

A State of Inequity: The UN Partition Plan of 1947

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Introduction

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voted with a strong majority to partition western Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state.¹ Jews and Arabs were given a chance under the UN Partition Plan of 1947 to live side by side in two separate states. This thesis will examine why the 1947 partition failed.

The 1917-1947 Milieu Behind the 1947 Partition Failure

To truly understand the 1947 partition failure it is necessary to consider the preceding decades given that the Palestine problem became a truly international issue towards the end of the First World War upon the disintegration of the Turkish Ottoman Empire.² Palestine as a former Ottoman territory was placed under the administration of Great Britain under the Mandates System adopted by the League of Nations pursuant to the League's Covenant (Article 22).³ All but one of these Mandated Territories became fully independent States. The exception was Palestine where, instead of being limited to "the rendering of administrative assistance and advice" the Mandate had as a primary objective the implementation of the "Balfour Declaration" issued by the British Government in November 1917, expressing support for "the establishment in Palestine as a national home for the Jewish people".⁴

From the outset the inequity of the Balfour Declaration is obvious. The 1917 Balfour Conference occurred without the consent or the knowledge of the Arabs, and was a stark contradiction to the outcome of the McMahon Pledge of 1915 which stated that a Jewish settlement in Palestine would be allowed only in so far as it was consistent with "the political and economic freedom of the Arab population."⁵ Thus many Palestinians see each step towards the creation of Israel as more oppressive upon the rights and freedoms of the Palestinian people than each preceding step.

The Geo-Strategic Reasoning Behind the Failure of the 1947 Partition

The strategic imperatives since 1936 of David Ben-Gurion (Israel's first Prime Minister 1948–1953, 1955–1963) are relevant to influencing the Palestinian rejection of the 1947 partition. Ben-Gurion consistently lacked the willingness to negotiate in good faith with the Arabs of the mandate Palestine, a gross and unconscionable act given that the Arab Palestinians had lived in the region for centuries. Ben-Gurion's foremost biographer Shabatai Teveth is insightful on this point. Teveth states that as early as 1936, Ben-Gurion had decided that the Jewish relationship with Palestine was

to be a military one.⁶ On the October 29 1937 at a lecture to Mapai activists, Ben-Gurion (inspired by the Peel Report) stated that the Jewish State must develop in two stages.⁷ Firstly, “the period of building and laying foundations” would last ten to fifteen years and would be but a prelude to the second stage of “the period of expansion”.⁸

In the summer of 1937 Ben-Gurion ordered Elimelech Slikowitz (“Avnir”) to draw up a plan for the military takeover of the entire country (all of the Mandate Palestine) in anticipation of the withdrawal of the British.⁹ In many private statements, Ben-Gurion was quite explicit, as illustrated in a 1937 letter to his son:

“A partial Jewish State is not the end, but only the beginning. The establishment of such a Jewish state will serve as a means in our historical efforts to redeem the country in its entirety. ...We shall organize a modern defense force ..and then I am certain that we will not be prevented from settling in other parts of the country, either by mutual agreement with our Arab neighbors or by some other means... We will expel the Arabs and take their places with the force at our disposal.”¹⁰

Thus the “Avnir plan”, ten years before the 1947 Partition illustrates why Palestinians would perceive a milieu of Zionist imperialism in the form of claiming farmland which Zionists had not cultivated, in claiming ownership over houses which the Zionists had not built and over a people’s land whose ancestors had occupied the region consistently for centuries.¹¹

Jewish Terrorism: Hardly an Incentive to Accept the 1947 Creation of a Jewish State

On July 2, 1946, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem was bombed, killing 91 people mostly of Arab origin. Menachem Begin who later became Prime Minister of Israel between (1977–1983) planned the attack on the King David Hotel.¹² Another terrorist who went on to become Prime Minister was Yitzak Shamir (1983–1984, 1986–1992), Shamir was originally a member of the Jewish terrorist gang called “Irgun”. Shamir later moved over to the even more radical “Stern Gang,” which also committed many vicious atrocities. Shamir himself has defended the various assassinations committed by the Irgun and Stern gangs on the grounds that “it was the only way we could operate, because we were so small.”¹³ In this context, it is wise for Palestinians to resist the partition of Palestine. Israel had and in my opinion remain predisposed to violent extremism, expansionist motivations and continue to refuse “meaningful” negotiations.

