# *Après nous le déluge*: Britain, the United Nations, and the 1947 Partition Plan

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In a historic vote on 29 November 1947 the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for an end to thirty years of British rule over Palestine. Earlier that year, Britain had turned to the UN for advice on how to contain the growing communal violence between Palestine's Arab and Jewish communities. Britain, of course, held its own strategic interests in the Middle East, and Palestine's ports and airbases played an increasingly important role in maintaining them. But Britain's main preoccupation in Palestine following the Second World War was the need to reconcile the demand of its majority Arab population for self-determination and independence (as had by then been achieved in neighbouring Arab states) with the Jewish aim (more desperate than ever in the shadow of the Holocaust) of transforming Palestine into a Jewish state.

The 1947 UN plan was officially entitled "Resolution 181 (II) Future Government of Palestine." It proposed the partitioning of the unitary state of Palestine into two countries, one Jewish and one Arab, as well as establishing a special international regime over the Jerusalem area and its religious sites. Partition plans are, by their very nature, offensive and destructive. In the valleys and plains of western and northern Palestine, Jewish and Arab communities were thoroughly intermingled. The task of carving new frontiers that separated Jews from Arabs was a huge challenge, and the terms of the plan demanded an economic union. There simply was no way of drawing straightforward boundaries that brought together the largely urban Jewish populations without including a large proportion of the Arab population. Instead of aiming for contiguity, the UN proposal envisaged each state consisting of three separate parts, creating a criss-cross arrangement with two meeting-points where the Jewish and Arab territorial units would overlap. In the eyes of one observer, the unnatural borders envisaged by Resolution 181 created a patchwork quilt of Arab and Jewish territories "entwined in an inimical embrace like two fighting serpents."[1] Arrangements were made for a UN commission to oversee the transfer of administrative powers to two new states, but it achieved nothing. Its failure was due to lack of resources and Britain's refusal to cooperate in any way. As a result, it was left to the Jews and Arabs to fight it out. Indeed, most historians of the Middle East mark 30 November 1947, the morning after the UN vote, as the beginning of the first Arab-Israeli war.
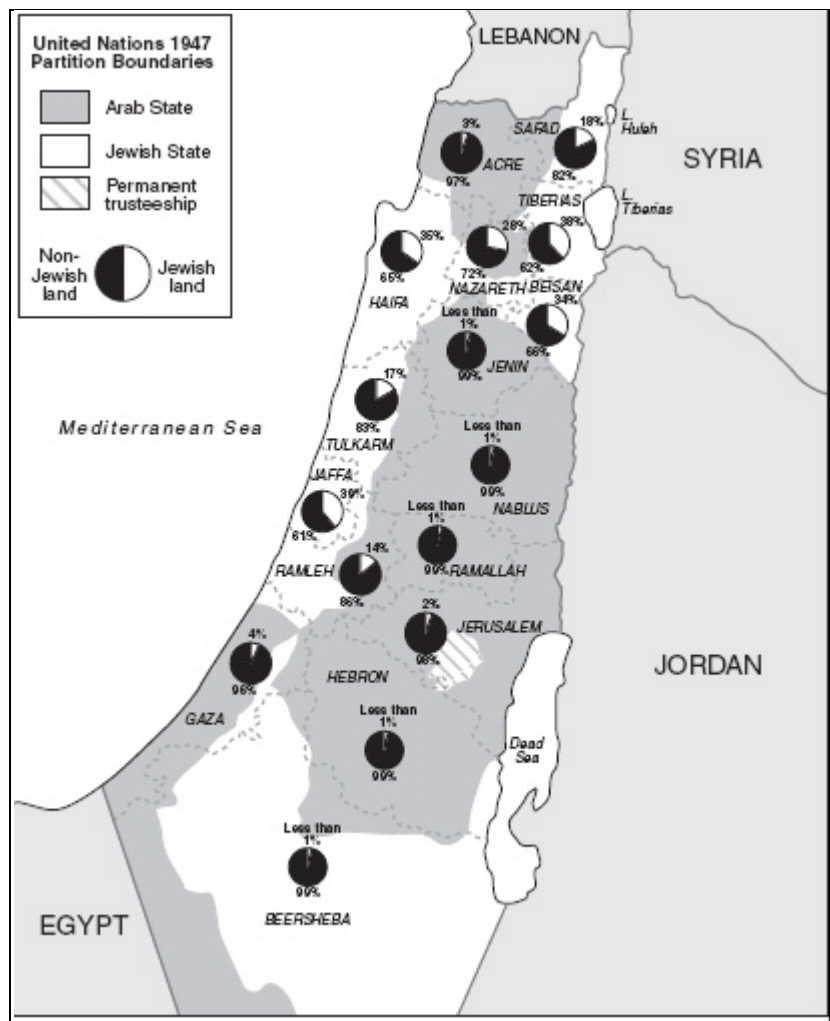
"The 1947 United Nations Partition Plan as a Reflection of Land Ownership in Palestine" Source: Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 7th ed. (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 191.

