President Truman’s Monumental Decision:
The Acceptance of the United Nations’ Partition Plan for Palestine

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the decision of President Harry Truman to accept the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine. It analyzes the role of the international community in the creation of this plan. This includes the United States Department of State, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the Arabs of Palestine, the Arab League, and the newly-minted United Nations. Furthermore, it details the roles of Truman’s domestic advisors, his personal beliefs, and his desire to win re-election in 1948 in the scope of the situation unfolding in Palestine. This document explains what led President Truman to support the UN Partition Plan; specifically, it will seek to understand why Truman made his decision against the advice of his allies and his foreign policy advisors and to make the decision that he did.
Introduction

January 1, 1946. The Allies have defeated the Nazis and the Imperial Japanese, and an uneasy peace is settling over the world. The Cold War has already begun developing, and the United States and the USSR are beginning to battle for influence around the world. Colonialism everywhere is being met with new resistance, and a cry for independence and self-determination was being heard from every corner of the earth. This included the world’s Jewish community: Over 1 million Jewish lives had been lost at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators across Europe during World War II, in the extermination event that became known as the Holocaust. Many of Europe’s Jews that survived the Holocaust were either scattered across the continent in refugee camps or seeking out a new life elsewhere. Many Jewish survivors sought a new life in the British territory of Palestine.

During this time period there was a growing global movement in support of the creation of a Jewish state there. This movement’s base relied on a document known as the Balfour Declaration. This declaration came from a letter sent by Arthur Balfour to Walter Rothschild, a wealthy Jewish, British banker in 1917. Balfour was the British Foreign Minister at the time, so this statement was seen as representative of the British government’s position.1 In the letter, Balfour said that

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this 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, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."2

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1 In 1917 Palestine was still a part of the Ottoman Empire. However, the British took control of it after the Sykes-Picot Treaty was passed at the end of World War I.
The movement to create a Jewish state is known as “Zionism,” which will be defined in this paper as “the international movement to create a Jewish state in Palestine.” Supporters of Zionism, known as Zionists, rallied around the Balfour Declaration as the long-awaited restoration of Palestine in to Jewish hands. Zionists often believed that Palestine should rightfully belong to the Jews based on the Jewish holy book known as the Torah. To Christians, the Torah is the first five books of the Old Testament. To Jews, it is their God’s promise to their forefather Abraham of a “promised land.” Not only that, it is a collection of the actions that their God performed in order to assist the Jews’ escape from slavery in Egypt, and the installation of Jews as rulers in their “promised land.” Geographically, the “promised land” was an area in the Middle East known as Palestine. In 1945, Palestine was under the control of the British Empire. Zionists believed that between the Balfour Declaration’s promise and the historical basis in the Torah, there was enough material to base a claim for a Jewish state in Palestine.

The Zionist movement had support around the world, and this included powerful people in the United States. These people were using their influence in an attempt to persuade President Harry Truman to support the Zionist cause. This essay will focus on the specific advisors to President Truman that played a significant role in forming his policy towards Palestine. The most influential of those advisors were Truman’s personal assistant, David K. Niles, and White House Counsel Clark Clifford. While there were many others that had a role in shaping the President’s policy toward Palestine, this essay will focus on these two, as they played a vital role.

The President of the American Council for Judaism, Lessing J. Rosenwald, took a different stance towards Palestine than many Jewish organizations. Rosenwald met with

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President Truman in December of 1945 in an effort to sway him away from supporting Zionism.\textsuperscript{4} In this meeting, Rosenwald proposed the idea of making Palestine a non-religious state given the already existing conflict there between Jews and Arabs, and his understanding that Christians needed to have access to the holy sites of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{5} There had been a marked increase in violence between Jews and Arabs in Palestine beginning in the 1930s. Arabs had been the dominant ethnicity in Palestine since the Jewish Diaspora in 69 CE. Arabs saw Zionism and the increased Jewish population as a threat to their existence in their homeland, along with their ability to access Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{6} The Jewish population in Palestine based their claims on the Balfour Declaration and the \textit{Torah}. Rosenwald saw the imminence of the religious struggle about to explode in Palestine, and he wanted to fix the problem before it happened. He called for “a complete reconsideration of the Palestine problem,” and said that solving it “can become a token of our earnest resolve to deal with broad world problems before they reach the crisis stage.”\textsuperscript{7} President Truman did not follow Mr. Rosenwald’s suggestions. In fact, he did the opposite. President Truman supported the Zionist cause which resulted in the foundation of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948.

This capstone paper will attempt to explain what led President Truman to decide to accept the UN Plan for Partition. It will seek to understand why Truman took the stance that he did, even though it meant interfering in the affairs of Great Britain, and went against his foreign policy advisors. Specifically, it will argue that President Truman always wanted a homeland for the world’s Jews, going back to his days as a Senator: However, historians have re-written his efforts in an attempt to portray them as domestically motivated, and as the actions of a man with

\textsuperscript{4} Lessing J. Rosenwald, Letter to President Harry Truman, December 4, 1945, Truman Library.
\textsuperscript{5} Rosenwald Letter
\textsuperscript{7} Rosenwald Letter
no foreign policy experience. This subject is important to the world today as the question of Israel and its role in the United States foreign policy continues to be a divisive issue that remains essential to US interests in the Middle East and around the world.

