

FRAMING THE PARTITION PLAN FOR PALESTINE

Many different opinions abound concerning Resolution 181, but one fact cannot be denied or overlooked: it was not a solution born out of the “free and sovereign” world states of the time

By Lorenzo Kamel

Resolution 181, passed by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on November 29, 1947, suggested the creation of two states, one Jewish and one Arab. The plan to partition Palestine would have established the Jewish state on an area of approximately 14,100 square kilometers, or 56.47 percent of the total land, to be inhabited by five hundred thousand Jews, four hundred thousand Arab-Palestinians, and ninety-two thousand Bedouins (in the Negev desert). This means that the Jewish state was expected to host an almost equal number of Jews and Arab-Palestinians. At the time, in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, Jews accounted for about 30 percent of the total population, and owned approximately 6.7 percent of the land (“land ownership” was not common in the region: in 1951 Iraq, for instance, only 0.3 percent of the registered land was owned as “private property”).

As for the Arab state envisioned by the UNGA, it would have covered approximately 11,500 square kilometers (42.88 percent of the total), with ten thousand Jews and eight hundred thousand Arab-Palestinians. Jerusalem, on the other hand, was expected to be subject to a Special International Regime under UN control.

The Partition Plan provoked territorial, demographic, and existential claims. For instance, the Arab-Palestinians complained that, despite Britain’s immigration policy to Palestine in the late 1930s and 1940s, a large percentage of the Jewish population was made up of recent immigrants, and that just four decades earlier, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Arab-Palestinians represented about nine-tenth of the total population. This local majority included only a small percentage of recent immigrants from neighboring areas (not from other continents), which to a large extent compensated for a wave of outward migration. In the second half of the 1930s, due to a state of public disorder, Palestine saw a substantial outward movement of Arab-Palestinians, mainly towards South America, which hosts the largest Palestinian presence outside of the Arab World.



*Lord Balfour arrived at Jaffa on March 25th 1925
Hailed by crowds at Tell Aviv on the following day.
His Lordship came to Jerusalem expressly to
open The Hebrew University.*

The Zionist leadership, on the other hand, claimed that the future Jewish state included the Negev Desert (known as Naqab in the ancient Egyptian texts), an inhospitable environment that could only be used after major capital investments, and where Jews constituted about 1 percent of the total population of the time. On top of this, the exclusion of the area east of the Jordan River (Transjordan) was heavily opposed by Zionist Jews, with some of them claiming that “Great Britain robbed the Jewish people of three quarters of its country”.

▲ Lord Balfour’s arrival in Jaffa on his first visit to Palestine. *American Colony Photo Dept./Papers of John D. Whiting.*

Most Zionist leaders were convinced that the Mandate for Palestine, entrusted to Great Britain by the League of Nations to administer Palestine, encompassed both the area west of the Jordan River *and* Transjordan. In their view, Transjordan was therefore included in the “Jewish national home”, although it contained no Jewish community at the time.

However, this narrative, which is still popular among a minority of scholars, overlooks the fact that the June 1922 British White Paper—which excluded Transjordan from Palestine—was requested and received by the League of Nations before the Mandate was confirmed in July 1922. In the words of the

future first president of the State of Israel, Chaim Weizmann: “It was made clear to us that confirmation of the Mandate would be conditional on our acceptance of the policy as interpreted in the White Paper [of 1922], and my colleagues and I therefore had to accept it, which we did, though not without some qualms.”