The Palestine Mandate

Britain's referral of the communal conflict in Palestine to the United Nations was premised on the country's status during the interwar years as a "mandate" of the League of Nations. In the immediate wake of the First World War, before even a final peace treaty with Turkey was concluded, Britain and France created new state boundaries for the Arabic-speaking peoples of the defeated Ottoman Empire. Continued European control over these new entities was then officially sanctioned in 1923 by the League of Nations' mandate system. In the patronizing language of the League's Covenant, former Ottoman territories were "inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world." In many ways, the invention of the mandate system was Britain and France's way of disguising old-fashioned imperial acquisition as enlightened tutelage. Nonetheless, by accepting the mandate

system, Britain and France officially accepted responsibility for preparing these new states for self-determination, while at the same time trying to protect their own strategic interests.

A tricky balancing act throughout the region, the mandate system was especially problematic in Palestine. Here, Britain not only undertook to reconcile its own strategic interests with the inhabitants' desire for self-determination, it also accepted responsibility for Zionism. Zionism was the Jewish political movement, founded in Basle Switzerland in 1897, which sought escape from anti-Semitism in Europe through the revival of the national aspirations of the Jewish people in their ancestral territory. Written directly into the terms of the Palestine mandate were the words of the British war-time pledge, issued in 1917 by foreign secretary Arthur Balfour, to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish national home. Known as the Balfour Declaration, this promise stood as official policy until the 1939 White Paper and the outbreak of the Second World War.

In their day-to-day running of Palestine during the interwar period, British colonial officials do not appear to have been overly constrained by any League of Nations oversight. Still, the mandate cannot be dismissed entirely as nothing more than a fig leaf. Palestine in the interwar period might have walked and talked like a colony, but the mandate system differed notably from prewar imperialism in the extent that Britain became fettered by an institution that placed its administration of Palestine in the court of international public opinion. Once the Balfour Declaration was written into a number of the articles of the League of Nations mandate sanctioning British rule in Palestine, it effectively turned a wartime promise, one of several issued in desperate times, into a binding contract mediated by the League of Nations. As the British administration in Palestine felt the pressure of being caught in the escalating conflict between the mutually exclusive nationalist demands of the Jewish and Arab communities, many officials wanted to reconsider the promise of imposing a Jewish national home on an Arab majority. However, Britain also felt the restraints of the mandate document and found it highly problematic to consider rescinding an internationally-sanctioned promise.

Zionist efforts to build a Jewish majority in a secure state of their own were at first facilitated by the conceptualization of Palestine as empty: "a land without a people for a people without a land," proclaimed one famous slogan. This wishful thinking lies at the heart of the conflict. The land was, in fact, inhabited by an indigenous Arab, and overwhelmingly Muslim, population whose sharpening sense of national consciousness was, in part, formed around resistance to the aims of Zionist settlement. Throughout the interwar period, British imperial rule provided Zionism with the necessary protective umbrella without which Jewish immigration, settlement and state building in Palestine could not have succeeded. At the time of the First World War, the Jewish population of Palestine consisted of 10 per cent of the population, the other 90 per cent consisting of an Arab community whose own rights and aspirations could not but be compromised by the promises extended to Zionism. At the outset, Britain clearly assumed that the juggling of conflicting interests was one it could manage. This was a gross misjudgment. Effectively, the Arab population of Palestine was excluded from the League Covenant's demand for eventual self-determination: indeed, Palestine's Arab population enjoyed less representation

in their government under British rule than in Ottoman times. Although the outlines of the new Palestine state quickly came into being—with a new capital city, currency and flag, and new trade agreements along its newly defined borders—failed attempts by the British administration in the early 1920s to draw the Palestinian population into a legislative council, as was the norm in British dependencies, meant that governing power in Palestine was limited to the British high commissioner and his own council of British officials.