Palestinian fears were once again proved correct when on April 9, 1948 a combined force of Irgun and Stern Gangs committed a massacre of 260 Arabs in the small township of Deir Yassin.¹⁴ The Zionist Leader, Chaim Weizman, referred to the massacre as this "miraculous simplification of our task," and Ben Gurion said that "without Deir Yasin there would be no Israel." Red Cross and United Nations observers who visited the scene said that the houses were first set on fire and the occupants were then shot down as they rushed out to escape the flames. History recites that one pregnant woman had her baby violently cut out of her stomach with a knife.¹⁵ Jacques de Reyneir, the chief of the International Red Cross delegation in Palestine in his report on the massacre states that "*All of them were young, some even adolescents, men and women armed to the teeth: revolvers, machine-guns, hand-grenades, and knives, most of them still blood-stained. A beautiful young girl with criminal eyes showed me hers (knife) still dripping with blood, she displayed it like a trophy.*"¹⁶ This event does not feature in the romantic tales told by the Zionists of the creation of Israel, but remains in the consciousness of Palestinians in prolonging the anger and resistance to accepting the 1947 Partition.

The McMahon Pledge May Have Been Reasonable, Resolution 181 Was Not

UN Resolution 181 represented a new step aimed at legitimising the Balfour Declaration by upgrading the home land promised to the Jews to a "full legal state".¹⁷ Part II(B) of Resolution 181, entitled the "Jewish State", states that the north-eastern sector of the Jewish State (Eastern Galilee) is bounded on the north and west by the Lebanese frontier and on the east by the frontiers of Syria and Trans-Jordan. It includes the whole of the Huleh Basin, Lake Tiberias, the whole of the Beisan Sub-District and the boundary line being extended to the crest of the Gilboa mountains and the Wadi Malih. From there the Jewish State extends north-west, following the boundary described in respect of the Arab State. The Jewish section of the coastal plain extends from a point between Minat El-Qila and Nabi Yunis in the Gaza Sub-District and includes the towns of Haifa and Tel-Aviv, leaving Jaffa as an enclave of the Arab State. The eastern frontier of the Jewish State follows the boundary described in respect of the Arab State. The Beersheba area comprises the whole of the Beersheba Sub-District, including the Negeb and the eastern part of the Gaza Sub-District, but excludes the town of Beersheba and those areas described in respect of the Arab State. It includes also a strip of land along the Dead Sea stretching from the Beersheba-Hebron Sub-District boundary line to 'Ein Geddi'.¹⁸

The partition plan was considered by the Palestinians to be biased against Palestinians who saw themselves as sole owners of their own land.¹⁹ At the time as the Partition Plan was being drafted, Arabs made up two thirds of the population. British land registration documents state that Palestinian Arabs owned 93 percent of the land. The non-Arabs and Jews who made up just a third of the population owned only seven percent of the land.²⁰ Yet the Partition Plan gave the Arabs between 43% - 45.5% of the land, which Palestinians considered unjust.²¹ For the Zionists, partition was an improvement on even the "national homeland" they were promised by Lord Balfour. Resolution 181

upgraded the promised Jewish “homeland” to “Israel the State” a full state given the international legitimacy it received via the United Nations.²² Further still, Resolution 181 gave the most fertile lands to the Zionists and left infertile soil to the Palestinians.²³ This is not an equitable deal for the majority of the regions’ population.

