

BICOM Briefing

The 1947 UN Partition Plan

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Key points:

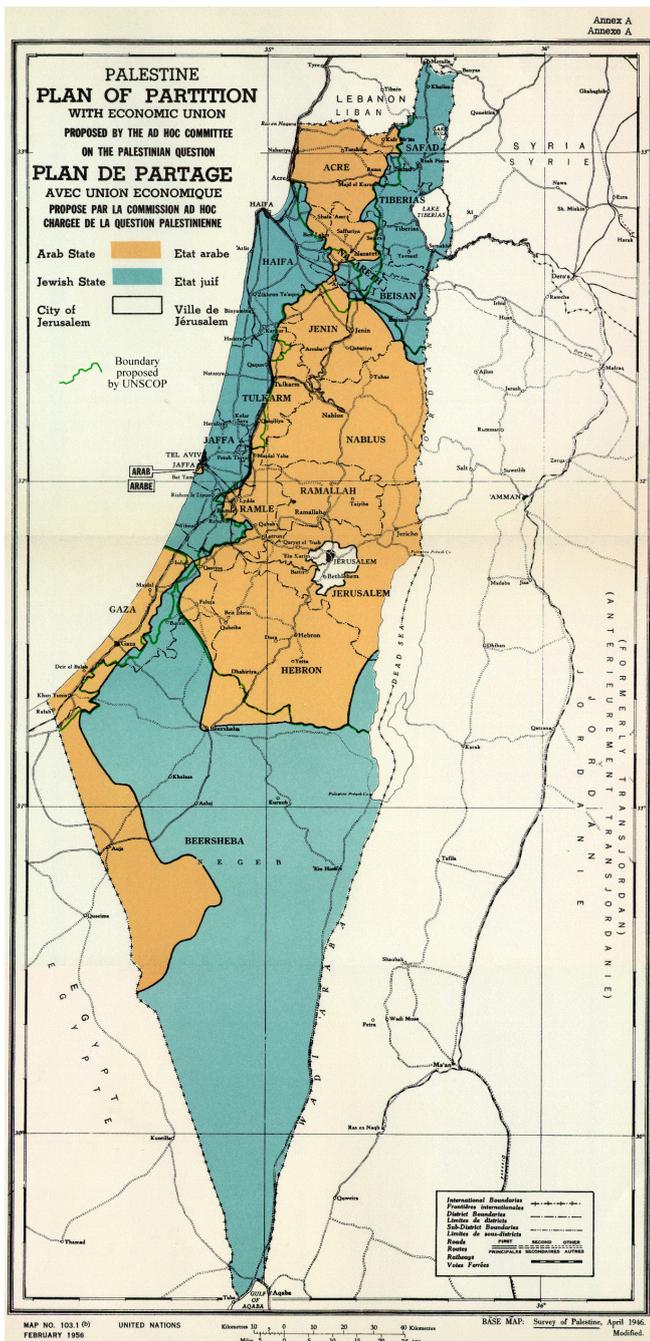
- UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (hereinafter the partition plan) sought to provide a solution to what was perceived as a conflict of two peoples with conflicting rights and claims in Palestine / the Land of Israel and established the principle of two states for two peoples that is still relevant today.
- The decision by UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to recommend partition resulted from a variety of reasons: the impressive institutions and organisational infrastructure established by Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine; Its leaders' willingness to cooperate with UNSCOP and accept the principle of partition – in contrast to the Arab Higher Committee who boycotted UNSCOP and rejected both its majority and minority recommendations; and the pressing need to find a solution to the hundreds of thousands of Jewish displaced persons in Europe who had survived the Holocaust.
- The rejection of the UN General Assembly Resolution 181 by Arab states and the subsequent war in 1948 eroded the relevancy of the proposed borders of the Partition Plan. However, even 70 years on, the principle of partition remains the accepted paradigm in the international community for resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Israel's Declaration of Independence bases the legitimacy of Jewish statehood on both the Jewish people's historic rights in Palestine / the Land of Israel as well as the partition plan approved by the international community. The proclamation announces that Israel was declared "by virtue of our natural and historic right and on the strength of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly".
- This paper details background to the recommendation of partition and the partition plan's acceptance by the international community on 29 November 1947 as well as the consequences of the vote. It also describes the history of the principle of partition as well as alternatives that were suggested at the time.