According to some historians, the failure to create a legislative council in Palestine represents a key turning point in the country's history.[2] "Seen in the larger context of British imperial history," D.K. Fieldhouse observes, "legislative councils had been a crucial means of transferring power from the executive to representatives of the colonial population, even if the transition from official to non-official majority, and then to a government responsible to a legislature, was in most cases slow."[3] Whereas the power structures among the Arab population in Palestine remained dominated by traditional patron-client networks of local notables, acting as intermediaries with the British authorities, Arab leaders in neighbouring states were slowly but gradually accorded the powers of a national government, the potential sovereignty of which was never in doubt. Meanwhile, with regard to the Jewish community, the mandate specifically enjoined Britain to establish a Jewish Agency for the purpose of empowering it with governmental, and even military, institutions, and allowing them gradually to build the structures of a state within a state. One of the few British colonies to be denied a legislative council, Palestine would also be one of the few not to survive British decolonization intact.

Throughout the interwar period negotiations over a legislative council were continually tripped up by the Palestinian Arab demand for power to control Zionist immigration and land purchase. This was something the British were unprepared, at least until 1939, to concede. Whereas Britain demanded Arab acceptance of the terms of the mandate, Arabs feared that participation on such terms implied, if only tacitly, their recognition and acceptance of the legitimacy of the Balfour Declaration. Jewish immigration was the main feature of the communal conflict in the interwar period: "to the Zionists it was the key to the construction of the Jewish state," explains Malcolm Yapp "and to the Arabs it was a threat to their enjoyment of their country."[4] Although Zionism's initial inability to attract large numbers of immigrants worried Jewish leaders during the 1920s, the mass migration of refugees fleeing Germany after the Nazi rise to power in 1932 boosted their numbers dramatically. The significance of Jewish land purchase is also important, though somewhat more complicated to weigh. By 1948, a relatively small proportion, less than 10 per cent, of Palestine was acquired by Jewish land purchasers. The key issue that would shape the contours of the future state of Israel was not the amount of land so much as its location.

Conflicts over a legislative assembly, immigration and land purchase all contributed to the growth of Arab resistance to Zionism. In 1937, after twenty years of British dominance, Palestine erupted into one of the most significant revolts ever confronted by the British Empire. This was the period when Palestine's Arab neighbours—first Iraq, then Egypt and Syria—negotiated various forms of self-government, as was called for by the mandate system. The Arab

revolt in Palestine had been preceded by demonstrations and a general strike in 1936 that were brought to an end by a British promise to send out a royal commission. Chaired by Lord Peel, the commission's report was published in July 1937. It concluded that the mandate was unworkable and, sympathizing with King Solomon, recommended partition. In its view, partition was best brought about by the emergence of a Jewish state in the agriculturally rich coastal plain. Although Peel's partition map is understandable in light of modern Zionist settlement patterns (if not ancient biblical identifications), the proposed Jewish state would also be home to a very large Arab minority (almost half the proposed state's population). So, as a corollary to partition, Peel called for an "exchange of population": that is, the transfer—preferably voluntary but forceful if necessary—of over 200,000 Arabs in order to make room for a Jewish state. Some British officials came around to seeing partition as the most hopeful solution to an intractable problem. Others, however, were wary of imposing such hardship on the indigenous Arab population, and a technical commission was appointed to sort out the logistics of implementing Peel's partition plan. This commission ended up killing the whole idea. Upon further examination and reflection, partition was deemed even less workable than a continuation of the mandate. The idea of forced transfer was considered a non-starter, and the prospect of a Jewish state constituting such a large Arab minority was feared to be a future source of insoluble problems.

As for Arabs' rejection of the Peel partition proposals, it was marked by the onset of the 1937-1939 revolt. This mass uprising had profound consequences. At the village level, Arab social and economic structures suffered greatly. At the political level, the colonial administrative structures set up by the British were dealt a fatal blow while the besieged Jewish community strengthened its resolve and its capacity to become independent. Most importantly, at the diplomatic level, the revolt brought about a dramatic change in British policy. In 1939, London issued a new White Paper announcing limits on Jewish immigration and land purchase and declaring that independence for the state of Palestine would be granted within ten years.