The role of the UN and its Resolution 181 triggered several other claims and counterclaims. It was argued, for instance, that the UN assigned to the Jewish state a substantial area of land that had never been an integral part of any ancient Israelite kingdom (including the coastal plain between Ashkelon and Ashdod), and that, on the other hand, it assigned to the Arab-Palestinians several areas which were part of ancient Israelite kingdoms. Moreover, according to the Arab-Palestinians, the UN did not adequately take into account their economic and social needs: they were in fact precluded from having a strategic port on the Red Sea or a direct communication route to Syria. This is besides the fact that about one-fifth of the land cultivated with wheat, and all the area cultivated with citrus fruits, went to the Jewish state. In the words of the then-secretary of the Arab League office in London, Edward Atiyah (1903-1964):

“Not only were the Jews...given the larger and more fertile part of the country with the most useful section of the coastal plain and the only good port, so that the Arabs were almost debarred from effective sea communications, but also 500,000 Arabs (or nearly half of the Arab population) were to be left in the Jewish state. A large number of these were the inhabitants of Jaffa, the biggest purely Arab city in Palestine and the Arabs’ principal seaport.”

Who Voted for the Partition Plan?

Resolution 181, passed on November 29 of 1947, had by far the most meaningful international reverberations in UN history. However, it is important to note that the resolution was not discussed at a General Assembly composed of the 193 countries that comprise it today. In fact, the General Assembly was made up of only 56 states, representing about one-fifth of the world population. More precisely, the resolution was approved by thirty-three countries, while thirteen expressed their opposition, and ten abstained.

Out of 56 member states, the votes of 37 countries would have been necessary to meet the two-thirds majority needed for approval.

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However, because the abstaining states were excluded from the overall count, the resolution was able to pass with only the yes-vote from thirty-three member states. Had the abstaining states been counted, as was the case with other resolutions, the resolution might not have passed.

The countries that did not participate in the vote because they were not yet

member states were Switzerland, Sweden, Malta, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and, of course, the main losers of World War II: Germany, Italy, Japan, Austria, and Romania. Also excluded was almost the whole of Africa, whose countries were still under the rule or direct influence of colonial powers such as Great Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, and Spain. Apart from Ethiopia (“liberated” by the British in 1941), Liberia (established on the base of “the political principles of the United States Constitution”) and Egypt (which voted against partition), the only non-Arab African state admitted to the General Assembly was apartheid South Africa.

The situation in Asia was not dissimilar. It is enough to mention that the figure chosen by Western powers to represent China was Chiang Kai-Shek, a despotic anti-communist leader heavily supported and funded by the United States and its allies. Even in the years and decades to follow, Western powers continued to provide unconditional support to Chiang Kai-Shek, and when the latter was forced into exile on the tiny island of Taiwan (1949), the majority of Western governments recognized him as the sole representative of the world’s most populous country. Despite having neither control nor sovereignty over almost the entirety of the country, Chiang Kai-Shek’s “Republic of China” continued to represent the whole of China at the UN until 1971.

The countries that voted in favor of Resolution 181 included the states of Central and South America, which at the time were little more than satellite countries of the United States, economically fully dependent on Washington. Other countries that approved the resolution included states that, at best, had limited sovereignty such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the other countries that had been freed by the two emerging superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. Regarding the latter, Bernard Lewis noted that Stalin “saw in Jewish migration to Palestine and the struggle for a Jewish state a useful way of weakening and eventually eliminating the power of Britain, then still his principal Western rival in the Middle East”, while Daniel Pipes went a step further and contended that “Stalin apparently believed in a Jewish power so vast that, in league with the British, it would overwhelm Soviet efforts”.

All this illustrates that the Soviet Union, Western powers (with the exception of Britain, which abstained on Resolution 181), and their “subordinate countries” suggested a solution that supported their specific interests, and had very limited international support.

While some may consider Resolution 181 an act of justice in favor of a persecuted people and/or the only practical solution, others may regard it as an unfair and unacceptable imposition on hundreds of thousands of humans, and part of a process which fostered “racialized categories”. It might indeed be all of this. However, one aspect holds true beyond question: it was in no way

a solution born out of the unprejudiced judgment of the “free and sovereign” world states of the time. This consideration appears even more relevant in light of the words written by a protagonist of that historical phase (and of the decades which followed), Israeli writer and politician Uri Avnery:

“No one asked the Arab Palestinians whether to accept or reject anything. If they had been asked, they would probably have rejected partition, since—in their view—it gave a large part of their historical homeland to foreigners. The governments of the Arab states rejected partition, but they certainly did not represent the Palestinian Arabs, who were at the time still under British rule (as were we).”