Introduction: Britain fails to balance competing claims to Mandatory Palestine

- *Following the Allied victory in the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Allied Supreme Council met in San Remo in 1920 and agreed to create a Mandatory power within Palestine* that "should be responsible for putting into effect the [Balfour] declaration...in favour of the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people". In 1922, the Council of the League of Nations legally confirmed Britain as the Mandatory power for Palestine and provided recognition "to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country".
- Over the subsequent years, British rule in Mandatory Palestine – which following the 1921 creation of Transjordan comprised the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea – came under increasing strain as it tried to maintain a delicate balance between fulfilling rival demands by Palestinian Jews and Arabs. On 18 February 1947, following years of violence by both sides against the British, and increased international pressure calling for immigration to Mandatory Palestine for European Holocaust survivors, *UK Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin announced that the Palestine issue would be referred to the UN.*
- *A session of the UN on 28 April 1947 agreed to set up the Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP)*, consisting of 11 neutral states – Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, India, Iran, Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, Uruguay and Yugoslavia. Representatives of these states were charged with making proposals for a solution to the conflict which would then be discussed by the UN General Assembly.

UN Special Committee on Palestine Recommendations

- The Palestinian Arabs, under the auspices of *the Arab Higher Committee (AHC)*, *opposed proposals to grant Jews national self-determination in Mandatory Palestine and decided to boycott UNSCOP.* With British



Mandate authorities also refraining from making any recommendations to the Committee, the Jewish Agency for Palestine, which served as de-facto government of the Yishuv (the Jewish population of Palestine), was left as the only player in the field. The Jewish Agency saw UNSCOP's creation as an opportunity to press their claims for independence and voted to "take an active initiative" to cooperate fully with the committee.

- *UNSCOP met formally and informally with numerous members of the Yishuv, before travelling to Lebanon, Transjordan* – where King Abdullah secretly suggested annexing any Arab area proposed by partition – and

Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Europe. The Committee was ultimately influenced by its visits to Jewish communities around the country as well to its conversations with various Jewish Agency leaders. It was also reportedly swayed by the plight of the Exodus ship, which arrived at Haifa port in July carrying over 4,500 refugees from European DP camps. The UNSCOP Yugoslavian and Swedish representative were in Haifa to personally witness the British boarding the ship, towing it into harbour and sending it back to Europe.

- In its final report, *UNSCOP affirmed that a Jewish National Home as enshrined in the Balfour Declaration and Mandate was a legal right to the "Jewish people as a whole"* and did not "preclude the eventual creation of a Jewish State". The Committee also concluded that the Arabs had strong claims to rights in Palestine "by virtue of being for centuries the indigenous and preponderant people there".
- The *Committee unanimously approved nine recommendations*, which called for the end of the Mandate and suggested that "the preservation of the economic unity of Palestine as a whole is indispensable to the life and development of the country and its peoples". UNSCOP rejected several options: a Jewish or Arab state in the entirety of the area; canton arrangements; and the creation of a binational state, which the Committee called artificial and impractical.
- The *majority proposal adopted by UNSCOP called for two states – one Arab and one Jewish – with an area surrounding Jerusalem reaching as far south as Bethlehem to be under international trusteeship*. The boundaries were drawn to ensure the largest concentration of Arabs and Jewish populations at the time, as well as for the future requirements of the sustainability of each state. The Negev desert was added to the Jewish state to allow for "considerable room for further development and settlement".
- The majority proposal would have resulted in approximately 500,000 Jews (which would have been supplemented by increased Jewish immigration over time) and 380,000 Arabs in

the Jewish state and approximately 700,000 Arabs and 10,000 Jews in the Arab state.