In these following ten years, Britain rapidly lost control of the situation in Palestine. The Second World War produced a perfect storm of domestic, regional, economic and international pressures whose effects were mutually reinforcing.[5] Faced with tremendous international (especially American) pressure to allow Jewish survivors of the Holocaust to enter Palestine forthwith, Britain stepped back from the White Paper's plan for an independent Palestine under majority Arab rule by 1949. Instead, in 1947, discussion returned to the question of partition. Just ten years earlier, Britain had decided partition was the last thing they would do. And so it was.[6]

British Withdrawal

Britain had little room to manoeuvre in early 1947. At home, war weariness and financial crises drastically limited the resources that could be devoted to imperial purposes. In Palestine, repeated attempts at mediation had failed and British officials were up against the by now

unstoppable Jewish push, including brutal attacks by extremist factions, for an independent state capable of providing a home for those who survived the horrors of Nazism. Internationally, Britain faced a growing rift with the American president, Harry Truman, and his constant demand—driven by overwhelming sympathy for the plight of Jewish refugees and by domestic electoral politics—for the relaxation of the 1939 White Paper and the immediate entry into Palestine of 100,000 Jewish immigrants.

Historians agree that all of these issues taken together led Britain in February 1947 to turn for help to the United Nations, assumed successor to the League of Nations and its mandate system. But the exact nature of that decision is the source of some debate. Some historians see no reason to view Britain's decision to pass the ball to the UN as anything other than an act of washing its hands of an impossible and demoralizing problem: that is, having had enough of bearing the cost for Palestine, Britain was now preparing to abandon responsibility there as Britain had for Greece and India.[7] Others, however, view this initial turn to the UN as less an act of desperation than a longer-term strategy on the part of the British government, and especially foreign secretary Ernest Bevin, to protect the continuity of British interests in Palestine while smoothing relations with the US.[8] Not only did British officials make clear that Britain was only seeking advice from the UN on how to administer or amend the mandate, not surrender it, they also announced that Britain would not feel bound by the advice of the UN unless it took the form of a (most unlikely) unanimous decision.

Either way, handing over the problem of Palestine to the United Nations effectively introduced a new factor into the equation. By the time the UN acted, Britain would have to respond to it and not the other way around. It is true that the international body was known more for its ability to endorse a policy than to collectively agree upon making one, but the situation changed markedly once the UN set up a special committee on Palestine, known as UNSCOP. Comprising the representatives of eleven countries, the committee consisted of a membership that included western Europe (Sweden, the Netherlands) eastern Europe (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia) the British Commonwealth (Canada, Australia), Asia (India, Iran) and Latin America (Guatemala, Uruguay and Peru). UNSCOP's wide terms of reference, which called for the future of Palestine to be determined in connection with the problem of Europe's displaced Jews, angered the Palestinian Arab leadership. Palestine's Arab population argued that it was unfair to view Palestine as part of the solution for a European problem. When the committee visited Palestine in June to July 1947 Arab delegates refused to meet it officially. One British official described the Arabs' unyielding stand as "exceedingly inept" diplomacy,[9] and their uncompromising leadership was repeatedly portrayed as constituting their own worst enemy. It is also evident that Arab leaders were hamstrung by the unique absence in Palestine of a legislative assembly that would have granted Palestinian representatives, serving as ministers of an elected government, much greater legitimacy in the struggle for sovereignty.[10]

In addition to the legacy of constitutional impasse emerging from the mandate period, the issues of Jewish immigration and land purchase also loomed large over UNSCOP's deliberations. By far the most eventful moment of UNSCOP's visit to Palestine was the arrival in

Haifa of 4,500 Jewish displaced persons crammed into a boat renamed Exodus. UNSCOP members watched as British officials, upholding the policies of the 1939 White Paper, sent the captured illegal immigrants back to Europe, the land of their persecution. Indeed, the dark shadow cast by the Holocaust ensured that UNSCOP members generally framed the partitioning of Palestine and the creation of new frontiers for a Jewish state in moral terms. For example, the Canadian committee member, Ivan Rand who as a representative of one of Britain's "loyal dominions" might have been expected to sympathise with British policy, told Jewish officials: "I fully appreciate that you're fighting with your backs to the wall."[11]