Who Rejected What

In the eight months which followed the passing of Resolution 181, about 450 Palestinian villages were razed to the ground by Israeli forces. Up to 770 thousand people—including about twenty thousand Jews expelled by Arab militias from Hebron, Jerusalem, Jenin, and Gaza—were evicted in a matter of days and then forcibly denied return. Some of them fled out of fear, often after witnessing the tragic fate of their relatives and friends and the “organized seizure” of their properties. A case in point is the mass expulsion of Palestinians from the towns of Lydda and Ramle in July 1948, which accounted for one-tenth of the overall Arab-Palestinian exodus. Most of the fifty to seventy thousand Palestinians that were expelled from the two cities did so under an official expulsion order signed by then-commander of the Harel Brigade Yitzhak Rabin: “The inhabitants of Lydda,” Rabin clarified, “must be expelled quickly without attention to age”. Several hundred of them died during the forced exodus from exhaustion and dehydration.

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founder David Ben-Gurion and Israel’s first agricultural minister Aharon Zisling, saying, “We must wipe them [Palestinian villages] out” and “forgive instances of rape” against Palestinian women. On the other hand, local Arab leaders and commanders explicitly warned that “houses and villages emptied by their [Arab-Palestinian] inhabitants in violation of these orders would be subject to demolition and destruction”.

Over the next seventy years, a plethora of observers and scholars would link the beginning of the Palestinian refugee problem, and more generally the Israeli-

Arab-Palestinian conflict, to “the Arab rejection” of the 1947’s UN partition for Palestine. While on the surface this claim may appear to make sense, the reality of who rejected what in the 1940s is more complicated than that.

From the perspective of the Arab Palestinians, who at the turn of the century constituted about 90 percent of the population, 1947/8 did not mark the beginning of the struggle, but coincided instead with the final chapter of a war that started with the implementation of a number of rejectionist policies and strategies against Palestinians.

Periodization is of course always arbitrary. However, it is historically accurate to claim that the year that more than any other ignited the basic components of the conflict is 1907. That year, the eighth Zionist Congress created a “Palestine Office” (the Agricultural Colonization Department) in Jaffa, under the direction of Arthur Ruppin, whose main objective, in Ruppin’s words, was “the creation of a Jewish milieu and of a closed Jewish economy, in which producers, consumers and middlemen shall all be Jewish”. Indeed, “rejectionism” featured very prominently in Ruppin’s mindset.

The goal of a “closed Jewish economy” was partially implemented from 1904 on by the leaders of the second and third waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine through policies like the *kibbush ha’avoda* (conquest of work) and the practice of *avodah ivrit* (Jewish work, or the idea that only Jewish workers must work Jewish lands).

While both were dictated by the need to offer greater job opportunities to the new immigrants, they resulted in the creation of a system of exclusion that blocked at its inception, primarily on an ideological level, any potential integration with the local Arab population.

Some researchers have emphasized that the Arab population likewise tended to avoid hiring Zionist Jews. This, however, takes no account of the fact that Arabs had only a marginal interest in employing a minority of new immigrants who had much more limited agricultural experience and did not speak the language used by the native inhabitants. Their avoidance of Jewish workers was not part of an organized political campaign.

It should also be noted that the “system of exclusion” and the two parallel social and economic structures that it triggered affected other crucial issues such as that of the land and its resources. For instance, the Jewish National Fund (KKL) was established with the task of buying land in Palestine (and succeeded in purchasing nine-tenth of the total land owned by Zionist buyers).