- *The minority proposal, which was advanced by India, Iran and Yugoslavia, called for an independent federative structure* composed of an Arab and Jewish province with autonomy regarding internal matters. In this proposal, the territory intended for Jews was primarily limited to a region along the coast and to a large region in the heart of the Negev desert.
- *A Zionist General Council meeting in September 1947 accepted the majority proposal*, although some parties continued to reject partition and others saw it as a significant compromise. Speaking to the UN Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine of behalf of the Jewish Agency, Abba Hillel Silver argued that partition “was never contemplated by the Balfour Declaration or the Mandate” and “entails... a very heavy sacrifice on the part of the Jewish people,” before concluding that the Jewish Agency was prepared to accept it. In a letter to his wife, Chairman of the Jewish Agency executive (and future first Prime Minister of Israel) David Ben-Gurion acknowledged that should the plan be implemented, “it would truly be the beginning of the redemption, and more than the beginning” while Moshe Shertok (later Moshe Sharett and the future second Prime Minister of Israel) referred to the report as “an incredible achievement”.
- *The Palestinian Arab leadership rejected both the majority and minority proposals.*

The UN General Assembly Resolution 181 vote and its aftermath

- In November 1947, the UNSCOP majority recommendations – with amendments to the boundaries that removed approximately 2,000 Square Kilometres in the Negev / Beersheba area from the proposed Jewish state – were incorporated into UN General Assembly Resolution 181. The partition formula was presented as a genuine compromise between the competing claims and the large Arab minority in the Jewish state guaranteed constitutional requirements respecting their minority rights.
- *Resolution 181 was adopted on 29 November by 33 votes to 13 with 10 abstentions*, which constituted more than the required two-thirds majority on. Voting was significant in that both the USSR and USA voted in favour of the proposal. Britain abstained.
- Although *the Partition plan gave 55 per cent of the territory to the Jewish state, it posed several significant challenges*: It didn’t provide it with enough arable land to absorb the millions of Jews in refugee camps following the Holocaust; it wasn’t thought to provide a long-term solution to the security of the state – especially in light of the opposition of Arab neighbours; and it created a sizeable Palestinian Arab minority who would likely rebel against the new state and create instability. It also separated the proposed Jewish state from the Holy City of Jerusalem, which had a Jewish majority.

The vote

Those countries voting in favour of the resolution included: Canada, United States, Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Liberia, South Africa, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, Sweden, Norway, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Iceland, France, Denmark, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Those countries voting against were: Cuba, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Yemen, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, India and Afghanistan.

Those countries abstaining were: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, China, Ethiopia, United Kingdom, Yugoslavia.