Mandate patterns of land ownership also had a large impact upon UNSCOP's deliberations. Jewish land acquisition during the mandate period played a key role in determining the contours of UNSCOP's proposed Jewish state. Prior to the Second World War, a combination of economic, legal and political processes had significant implications for the settlement patterns of Jewish immigrants. As described by Gershon Shafir, Jewish colonization in Palestine during the late Ottoman and mandate periods was determined chiefly by the vagaries of the land market. Jewish land purchasers gravitated towards Palestine's more agriculturally productive coastal plains and inland valleys where settlers could focus on building citrus plantations.[12] This notable shift in the definition of the Jewish homeland had an important impact on the drawing of new political boundaries aimed at partitioning the land (see map 1). As Charles Smith explains, "UNSCOP recommended partition in accordance with those sectors where the percentage of Jewish holdings was highest relative to that of the Arabs."[13] As a result, the central mountainous areas of biblical antiquity, sometimes referred to as Judea and Samaria, ended up being located in the areas designated for a Palestinian Arab state.

In August, UNSCOP submitted both a majority and a minority report, though its members were unanimous in deciding that the British mandate must end. The minority report, supported by three of the eleven members, called for the establishment of a single federated state after a three-year period of international control. The majority report outlined the terms of partition, with the two states linked by an economic union and constitutional guarantees for minority rights. The majority plan went further than previous partition plans, such as Peel, in accommodating Jewish aims. On paper, the areas proposed for the Jewish state comprised 55% of Palestine's territory, including vital water supplies, most citrus plantations (both Arab and Jewish) and the largely unpopulated Negev desert, even though Jews constituted only 33% of Palestine's population and owned less than 10% of the total land area. This inequitable distribution was determined in large part by the anticipated need of the new Jewish state to absorb hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors. Other inequities were meant to be mitigated by the requirement that the two states in fact function as one economic unity, making the plan, in theory, less about wholesale partition than a political separation combined with economic unification. The overall resident population actually embraced by the proposed frontiers of the projected Jewish state comprised approximately 500,000 Jews and a very large minority of 400,000 Arabs. As for the proposed Arab state, it was almost entirely Arab in population. While the minority report in favour of federation was effectively ignored, the

majority report's decision in favour of partition prepared the way for the General Assembly vote on 29 November and, as Louis observes, "quickly came to represent the cutting of the Palestine knot."[14]

The November vote in the General Assembly was both controversial and indeterminate. According to the UN Charter, votes in the General Assembly required the approval of a two-thirds majority. To achieve this, extensive lobbying on the part of the Zionist delegation and their American supporters was considered necessary, and the bargaining and pressure tactics exerted by the US to force small wavering countries to vote in favour risked reducing the proceedings to the level of the pork barrel.[15] Western guilt for the Holocaust was also a large factor, and the Zionist campaign at the UN was helped enormously by the singular appearance of Soviet-American harmony. Soviet endorsement of partition emerged out of both a feeling of sympathy for Jewish suffering and a cold calculation of how best to undermine Britain in this strategically important region.[16] It is also important to recall that the Zionist delegation was able to take advantage of a brief post-war period when the UN encapsulated the hopes for a better world and when so many people placed their faith in the ability of the UN to resolve conflict.[17] In many official circles Palestine came to be regarded as a test case of whether the UN was to be a more effective world organisation than the League of Nations, and people desperately wanted the UN to work.[18] On 29 November the tally in the General Assembly was 33 to 13 in favour of partition, with ten abstentions (including Britain).

