

1947-1948, Palestine: The Creation of Israel

By Richard Curtiss, exec. editor, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*.

The U.S. is largely responsible for the Israeli-Palestinian problem because of American decisions in 1947 and 1948. Most people who knew the Middle East at first hand opposed the partition plan, adopted by the UN on November 29, 1947. Patently unfair, it awarded 56% of Palestine to its 650,000 Jewish inhabitants, and 44% to its 1,300,000 Muslim and Christian Arab inhabitants.

Partition was adopted after ruthless arm-twisting by the U.S. government and pro-Zionist U.S. senators whose telegrams to UN member states, warned that U.S. goodwill in rebuilding their WWII-devastated economies might depend on a favorable vote.

On Nov. 10, 1945, U.S. diplomats from the Mid-East urged Truman not to heed Zionist urgings. He replied: "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism: I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."

Immediately after the partition plan was adopted, extensive fighting broke out, just as U.S. diplomats predicted. The Arab states categorically rejected the partition.

David Ben-Gurion, soon to be Israel's first prime minister, ordered his representatives at the UN to accept the plan, but not to enter into any discussion defining the new state's borders. His acceptance was only tactical.

Well-organized Jewish militias seized village after village assigned by the UN to the Arabs. Badly organized Arab villagers retaliated with bloody but purposeless attacks on Jewish vehicles and convoys.

The British Army was resolved to withdraw from Palestine on May 15, 1948. The fighting was spreading all over, including Jerusalem, which was supposed to remain under UN control.

Secretary of State George Marshall urged Truman to reconsider and a majority of UN diplomats saw a direct trusteeship as the only solution. Otherwise, they knew, neighboring Arab states would send military units



Harry Truman

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David Ben-Gurion

"[I am] satisfied with part of the country, but on...the assumption that after we build up a strong force following the establishment of the state, we will abolish the partition of the country and we will expand to the whole Land of Israel."

into Palestine the day the British withdrew, in an attempt to reoccupy the Arab areas seized by Jewish forces. The State Department urged Truman not to grant diplomatic recognition to Israel when the British withdrew, but to side with rapidly growing sentiment in the UN in favor of trusteeship.

Between 1944 and 1948, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, a 37-year-old lawyer and newly commissioned junior lieutenant, was Truman's inexperienced domestic advisor. He played a key role in overriding the wishes of WWII chief of staff Marshall.

In a *New Yorker* article (March 25, 1991) Clifford recalled that:

"Marshall firmly opposed American recognition of the new Jewish state; I did not. Marshall's opposition was shared by almost every member of the brilliant...group of presidential advisers...who were...creating a post-war foreign policy that would endure for more than 40 years. The opposition included Under Secretary of State Robert Lovett; his predecessor, Dean Acheson; the No. 3 man in the State Department, Charles Bohlen; the brilliant chief of the Policy Planning Staff George Kennan; (Navy Secretary James V.) Forrestal; and...Dean Rusk, director of the Office of UN Affairs.

"State Department Officials had done everything in their power to prevent, thwart or delay the President's Palestine policy in 1947 and 1948,

while I had fought for assistance to the Jewish Agency.

"At midnight, May 14, 1948, the British would relinquish control of Palestine.... One minute later, the Jewish Agency, under Ben-Gurion, would proclaim the new state.

"I had already had several serious disagreements with Marshall's protege, Dean Rusk, and Loy Henderson, director of Near Eastern and African Affairs.

"On May 8 [Marshall] told Moshe Shertok [the Jewish Agency's] political representative, that...if the Jews got into trouble and 'came running to us for help...there was no warrant to expect help from the U.S., which had warned them of the grave risk which they were running.' The U.S., he said, should continue to support UN resolutions to turn Palestine over to the UN as a trusteeship."

Clifford proposed to Truman "that at his next press conference, on the day before the British mandate would end, he announce his intention to recognize the Jewish state."

At a May 12 meeting with key decision makers, Marshall told Truman: "If you follow Clifford's advice and if I were to vote in the election, I would vote against you." Clifford continues: "Certain that history would prove him right, [Marshall] wanted his personal comments included in the official State Department

record.” That record reads, in part: “The transparent dodge to win a few votes would not ...achieve this purpose.... The counsel offered by Mr. Clifford was based on domestic political considerations, while the problem...was international.”

Clifford described his further negotiations, through Lovett, to stick to his own plan to recognize Israel while keeping Marshall from resigning. He pretended to take Marshall’s suggestions to Truman but, in fact, did not consult Truman on some of Marshall’s proposals. He simply waited awhile and then called Lovett back, saying in one case, the President “is not going to budge an inch.”