- Despite these difficulties, *the UN vote was greeted with much enthusiasm among most Jews in Palestine and the Zionist movement*. David Ben Gurion said that “I know of no greater achievement by the Jewish people ... in its long history since it became a people”. Future Israeli Ambassador to the UN and US Abba Eban said that “I cannot construct any scenario for 1947-1948 in which a Jewish state, recognised by the major powers, could have emerged if there had not been Zionist victories at UNSCOP and in the UN General Assembly”.
- *The Palestinian Arabs and Arab states categorically rejected the Partition plan*. The AHC argued that the Jews did not constitute a distinct people or nation and therefore could not legally be entitled to collective rights. Before the vote, Mufti Haj Amin al-Husayni said that the Arabs of Palestine “are entitled to live in freedom and peace to develop their country in accordance with their traditions and in harmony with universal conceptions of justice and equity”. Furthermore, many Arab leaders argued that the UN was aiding the actions of an “aggressor” and therefore the Arab world would “reserve the right to act accordingly”.
- *The months following the vote were plagued by violence* with over 400 hundred Jews and Arabs being killed. In 1946 the Arab League had passed a resolution that called on members to secretly fund, equip, train and provide volunteers for Arab militias in Palestine. In October 1947 the Arab League formed a military committee, under the leadership of Iraqi General Ismail Safwat, to organise the hundreds of volunteers from Syria, Iraq and Jordan, which were subsequently supplemented and aided by various Arab states. Within two weeks of the partition vote, the Arab League formed the Arab Liberation Army (ALA).
- As violence increased and the British prepared to leave, *Arab states made their own designs for Mandatory Palestine*. Most Arab leaders opposed the establishment of an al-Husayni-led Palestinian state and the Palestinian Arab population was bereft of leadership, with many of its elites having fled or been expelled a decade earlier by the British. As war seemed increasingly likely, Egypt sought to capture Tel Aviv, the Jordanians prepared to seize parts of the proposed Arab state, and Syria aimed to make Palestine part of a Greater Syria again.
- *The passage of the Partition plan also put in danger the lives of Jews in Arab lands*. In the lead up to the vote, the head of the Egyptian delegation to the UN said that “the lives of 1m Jews in Muslim countries would be jeopardised by the establishment of a Jewish state”. In early December massive demonstrations raged across many Arab cities. In Cairo European shops were vandalised and police were deployed daily to prevent a raid on the Jewish Quarter of the city. In Damascus demonstrators called for “jihad” and vandalised Western consulate buildings. In the Yemeni city of Aden 75 Jews were murdered and dozens of Jewish homes, shops and synagogues were burnt. One woman was killed and dozens injured in rioting in Bahrain, and in Aleppo widespread anti-Jewish riots caused many Jewish schools and synagogues to be destroyed.
- By March 1948, with internecine violence getting worse and the British poised to leave, areas in *Mandatory Palestine began to fall under the control of Jews or Arabs*. In May, when Ben-Gurion declared the Declaration of Independence for the new State of Israel, local and foreign Arab militias controlled the majority of the land. The invasion of the nascent state of Israel by surrounding Arab armies was described by UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie as “the first armed aggression the world has seen since the end of the [second world] war”.
- *The results of the war led to changes on the ground which eroded the relevancy of the proposed borders of the partition plan*. Israel expanded its borders to control 78 per cent of Mandatory Palestine, Transjordan occupied and annexed the West Bank, and Egypt captured Gaza. Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion announced that the Arab rejection of the Partition Plan and the subsequent results of the war made the proposed borders “null and void” and bereft of “any moral force”. However, despite the non-binding aspect of the UN General Assembly Resolution, even 70 years on, the principle of partition remains the accepted paradigm in the international community for resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Partition: the genesis of an idea

The first time an international power recommended partitioning Mandatory Palestine into two states was in the 1937 Peel Commission. Following the 1936 Arab Revolt in Palestine, Britain appointed a Royal Commission led by Lord Peel to look into the “underlying causes of the disturbances ... [and whether] the Arabs or the Jews have any legitimate grievances”. The Commission concluded that there could be no permanent settlement between Jews and Arabs under British rule, and proposed partition, on the basis that “(i) a reasonable allowance is made within the boundaries of the Jewish State for the growth of population and colonisation, and (ii) reasonable compensation is given to the Arab State for the loss of land and revenue”.

Based on this logic, the Peel Commission proposed to create an independent Jewish state in 20 per cent of Mandatory Palestine and an Arab area – which was to be attached to Trans-Jordan – in the rest of the territory. The Commission also suggested “transferring” Jews and Arabs who found themselves in the “other” state, as well as establishing a British controlled corridor from Jerusalem to Jaffa and maintaining British control over Bethlehem, the port of Haifa, Nazareth, Lake Tiberias, and all religious endowments and religious buildings and places of worship in both the Jewish and Arab states.

The Jewish leadership was ultimately sympathetic to partition, although opposed the borders suggested by Peel. While Revisionist leader Zeev Jabotinsky compared the proposed Jewish state to a new “Pale of Settlement,” which would be “perfectly valueless” due to its inability to absorb many Jewish immigrants, Chaim Weizmann suggested that “the choice before us is this: a Jewish minority in the whole of the Eretz Yisrael – it is even possible to say in an Arab Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) – or a Jewish majority in part of the land”. The Zionist Congress of 1937 passed a resolution which supported the principle of partition, without explicitly mentioning the word, but rejected the Peel Commission’s scheme and its conclusion that the national aspirations of Jews and Arabs were irreconcilable.