Experiment in Anarchy

In Palestine, the day following the vote was marked, understandably enough, by Jews rejoicing and Arabs bitterly proclaiming a three-day strike. In London and New York, meanwhile, observers began to worry about what came next. In a House of Commons debate focused on the termination of the Palestine mandate one British M.P., for example, expressed his wish that "we had a clearer sign that [the U.N.] were going to proceed from the easy task of talking about what they are going to do to the much more difficult task of planning how they are going to do it."[19] At the UN, many delegates remained uneasy about the failure of the General Assembly to take sufficient notice of Britain's oft-cited refusal to share in the responsibility of imposing any plan unacceptable both to Jews and Arabs. Because Britain worried about the effect that a forceful imposition of partition would have on Arab allies in the region, it refused to play any role in its implementation or enforcement. Secretly, British officials began working to facilitate the absorption by Transjordan of the proposed Palestinian Arab state, but the general feeling in Britain was that Britain had already sacrificed enough, and that the countries who had voted for partition ought to step up and face the consequences. So Britain just announced its decision to withdraw entirely by 15 May 1948, leaving it to the UN to figure out how to carry out its own schemes. "Experiment in anarchy" is how Richard Graves, a senior official in Jerusalem during the troubled last months of British rule, described the situation in the wake of the vote:

"the contestants who are supposed to have had their cause settled in a court of law will be left to fight it out."[20]

Resistance to partition among Palestinian Arabs was a foregone conclusion. The frontiers drawn by Resolution 181 were considered grossly unfair, though it is doubtful whether any partition plan would have been received by the majority Arab population as either fair or legal. How then to bring it about? In terms of actual implementation, the UN plan called for a two-year transition period during which Britain was expected to continue, under the auspices of the UN, to administer the government, while admitting an increased number of Jewish immigrants. The response in Britain to this presumed arrangement was one of exasperation: "This casual fashion of dismissing partition as a minor chore to be done by the housekeeper on the way out of the house," wrote *The Economist* "is nothing better than frivolous."[21] Resolution 181 did also entrust a commission consisting of members appointed by Czechoslovakia (head of the commission), Bolivia, Denmark, Panama and the Philippines with the duty of partitioning Palestine. Under the guidance of the Security Council, these five representatives were expected to go to Palestine, take over authority from the British authorities in the areas progressively evacuated by them, delineate and finalise the borders, and help in the establishment of the two provisional councils of government. The commission, however, failed miserably. Some sense of this failure can be gleaned from the 13 May entry of the diary of Sir Henry Gurney, British chief secretary of the mandate administration during its final days:

> The Police locked up their stores (worth over £1m.) and brought the keys to the United Nations, who refused to receive them. I had to point out that the United Nations would be responsible for the administration of Palestine in a few hours' time (in accordance with the November Resolution) and that we should leave the keys on their doorstep whether they accepted them or not; which we did.[22]

Several factors account for the inability of the UN partition commission to secure the implementation of the resolution. The biggest problem was the inattention paid to it by the Security Council. Sufficient machinery was clearly lacking for the commission to successfully implement Resolution 181. The five members of the commission were not even appointed by their respective governments until a month after the vote, and they did not buckle down to their assignment until 9 January 1948. Empowered as it was with only a secretariat, many observers scoffed at its chances of securing the enforcement of partition on a population two thirds of whom were unwilling to accept it. Indeed, by February the commission was referring to itself as the "five lonely pilgrims" and their first report to the Security Council stressed "the need for an international armed force if the United Nations plan is to be carried out."[23] Pleading that "the authority and effectiveness of the United Nations were deeply involved," their report foresaw that when Britain withdrew in May there would be "a period of uncontrolled, widespread strife and bloodshed" in the Holy Land, unless the Security Council provided "effective assistance."[24]

The commission described this scenario as "a catastrophic conclusion to an era of international concern for that territory."

The British, for their part, firmly refused to contribute anything to help in implementing partition. They were very worried that the actual arrival of the UN partition commission to Palestine would be, in the words of colonial secretary Arthur Creech Jones, "the occasion of fiercer conflict."[25] Britain, therefore, sought as short as possible a period of overlap with the commission and a partition government. The lack of cooperation on the part of the British mandate administration was criticized as sour grapes, but officials defended their position as one of strict neutrality. Britain repeatedly rejected various requests of the commission for assistance on the grounds that they would have required Britain taking sides on the question of partition. The chief aim, as described by Bernard Wasserstein, was "to avoid incurring the odium, in the eyes of most Arabs, of helping to implement partition."[26] British officials foresaw nothing ahead but a thankless end to their thirty-year role as mandatory, and the focus now was on getting out with as little further loss in blood and prestige as possible. As Creech Jones tried to explain, "If we have appeared at times not very forthcoming in regard to some of the requests of the Palestine commission it is because we ourselves have a gigantic problem of our own in the evacuation of Palestine."[27]