Clifford indicates that he represented Truman’s personal position, even when he did not consult the president. Truman’s own accounts indicate that he vacillated and was honestly confused. He was pulled one way by Jewish White House adviser David Niles and a Jewish business partner, Eddie Jacobson, and another by State Department professionals.

When news of Truman’s decision to recognize Israel was broken to the U.S. delegation at the UN, which had lined up votes for continued UN trusteeship, U.S. Ambassador Warren Austin left in order not to be present when U.S. recognition of Israel was announced, just 11 minutes after Israel’s creation. Dean Rusk then rushed to the UN to talk U.S. delegation members out of resigning *en masse* in protest.

Clifford writes that: “Lovett remained adamant for the rest of his life, that the president and I had been wrong. Nothing could ever convince him, Marshall, Acheson, Forrestal or Rusk that Truman had made the right decision.... Because Truman was often annoyed by the tone and fierceness of pressure exerted on him by American Zionists, he left some with the impression that he was ambivalent about the events of May 1948. This was not true. He never wavered in his belief that he had taken the right action.”

Nor did Clifford, who never expressed any regret about the 750,000 Palestinians who were pushed out of their country during the war, and never allowed by Israel to return to their homes. Nor does he seem to realize that his opponents are vindicated by five

Arab-Israeli wars. These are largely attributable to U.S. recognition of Israel before it officially agreed to borders assigned by the UN in 1947.

Source: *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, May/June 1991 <www.washington-report.org/backissues/0591/9105017.htm>

1948-1949: First Arab-Israeli War

At dawn on May 15, five Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq) declared war on the newly-born state of Israel, and attacked. During the war an estimated 8,000 soldiers were killed.

To the surprise of their opponents, Jewish forces not only resisted them but also annexed several Arab towns in the process. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled, or were driven, from their homes to become stateless refugees in enforced exile. A meeting of Jewish leaders resolved that they should never be allowed to return.

In 1949, the UN achieved truces that allowed Israel to retain almost all

the land it had seized. Egypt secured the Gaza Strip; Jordan had the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The rest was Israeli territory. Nothing remained that was officially called Palestine.

Arabs who fled in 1948 went to Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza. All were in refugee camps. Those still alive, or their descendants, are still there. The UN passed Resolution 194, saying ‘refugees wishing to return to...live at peace with neighbours should be permitted to do so.’ But no permission has ever been given.

Source: “A line of fire and blood,” *Wars and Armed Conflicts*, May 19, 2002. <www.ppu.org.uk/war>

Czechoslovakia & U.S. Supported Israel

In 1948, only one nation, Czechoslovakia, came to Israel’s aid. The Czechs shipped aircraft to Israel by packing fuselages inside U.S. cargo planes, smuggled out in violation of Truman’s embargo. [Defence Secretary] James Forrestal was furious when he learned that American Jews had set up an airbase behind the Iron Curtain. He would never allow his countrymen to sell arms to the Jews because [he thought] they were all Communists.

In addition to artillery and ammunition, they had given the Jews the cream of the Nazi air force, the Messerschmitt. The Israeli air force turned the tide of the war. Czech arms were a significant factor in the Jewish victory.

When the British Mandate expired on May 15, the Jews needed more Czech guns urgently. Shipments included rifles, machine guns, Messerschmitts and WWII Spitfires. Some U.S. pilots flew desperate missions from Czechoslovakia to Israel. They were heroes of the logistical war.

Czech Communists had saved Israel in its first months. By early 1949, the Jews had a famous victory. The minute the war was won, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion dumped the Communist connection. Contrary to Forrestal’s dire predictions, there weren’t many Israeli Communists. The Communist

party won only 4 of 120 seats, mostly with Arab support. This 3% communist vote was an embarrassment for the State Department, which in 1945 had predicted that Israel would be a communist puppet state within three years.

The radical socialist Mapam party won 15%, a small but irritating minority. Ben-Gurion hated Mapam, and suggested the Soviets had a fifth column inside the Jewish state.

Ben-Gurion abolished the Palmach [Israeli’s elite army unit] which had several pro-Mapam officers. As soon as the war against the Arabs was over, he asked for U.S. military advisers to crush the remaining Mapam influence. Then, he reorganized the entire Israeli intelligence service under the control of pro-Western leaders.

Source: Excerpts, John Loftus and Mark Aarons, *The Secret War Against the Jews* (1994).

Aramco Hauled Saudi Troops to War

Professor Robert Vitalis, notes that the U.S.-owned Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), with its intimate links to the CIA, moved Saudi soldiers to invade Israel in the 1948 war. (“Black Gold, White Crude,” *Diplomatic History*, Spring 2002).