The KKL's areas were managed in a discriminatory way in relation to the Arab population. KKL farmers who were found employing non-Jewish workers were subject to fines and/or expulsion. Such policies were indeed alarming, especially considering their intended purpose, which the future first president of the State of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, outlined in a letter to his wife in 1907: "If our Jewish capitalists, say even only the Zionist capitalists, were to invest their capital in Palestine, if only in part, there is no doubt that the lifeline of Palestine—all the coastal strip—would be in Jewish hands within twenty-five years."

Rejectionist policies had an immensely disruptive effect on intercommunal relations in Palestine. A plethora of primary sources from local actors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries confirm that before the implementation of these policies and approaches, relations between different communities were much less confrontational.

For instance, an unsigned editorial published in the daily Arab-Palestinian journal *Filastīn* on April 29, 1914 contended, "Until ten years ago, the Jews constituted a native fraternal Ottoman element. They lived and mixed freely in harmony with other elements and entered into working relationships, lived in the same and sent their children to the same schools."

These words, despite their apologetic tones, were not far from the truth.

Scholar and author Yaacov Yehoshua wrote in his memoir, *Childhood in Old Jerusalem*, published in 1965, that in Jerusalem "there were joint compounds of Jews and Muslims. We were like one family [...] Our children played with their [Muslim] children in the yard, and if children from the neighborhood hurt us the Muslim children who lived in our compound protected us. They were our allies." In the same period, almost 80 percent of the inhabitants of Jerusalem lived in mixed neighborhoods and quarters.

All this should not suggest that interreligious and/or confessional conflicts did not exist. They have been documented as far back as the Middle Ages. Yet, their nature and scope are hardly comparable to those of more recent times. On top of this, they do not reflect the actual history of most of the region's past.

A Reciprocal Exchange of Refugees?

If the Palestinian refugee question has little to do with "Arab rejectionism," the same can be said regarding the attempt to tie Palestinian refugees to the expulsion of Jewish communities from some Arab countries. The dominant narrative espouses that at the same time that 750 thousand Palestinians "fled" what is today Israel, an almost equal number—800 thousand Jews living in Arab countries—faced "mass displacement". Therefore, Palestinians should then



accept that there was a “population exchange” between “Arab and Jewish refugees”, and renounce their demands for return and/or compensation.

△ Hajj Amin Al-Husayni while visiting a village in the Galilee della Galilea on April 23, 1947. *Israel Defense Force Archive (Tel-Hashomer).*

Indeed, thousands of Jews in Arab countries suffered discrimination, oppression, threats, and various forms of violence. The most well-known example is the *Farhud*—a 1941 pogrom against Jews in which over 180 Jews were brutally killed in Baghdad. According to Hayyim J Cohen, it “was the only [such event] known to the Jews of Iraq, at least during their last hundred years of life there”. Regardless of whether we agree or disagree with Cohen’s words, Palestinians were not responsible for what happened in Baghdad or elsewhere in the Middle East. They may be Arab, but they were and are not the same people as Iraqis.

Jews who suffered discrimination and brutality in certain Arab countries have legitimate claims; all forms of violence are equally unacceptable and must be acknowledged and condemned. At the same time, it must be noted that, contrary to Palestinian refugees, many of whom were expelled and/or fled in fear, a large percentage of Jews left out of a desire to join their “*Eretz Yisrael*” (Land of Israel).

One figure that is often used to justify the alleged moral responsibility of Palestinians for the conditions of Jews in Arab countries is Hajj Amin Al-Husayni, the “Grand Mufti of Jerusalem”.

Al-Husayni was a supporter of Prime Minister Rashid Ali Al-Gaylani in Iraq, who sought to establish stronger ties with Nazi Germany and Italy. It was in the aftermath of the collapse of Al-Gaylani’s governments that the riots in Baghdad erupted, which led to the Farhud.