A third main factor impeding the ability of the partition commission to straighten out the tangle in Palestine was America's wavering support for it. The biggest difficulty in putting armed forces into the hands of the UN partition commission was, of course, the distrust and suspicion among the veto-wielding superpowers. Despite their initial support for Resolution 181, the US had categorically ruled out authorising the use of any force to impose partition. In March 1948, when it had become abundantly clear that violence was spiraling out of control and partition could only be imposed by force, Washington began to step back from its pro-partition position. This reluctance may be seen as stemming from the refusal both to despatch American troops to the Middle East in an election year and to authorize the entry of Soviet troops into the strategic region. At the time, the US unwillingness to enforce the partition settlement by force was explained in the *New York Times* as discomfort with the creation of an international policeman: "by marrying police action to any recommendation either of the General Assembly or of the Security Council, the product is automatically a world government with a legislative and an executive branch."[28] As Louis notes, officials in Washington were as conscious of constitutional issues of precedent at the UN as they of the logistical issues of partition on the ground in Palestine.[29]

As a result, the US responded to the UN partition commission's demand for armed assistance by seeking to defer partition and to establish a new trusteeship. But this initiative received no other support. The Soviets seized on the golden opportunity to criticize America for undermining the United Nations' authority,[30] while Britain balked at even the implication that it might be prepared to stay on in Palestine to accommodate Washington's wishful thinking about a proposed transition to a new trusteeship. The British response was underlined by an editorial in *The Economist*:

If Britain knew America's full participation would be maintained for as long as was necessary to reconcile Jew and Arab to a solution they both dislike, it is conceivable that the present British policy of withdrawal and *après nous le déluge* might be reversed. To say so much is simply to underline the extreme improbability of such a solution. Possibilities splinter on the single fact that America will not send troops to Palestine and the British are no longer prepared to do so. No phrase-making about the United Nations or mandate or trusteeships or sacred trusts to humanity will cover up the stark reality. And since neither Britain nor America will enforce a settlement, the Arabs and Jews will, by a bloody war, enforce their own.[31]

Interestingly, Richard Graves had earlier expressed the much the same warning in his diary:

If at any moment there is a vacuum (which our Government unlike nature, does not seem to abhor) there will be civil strife, with much bloodshed and general anarchy… Wasn't it Louis XIV who said "Après moi le déluge"?[32]

As for the official statements emanating from London at this time, the response was part "why blame us?" and part "I told you so." Colonial secretary Creech Jones, for example, rebutted the charge that Britain had pursued policies calculated to create chaos by telling the House of Commons:

It was so easy to lay the blame for the present position at the doors of the British Government and to forget that the Palestine Commission was charged with a responsibility which it had not the means to discharge and with a task which, in the conditions of Palestine, was somewhat unreal.[33]

Conclusion

Palestine's descent into widespread civil war began immediately following the UN vote. Arab guerrilla attacks targeted areas earmarked by the partition plan for Jewish statehood while Jewish retaliatory strikes intensified the conflict. The main Jewish counter-attack waited until April 1948 with the implementation of Plan D, or 'Dalet.' The startling pace at which Resolution 181 unraveled may have led to second thoughts among some members of the UN, such as the US, but such reconsideration came too late for those Palestinian Arabs who were cleared from areas incorporated into the burgeoning new Jewish state.[34] At midnight on 14 May 1948, the moment of the final withdrawal of British troops, Israel declared its independence and neighbouring Arab states sent battalions from their armies into Palestine. The regional war that followed quickly developed into what Avi Shlaim describes as "a land grab."[35] The Jewish state extended its

borders beyond the UN lines so that it came to possess 78% of Palestine. Transjordan's Arab Legion, the most effective of the Arab armies, captured the central mountainous region (which came to be known as the West Bank), while the Egyptian army maintained control over a thin strip of land around the coastal city of Gaza. By the end of the fighting, some 700,000 Palestinian Arabs had become refugees and were not allowed to return to their homes which had then came under Jewish control.

