it unilaterally vetoed a UN Security Council resolution demanding all settlement activities cease. In October 2011, the US cut off funding to UNESCO when it admitted Palestine. In 2012, the US was one of a tiny minority voting unsuccessfully against UN recognition of Palestine as a "non-member observer state". The vote was 138-9, with Canada, the Czech Republic, Panama, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, and Palau standing with the US and Israel.