In 1941, Al-Husayni made his way first to Italy and then to Germany. Two years later, he participated in the formation of the Handschar, a Nazi division created in collaboration with SS commander Heinrich Himmler, which fought the communist partisans in Yugoslavia and committed various crimes against the local population, including many Jews. Given his alleged Islamic credentials, he was tasked with recruiting Bosnian and Serbian Muslims, who, along with some Catholic Croatian volunteers, formed the core of the unit.

There were no Palestinians enlisted in the Handschar; by contrast, about 12 thousand Arab Palestinians joined the British army to fight the Axis powers in 1939.

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representative of the Palestinian people, and was imposed on them by the British authorities to fulfil specific strategic objectives.

The Issue of “Absorption”

When many Palestinians were forced to flee to neighboring Arab countries during and after 1947/8, a meaningful percentage of them were prohibited (until very recently) from getting

citizenship and were banned from certain professions. The suffering of the Palestinian refugees has been—and in some cases still is—exploited by the leadership of those countries for political gain.

Yet, a comparison between Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon or Syria, and the *maabarot*—that is, the refugee absorption camps in Israel in the 1950s—is largely misleading. The reason why the last *ma’abara* was closed in 1963 is partially connected to the establishment of a number of development towns in Israel. Even more important, however, is the fact that many new immigrants were absorbed—in many cases following a painful and violent process—by giving them emptied Palestinian houses.

Any person who has visited Ein Hod, Musrara, Qira, and hundreds of other former Palestinian villages, quarters, or cities, is familiar with the thousands of houses that are still perfectly intact. Most (if not all) are today inhabited by the families of “*olim*” (immigrants). Palestinian refugees, on the other hand, did not have emptied houses ready to host them: this was hardly a minor detail.

It should therefore not be surprising that, in light of the above-mentioned considerations, many Israeli officials have rejected the term “refugee”. As Knesset speaker Yisrael Yeshayahu noted in 1975, “We are not refugees. [Some of us] came to this country before the state was born. We had messianic aspirations.”

Former Knesset member Ran Cohen went a step further by saying: “I have this to say: I am not a refugee. I came at the behest of Zionism, due to the pull that this land exerts, and due to the idea of redemption. Nobody is going to define me as a refugee.”

Palestinians are the only refugees who do not fall under the UNHCR and instead have their own agency (UNRWA). The reason for this and the related (and largely irrelevant) difference between “derivative refugees” and “descendent of refugee” is rooted in the full recognition of the heavy price paid by Palestinians for the decisions taken by the “international community” in the 1940s.

The Present’s Past

To be aware of all of this is not meant to downplay the claims of any of the current inhabitants of this “Land of Aching Hearts”. It is instead a way to acknowledge the many scars which lie beneath this conflict, and to understand the deeper reasoning of what Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky, a hardliner of his time, wrote back in July 1921: “Today the Jews are a minority in Palestine. In twenty years’ time, they could easily be a vast majority. If we were the Arabs, we wouldn’t accept it either.”

One century after Jabotinsky’s words, it is becoming increasingly common to hear analysts and scholars claiming that Israel will be soon forced to choose between two options: “the consolidation of a one-state reality, which would then force it to become an apartheid state, or grant Palestinians full citizenship”. These and other similar claims, however, ignore or downplay a third scenario that appears far more realistic: Israel will annex Area C of the West Bank (while further sealing off the Gaza Strip) and will offer the Palestinians “autonomy on steroids”. Such a scenario, proposed by Israel’s current Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, does not require any war or the removal of most of the population residing in the area: the relatively few Palestinians that in the coming decades will still be able to reside in Area C will get the option of receiving Israeli citizenship.

Fostering a rights-based resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is not sufficient and will not change this scenario. Redefining Palestinians’ self-determination and shifting the focus away from statehood is indeed a risky gamble. In Palestinian businessman Sam Bahour’s words, the moment in which the struggle becomes “a purely civil rights one, the game is over—even if the struggle for full civil rights lasts another one hundred years”. Ultimately, and even more so in light of history, no one should feel entitled to tell Palestinians what they can or should do with their right and quest for self-determination. ©



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