Shlaim refers to UN Resolution 181 as "the signal for a savage war between the two communities in Palestine."[36] But it wasn't a total Hobbesian-like state of conflict. In important ways the paper on which the United Nations' 1947 diplomatic solution was written played a significant role throughout the civil war that followed. For Palestine's minority Jewish population, Resolution 181 granted them a charter of international legitimacy in their quest to transform large parts of Palestine into a Jewish state. This is powerfully recounted by David Horowitz, a leading Jewish Agency official at the time of the UN vote, in his memoir entitled *State in the Making*: "Our national revival and the resurgence of our independence were stamped with the authority of the world's political and moral judgment."[37] Conversely, for the majority Arab population, Resolution 181 manifested itself as a subterfuge. Walid Khalidi views Resolution 181 as a tool with which Zionism could, on the one hand, frame as aggression Palestinians' resistance to living as an Arab minority in a Jewish state while, on the other, portray the forceful imposition of a revolutionary new regime as Jewish self defence.[38] As clearly revealed in both narratives, the 1947 United Nations partition plan was as important an intervention in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the incorporation of the Balfour Declaration into terms of the formal mandate issued by the Council of the League of Nations twenty-five years earlier.

Notes

[1] George Kirk, *The Middle East 1945-1950* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 246.

[2] See, for example: Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914-1958* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Malcolm Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War*, 2nd ed (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2006).

[3] Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, p. 155.

[4] Yapp, *The Near East,* p. 117.

[5] See John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: the Historical Debate* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 22.

[6] See also Christopher Hitchens, "The Perils of Partition," *The Atlantic* (March 2003).

[7] For example, Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 38.

[8] The key source here is William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). See also Jon and David Kimche, *Both Sides of the Hill* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960).

[9] Quoted in Louis, p. 470.

[10] R. Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, p. 121.

[11] Quoted in David Horowitz, *State in the Making*, translated by Julian Meltzer (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1953), p. 170.

[12] Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labour and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[13] Smith, p. 190. The main exception to this rule was the southern Negev desert.

[14] Louis, p. 472.

[15] Louis, pp. 485-6. See also, J.C Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine* (New York: Norton, 1950), pp. 308-309.

[16] Hurewitz, *Struggle,* pp. 305-307.

[17] Exemplified neatly in I.F. Stone, "Arab States on the Fence" *The Palestine Post*, January 1948, p. 4.

[18] See also the debates in the House of Commons on the termination of the Palestine mandate, November to December 1947.

[19] Quoted in "Commons Debate on UN Decision", *The Palestine Post,* January 1948, p. 2.

[20] Richard M. Graves, *Experiment in Anarchy* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1949), p. 132.

[21] *The Economist*, Nov 1947, p. 8.

[22] Quoted in Motti Golani, *The End of the British Mandate for Palestine, 1948: The Diary of Sir Henry Gurney* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 209.

[23] Cited in Mallory Browne, "Commission to Ask Palestine be Held a Threat to Peace, *New York Times,* 10 February 1948.

[24] Cited in Mallory Browne, "Report Says Bad Precedent would be set if UN were Deterred Now," *New York Times,* 17 February 1948, 1. Full text of report on page 4.

[25] Quoted in "UN Commission Warned," *New York Times,* 15 February 1948, p. 9.

[26] On the efforts of the commission to prepare a new regime for the international zone around Jerusalem, see Bernard Wasserstein, *Divided Jerusalem: The Struggle for the Holy City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), chapter 4.

[27] Quoted in Mallory Browne, "Britain Backs Idea of a Force to Aid Palestine Division," *New York Times,* 19 February 1948, p. 1.

[28] Mallory Browne, "Asks Big 5 Action", *New York Times*, 25 February 1948*,* pp. 1, 3.

[29] Louis, *The British Empire,* p. 507.

[30] Hurewitz, *Struggle,* p. 312.

[31] "Realities in Palestine," *The Economist*, 27 March 1948.

[32] Graves, *Experiment,* 88. See also Wasserstein, *Divided,* p. 140.

[33] "Palestine Bill: the New Decision at Lake Success," *The Times*, 24 March 1948, p. 2.
[34] See the discussion on the civil war in Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pp. 204-214.
[35] Avi Shlaim, *War and Peace in the Middle East* (Harlow: Penguin, 1995), p. 22.
[36] Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 27.
[37] Horowitz, *State,* p. 305.
[38] Walid Khalidi, "The Hebrew *Reconquista* of Palestine: From the 1947 United Nations Partition Resolution To the First Zionist Congress of 1897" in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XXXIX, No.1, Autumn 2009, 25.