

The United Nations and the Formation of Israel

Briefing

United Nations Historical Committee Secretariat

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Pre-State Background

The modern Israeli state was formed out of competing claims to the right to rule over Palestine and the negotiations of the great imperial powers that survived the First World War. Palestine¹ was ruled by the Turkish Ottoman Empire from 1517 until the British captured the country in 1917. With the Ottoman Empire dissolved, Britain was granted a Mandate to govern Palestine by the newly founded League of Nations in 1919.

A challenge for Britain emerged the competing promises it had made to its supporters during the war. On the one hand, Britain had promised the *Sharif Hussein* of Medina² that in exchange for Arab support in combating the Ottomans, a grand Arab kingdom based in Damascus, Syria with Hussein as its king, would be formed out of the Arab areas of the former Ottoman Empire (Blumberg). In opposition to this promise was the *Sykes-Picot Agreement* between Britain and France, which split direct control of the same area between two spheres of influence, with Britain controlling Palestine and Iraq's oil fields, and France taking responsibility for Syria and Lebanon. Britain created an expectation amongst these Arab leaders that responsibility for governing the region would fall on the Arabs, with other non-Muslim or Arab citizens being loyal subjects to Sharif Hussein. In reality, the intent was to create outposts of British and French influence, with Arabs seeing Sykes-Picot as a betrayal of the original promise made to Hussein (Stewart).

Since the 19th century, non-native Jewish immigrants had travelled to Palestine to settle, with Russian Jews escaping persecution making up the largest group of émigrés. In 1895, *Theodor Herzl* published a paper, *Die Judenstaat*, which called for the creation of a Jewish homeland in order for Jews to escape anti-semitism (Wikipedia). The *World Zionist Congress* was created and met annually in Basel, Switzerland to plan the search for a homeland. The Jewish National Fund (JNF) was created to fundraise and purchase land for Jewish immigrants to settle in Palestine, the original homeland of their people (Blumberg). The group's search for a homeland was ignored by the Great Powers until near the end of the War, when Britain's Foreign Secretary, *Lord Balfour*, drafted a letter to Lord Rothschild of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, stating:

His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of that object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. (Blumberg)

¹ Palestine included what is modern day Israel and Jordan.

² As a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammed and guardian of Islam's holy sites, Sharif Hussein was considered a dominant leader of Arab Muslims in the region including Palestine.

Zionists hailed the **Balfour Declaration** as an affirmation from Britain of the legitimacy of their claim to build a homeland in Palestine; however, the immigration of Jews to the country would create complications for Britain to deal with in its Palestinian Mandate. Zionists hoped and expected Britain to aid them in creating a homeland in Palestine, while local Arabs expected Britain to prevent their land from being taken over by a new wave of Jewish immigrants (Blumberg). The dynamic between Zionist Jewish settlers, Arab Palestinians and the British would define politics within the state for a period of time. As Jewish immigration rose, so too did tensions in the country with a 1929 pogrom incited by Arab figures leaving 133 Jews dead and 339 injured. The Zionist response to rising Arab violence against settlers was the formation of the **Haganeh** or Defence Force, who were trained by the British to repel Arab incursions (Blumberg). Zionists also established the **Jewish Agency** as a semi-formal government to communicate with the British High Commission government, and would later form the backbone of a future Israeli government.

In 1936, the British High Commissioner, formed the **Peel Commission** to examine future governance of Palestine and recommended a Jewish state be created with remaining non-British Mandate areas to be ruled by King Abdullah of trans-Jordan, son of Sharif Hussein (Wikipedia). Zionists while unhappy with the failure to rule Jerusalem saw Peel's recommendations as an acceptable compromise, while opposition from Palestinian Arabs ensured Peel quickly passed without implementation (Blumberg). As Nazi Germany expanded its territory through the annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia, British policy termed from appeasement of German ambitions to a tougher line. In the 1939 **White Paper**, the British implied the following:

1. Britain had fulfilled the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate; a Jewish homeland existed already.
2. 75,000 more Jews were to be admitted to Palestine.
3. After 1944, no more Jews would be admitted without Arab consent.
4. An Arab state was to be created, including all of Palestine. (Blumberg)

British enforcement of the White Paper during the Second World War was met with clandestine opposition from the Jewish Agency who tried to smuggle Jewish immigrants into Palestine, all while openly supporting Britain's stance against Nazi Germany. When White Paper policies appeared unlikely to be repealed after the defeat of Germany, different factions of the Haganeh split into the **Stern Gang** and **Irgun**, where both resorted to use of terror to oppose the White Paper and drive Britain out of Palestine (Wikipedia).