Cold War Political Pawns

The United Nations General Assembly enjoyed the support of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite Governments in the creation of Israel.²⁴ Josef Stalin gambled that the new Jewish State would be a bulwark against British imperialism. The US President Truman, despite State Department advice and Department of Defense pressure, supported the Partition Plan, and ensured its passage. Meeting in Lake Success in New York on November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Partition Plan, with 33 votes in favor, 13 against, 10 abstentions and one absent.²⁵ Critical to this thesis is the need to acknowledge that the Palestinians and Arabs considered this to be a total injustice in ignoring the rights of the majority of the population of Palestine. Thus the Arab League and Palestinian institutions rejected the Partition Plan. Afghanistan, Cuba, Egypt, Greece, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey and Yemen all voted against Resolution 181. Some Arab states formed militia to support the Palestinians in 1947-8. Thus in the eyes of the Palestinians, the oppressive wording in Resolution 181 is also a symptom of Cold War politics and is perceived as treasure stolen by a cunning and opportunist Zionist lobby rather than a legitimate urgency to create a homeland for the Jewish people.

To clarify the core foundational reasons behind the Palestinian rejection of the 1947 Partition Plan, there are four core reasons deserving of reiteration.

[First], the Arab world perceived that the United Nations were not competent under international law to partition or otherwise dispose of the territory of Palestine against the wishes of the clear majority of its inhabitants. Although Palestine, in 1947, was still subject to a mandate that had legally terminated as a result of the dissolution of the League of Nations, it did not affect its statehood or the sovereignty of its people, so the question of its future government was a matter that fell exclusively within its own domestic jurisdiction and could not become subject to adjudication by the United Nations. The United Nations did not possess any sovereignty nor did it exercise any other right over Palestine. It therefore had no power to partition Palestine or to assign any part of its territory to a religious minority comprised mostly of recent European immigrants in order that they might establish a state of their own.

[Second], the Partition Plan was perceived as having no legal validity.²⁶ The Partition Plan was adopted by the General Assembly, not the Security Council. Resolutions of the General Assembly have the force of recommendations to

member states of the United Nations but do not have any mandatory force.²⁷ Therefore, the General Assembly vote to accept the recommendations of UNSCOP to partition Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state did not mean that one or another state was being created over the objections of one of the parties.²⁸ The partition plan also violated a very basic principle in international affairs: that of self-determination of peoples, recognised by Article 1 of the United Nations Charter.²⁹ The carving-out of 55 % of Palestine for the creation of a Jewish state and the subjection of part of the original inhabitants (who were not Jewish) to its dominion represents a fundamental violation of international law.³⁰

[Third], the Partition Plan was neither just nor fair. Rather, it was oppressive.³¹ The Partition Plan granted 55% of Palestine to the Jews, who at that time comprised only 30 percent of the population, and who owned a mere 6 or 7% of the land.³² Within this Jewish State there were to have been 407,000 Palestinian Arabs. The Arab State was to comprise only the remaining 34% of the land.³³ The UN Partition Plan also ordered that the most fertile region, be given to the Jewish settlers.³⁴ The remaining 45% of Palestine was to comprise a home for the other 70% of the population who were Arab. The major reason the Palestinians rejected the partition resolution was on the grounds of its lack of fairness: it proposed to give the minority population an exclusive and hegemonic right to the majority of the land. In 1946, the total population of Palestine was 1,972,000 inhabitants, comprising 1,247,000 Palestinians and 608,000 Jews, as well as 16,000 others.³⁵ The Jewish population was composed primarily of foreign-born immigrants, originating mostly from Poland, Russia and Central Europe. Only one third of these immigrants had acquired Palestinian citizenship.³⁶ With respect to land ownership, it appears from the government of Palestine's Village Statistics that the Jews then owned 1,491 square kilometers (exclusive of urban property) out of a total of 26,323 square kilometers in Palestine.³⁷ Thus, Jewish land ownership amounted to 5.6% of the total area of the country. In contrast, the Palestinians owned the rest of Palestine, including all the areas that were categorised as public domain. Moreover, the territory allocated to the Jewish State included the coastal plain extending from Akka to Ashdod and other fertile lands, while the Palestinians, an agricultural people, were left mainly with mountainous and arid regions.³⁸