The mainstream Palestinian leadership rejected the Peel Commission. The dominant Palestinian viewpoint, championed by the pro-Nazi Mufti Haj Amin al-Husayni and his followers, as well as the Palestinian branch of the Baath Party, communist intellectuals and the Muslim Brotherhood, rejected any compromise regarding Palestinian Arab territorial and political control of Mandatory Palestine. They argued that: the plan ignored Palestinian Arab sovereignty by annexing the Arab state to Trans-Jordan; the idea of population transfer discriminated against the Arabs (the Peel Commission called for transferring 1,250 Jews residing in territories designated for the Arab state compared to 225,000 Arabs who resided in areas designated for the Jewish state); and that the proposed borders didn’t reflect that significantly more land in Mandatory Palestine was held by Arab citizens.

However, not all Palestinian Arab factions supported the anti-partition camp. A very small number of opponents, most notably the al-Nashashibi family, led by Fakhri Nashashibi, came out openly against the Palestinian Arab decision to reject the Peel Commission proposal, saying that the lack of flexibility was what led to Lord Peel’s unfair proposal in the first place.

Beset by Arab opposition and the deterioration of the political situation in Europe, the British Government walked back its support for partition. A statement by the British Government presented by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to Parliament as part of the publication of the 1938 Palestine Partition Commission (Woodhead Report) rejected the Peel Plan as impracticable due to “political, administrative and financial difficulties”.

Alternatives to partition

The decade between the Peel Commission and UNSCOP recommendations included other schemes that were presented by the Yishuv, Palestinian Arab and Arab representatives, and other governments as possible solutions to the national clash between Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine.

In general, advocates of Zionism mainly favoured some form of federalism based on power-sharing between Arabs and Jews, whilst leaving open the door to partition. Arab proposals refused any semblance of Jewish self-determination in any part of Mandatory Palestine, preferring a unitary state that would maintain a Jewish minority.

Following the 1939 British White Paper, a special committee of the Jewish Agency Executive, chaired by Shlomo Kaplansky, proposed a federal solution – the *Kaplansky Plan* – over all of Mandatory Palestine but with distinct Jewish and Arab areas and strong autonomy. In 1942, with the war raging and details of the Holocaust becoming clearer, American Zionists adopted the *Biltmore Programme*, which called for Palestine to be “established as a Jewish commonwealth” and “integrated into the structures of the new democratic world”. This policy gained US support in 1945 when US Congress passed a resolution calling for a “democratic commonwealth” in Palestine.

British and American governments evaluated several different options. The *1946 Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry (AACI)* proposed that the Mandate continue until a UN trusteeship could be agreed, suggested lifting all restrictions on Jews buying land and allowing the immigration of 100,000 displaced Jews. However, it was ultimately rejected by both governments. The *1946 Morrison-Grady Plan* which was drafted by British Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison and American diplomat Henry Grady, recommended cantonal autonomy – two under direct British control, one under Jewish control and one under Arab control – which would constitute a federation under a British high commissioner. While the plan was accepted by the British Cabinet, it was rejected by US President Harry Truman and by both the Jewish and Arab communities in Mandatory Palestine. Following this, in a last ditched effort to bring both sides together, the British held a conference in London in January 1947 which led to the *Bevin Scheme*: Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, together with Colonial Secretary Creech Jones, presented a plan which sought the establishment of self-government in Palestine leading to independence after a transition period of five years under trusteeship, provide substantial autonomy in both areas, and allow 100,000 Jewish immigration over two years after which it would be contingent on agreement between the two communities and failing that, through UN arbitration. It too was rejected by both Jews and Arabs.

In February 1939 at a London Conference at St James Palace, Jamal Husayni put forward the Arab position which demanded independence and the replacement of the Mandate as well as rejecting a Jewish National Home in Palestine and an end to Jewish immigration. In 1946, at the London Palestine conference, the Arab League proposed that Palestine become a “unitary state, with a democratic constitution and an elected assembly”. The plan demanded that Jewish representation would be limited to one third, strict “prohibition of Jewish immigration and the continuation of the existing restrictions on land transfer,” and citizenship only given to Jews who had lived continuously in Palestine for at least 10 years – a clause that would have disqualified hundreds of thousands of Jews in Mandatory Palestine and abroad.

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