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On February 17, 1947, in a stunning surprise, the British renounced the Palestinian Mandate and Balfour Declaration and referred the issue to the United Nations under a Chapter 10 (Wikipedia). British Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee passed the issue

to the United Nations General Assembly believing it would be unlikely a *two-state solution* would be proposed.

London was confident that a required two-thirds of the members would not approve a Jewish state if, as seemed likely, the United States supported Britain actively—particularly by persuading Latin American to follow Washington. Eleven Muslim states, including five Arab members, would also block partition. The Soviet Bloc was expected to follow. (Blumberg)

The UN Security Council passed the Palestine question to the General Assembly who created the **United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP)**³, which was to report back to the General Assembly in the fall of 1947. UNSCOP reported back recommending an end to the British Mandate and formation of Arab and Jewish states, with Jerusalem and Bethlehem constituting international zones (Wikipedia).

On November 29, 1947, under **UN Resolution 181**, 33 countries voted to support the creation of the two states, with 13 opposing and 10 abstentions, representing a bare two-thirds majority needed to pass the resolution (Jewish Encyclopedia). In direct opposition to British interests, the Soviet Union and United States voted to support the resolution. US President Harry S. Truman, a committed Christian, also pressed five General Assembly members (Haiti, Liberia, the Philippines, China and Ethiopia) to vote for the partition of Palestine (Blumberg). The British, who were about to receive reconstruction aid from the American Marshall Plan were reluctant to challenge American interests to directly, and would grudgingly need to accept that long-term recognition of the Jewish state would be necessary (Blumberg).

Immediately after the vote in support of partition, conflict broke out as Arabs attacked Jews in states across the region, leading to an influx of refugees into Palestine. The Jewish Agency transformed into a **Provisional National Council**, led by **David Ben-Gurion**, who was Prime Minister and Defence Minister (Jewish Encyclopedia). As the British Mandate withdrew its forces, the Jewish government prepared for war against several of the Arab powers in the region. It remained to be seen what would emerge. On Friday, May 14, 1948, twenty-four hours before the end of the British Mandate, David Ben-Gurion declared the independence of the Israeli state. The next day, the United States and Soviet Union recognized Israel.

Analysis for Delegates

The issue at hand is the desire for Britain to withdraw its Mandate to rule over Palestine, effective in 1948. Prime Minister Attlee has requested the General Assembly to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion for how differences of opinion over how Palestine should be governed. The UNSCOP has reported back recommending the dissolution of the British Mandate, and partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states in a way that preserves

³ UNSCOP member states included Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, India, Iran, Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, Uruguay, Yugoslavia.

settlement patterns already established and places Jerusalem and Bethlehem under a UN mandate.

Any partition of Palestine will have to balance the interests of local Jewish and Arab residents, in a manner that helps prevent the outbreak of conflict. The Jewish Provisional National Council as representative of residents of a future Jewish state, would like to ensure the largest, most contiguous national space possible, particularly in a way that ensures access to arable land and water supplies. Arab Palestinians on the other are completely opposed to formation of any non-Arab state, because they see their claim to live in Palestine as inalienable and indivisible given their long tenure in the country.

The position of Arab Palestinians is matched by regional powers particularly Syria, Iraq and Egypt, and trans-Jordan, although, as a Mandate of Britain, trans-Jordan will confer with Britain on matters of regional importance. The position of Arab Palestinians and its regional supporters makes the chances of conflict much more likely; however, it also appears to be the case that unilateral imposition of an Arab state may create discontent amongst Jewish settlers who also have large claims to own and occupy land in Palestine.

It could be expected that Britain will oppose any two-state solution offered by the General Assembly and may form a voting bloc with regional powers and other countries under its influence. The United States have shown increasing interest in aiding the formation of a Jewish state, and there is the possibility that it will vote in support of a two state solution, bringing other members to also vote in this manner. The Soviet Union has not shown any particular inclination at this time.

Points of contention will likely emerge over the legitimacy of forming a Jewish state where claims to do so are challenged by questions surrounding whether or not Arab Palestinians have a justifiable claim to all of Palestine. The realities of dual-occupancy of Palestine combined with questions about the legal ground of recognizing a Jewish state will likely play a central role in debate.

Useful Sources

Books

- “Israel: A Concise Political History” by Yossi Beilin
- “The History of Israel’ by Arnold Blumberg

Links

- UN Resolution 181:
<http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/4f35dda0969b398885256c940075d006/7f0af2bd897689b785256c330061d253?OpenDocument>
- UNSCOP Partition Map:
<http://unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/cf02d057b04d356385256ddb006dc02f/3cbe4ee1ef30169085256b98006f540d?OpenDocument>