[Fourth], in contemplating the success of complying with Resolution 181 the Palestinians were aware that the Haganah, the military arm of the Zionist movement, in 1938 began forming their own underground groups, being the Irgun and later the Lehi.³⁹ The Irgun directed terror against Arabs. During the war, the Palmach, a special Haganah unit was formed to prepare for a possible invasion from Syria, controlled by the Vichy French. During most of the war the Haganah and Palmach cooperated with the British. The Haganah organised numerous attempts at illegal Jewish immigration, to bring the 250,000 refugees living in European DP camps to Palestine in whatever boats they could find. At the end of 1947 and the beginning of 1948 militarised Zionist organisations performed a series of terrorist actions and attacks against the Palestinian Arabs. Specifically the attack on the Arab village of Deir Yassin was a violent massacre where around 400,000 Arabs were driven from the future territory of the State of Israel before its establishment in May

1948. The expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs did not stop after the establishment of the State of Israel. It became most intensive amid the armed clashes between Israel and the Arab States during the Palestinian war of 1948-1949. After the war 340,000 Arab refugees joined the 400,000 Palestinians forced to leave their homeland earlier.

Conclusion

The conventional Israeli historical narrative declares that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the consequence of seventy-five years of mindless Arab hatred of the Jews and an Arab unwillingness to match the Jewish effort to reach a fair compromise over the ancient land of Palestine.⁴⁰ Yet the Arab Palestinian conflict with the Zionists then escalated into a wider Arab-Israeli conflict when the Arabs rejected the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan, which provided for the division of Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs and the creation of the State of Israel. In a continuing spirit of compromise, the conventional history holds that the Zionist leadership accepted the Resolution 181, but the Palestinians and the neighboring Arab states rejected it and launched an unprovoked invasion designed to destroy the new Israeli State.

After the 1948 war, Zionists claimed that Israel remained willing to settle the conflict on the basis of compromise, but they could find no Palestinian or other Arab leaders with whom to negotiate.⁴¹ Zionists maintain that the refugee issue remains unresolved because it suits the cynical purposes of the Arab States to justify Palestinian guerrilla terrorism, in league with neighboring Arab States, such as Egypt and Syria. This local and international terrorism according to the Israeli narrative led in turn to new Arab-Israeli wars in 1956, 1967, and 1973, all of them forced on Israel by Arab aggression.

This thesis rejects the conventional Israeli narrative of which I have just outlined. The Arab rejection of Resolution 181 was not based solely on Palestinian insistence on their political rights (which they are entitled to insist upon), but also on a belief, which turned out to be correct, that the Zionist leadership would not be satisfied with nor abide by a compromise. As I am neither an Israeli, a Jew, a Muslim nor an Arab I perceive the failure of Resolution 181 turning more on Israeli antagonism and a lack of a serious effort at compromise than anything else.⁴² Zionists never really sought to strike a workable compromise with the people whose lands they lobbied to occupy and rule. Many elements of Resolution 181 could be, but sadly have not been complied with by Israel. Examples include the failure to create a Palestinian State with specified boundaries; and the designation of Jerusalem as an International zone. Statements like "*No expropriation of land owned by an Arab in a Jewish State should be allowed except for public purposes*"; persons residing in Palestine shall "*become citizens of the State in which they are resident and enjoy full civil and political rights.*"; and, "*Jaffa should be an Arab Enclave*" were ignored.⁴³

The McMahon's pledge of 1915 *may* have succeeded in enabling the Jews and Palestinians to live side by side given the more balanced tone contained therein and given that 1915 preceded much of the Zionist condoned violence and imperialist murmuring causing the Arab Palestinian rejection of Resolution 181.⁴⁴ Yet the Balfour Declaration and Resolution 181 were always doomed to failure. Not only did Resolution 181 create an impossible competition between Israeli "State" rights and Palestinian human rights but it created a Palestinian achilles heal as it would have been strategically irrational for the Palestinians to allow Ben Gurion and his cohorts' expansionist regime, hell-bent on conquering all of mandate Palestine to establish a State next door upon Palestinian occupied Territories.

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Endnotes

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Against: (13), *Afghanistan, Cuba, Egypt, Greece, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Yemen.*
Abstained: (10), *Argentina, Chile, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Honduras, Mexico, United Kingdom, Yugoslavia.*
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