**Historiography**

The first major book written about Truman’s decision making towards Palestine was written by the author Frank Manuel, and published in 1949. In the book, Manuel argues that Truman based his support for Israel on the humanitarian need of Jews in the wake of World War II.\(^8\) Due to the fact that it was published in the immediate aftermath of Israel’s foundation, it became a defining book on President Truman’s stance, and for over a decade was seen as the primary explanation for Truman’s actions, says Hahn.\(^9\) Manuel’s book focused on issues of Western policy towards Palestine going back to World War I. He also portrayed Truman as a great humanitarian who supported the Zionist cause based on morality rather than politics. After three decades, more information was declassified and Truman’s advisors began to speak out against the idea that Truman had acted in a humanitarian spirit. The idea that developed out of the newly declassified information was that Truman had taken his stance towards Palestine in order to best position himself to win re-election in 1948.\(^10\) This is a position that is still widely accepted today.

In 1979, Kenneth Ray Bain wrote one of the first books that detailed an argument against President Truman’s motivations as a humanitarian and implicated him instead for being motivated by his desire to win re-election. This was markedly different than Manuel’s book that portrayed Truman as strictly a humanitarian. Rather, Bain says that the basis for President

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Truman’s decision regarding Palestine came from his desire to win re-election in 1948. Bain does not condemn Truman in his work however. Instead, Bain argues that Truman receives too much blame for a failure of governmental bodies to work together to form a cohesive policy towards Palestine. These bodies include the British government and the United Nations. Bain defends the basis of Truman’s decision making due in large part to the enormity of the decision, and the lack of a quality alternative plan.

One of the most complete analyses of President Truman’s life was written by David McCullough and published in 1992. In his nearly 1,000 page work, Truman, McCullough analyzes the entirety of Truman’s political career, with an obvious emphasis on his Presidency. Nonetheless, a huge amount of the book looks at his early life and his early political career, which gives a complete look at Truman the politician. McCullough makes clear that Truman absolutely had humanitarian concerns in his mind when he moved to support Israel. McCulloch says “Often as senator, he had personally assured Zionist leaders he would fight for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.” McCullough also uses comments from David K. Niles, Truman’s special assistant for minority affairs, to support his claim that Truman had always wanted to support the Zionist cause. Niles claimed that “he (Niles) sensed in Truman a fundamental sympathy for the plight of the Jews.” While McCullough also analyzes a wide range of other factors that President Truman took into consideration, he makes clear that from the onset, Truman had humanitarian purposes in mind, and that they played a major role in his decision.

The book Caught in the Middle East: US Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1945-1961, written by Peter Hahn, provides a detailed explanation of the US position towards

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13 McCullough, Truman, 596.
Palestine and the Middle East as a whole from 1945-1948. Published in 2004, Hahn looks at the entirety of the US stance towards Palestine, and the numerous factors that played into President Truman’s decision making in regard to the territory. Hahn gives in-depth background into the political situation in Palestine throughout these years, despite how quickly the political landscape was changing. He also addresses the various divides among Truman’s advisors, and the role of the international community in shaping the United States’ stance on Palestine.

This essay uses the article “Harry Truman’s Recognition of Israel,” by Michael Ottolenghi as background for the workings of President Truman’s inner circle in regard to Palestine during this time period. This article, published in 2004, details the actions of the major players in the political sphere, especially Loy Henderson, David Niles, and Clark Clifford. At the time of the Palestine debate, Clark Clifford was early in his political career. This was a man who played a large role in the Vietnam War and the policy that surrounded it 20 years after the Palestine decision. His emergence as a trusted advisor to President Truman was unexpected to those who had more experience, and it frustrated many of them, as it did Secretary of State Marshall. David Niles was President Truman’s personal assistant, and was responsible for much of Truman’s focus on winning re-election in 1948. Niles had stayed on from President Franklin Roosevelt’s leadership team, and had close connections to the Jewish community in the United States. Loy Henderson was one of the top officials of the US State Department’s Near East and Africa Division. As such, he was the in charge of shaping the United States’ foreign policy plan for the Middle East. Henderson emphasized protecting the interests of the United States in the region; in his mind, that meant fostering the newly formed relationship between the United States and the Arabs of the Middle East. He opposed the US support for a Jewish state in Palestine because he saw the damage that it could do to the relations with the Arabs of the

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14 Michael Ottolenghi, “President Truman’s Recognition of Israel,” The Historical Journal 47, no.4, 970.
region. This article looks broadly at the workings of Truman’s inner circle, but for this essay will be used to focus on Henderson, Niles, and Clifford.

The split among Truman’s advisors is also evident in the literature that surrounds the entire process of Israel’s recognition. The overriding issue with the established literature surrounding the debate over how Truman decided to support the plan for partition is the treatment of those that disagreed with him. Those that opposed, especially in the State Department, have been deemed either anti-Semitic, or blinded by ambition trying to further their own career. This appears to be a perfect example of “history is written by the winners.” This was an issue that was hotly debated and was personal for many involved in the process. It seems that the “winners” of the argument, the Zionists and those that supported the cause, had much more say in the way that the subject is remembered than those who opposed the plan. Loy Henderson was written off by many because he thought the State Department should be making the decision on Israel, not the President.15 The State Department as a whole is deemed as anti-Semitic during this time period, and nearly all of that is directly tied to their resistance to recognizing Israel. This further supports the idea of history being written by the “winners.”

Due to the bias towards Zionists, Zionism, and those sympathetic to Israel’s cause, the existing literature surrounding the entire topic of Israel and Palestine must be read with the bias firmly in mind. Literature on this subject that is written without bias is almost non-existent, as this is one of the most controversial topics in the world today, and has been since the beginning of the argument. The existing literature also points to the idea that Truman had long held humanitarian support for the Jews close to his heart, and that it played a large role in his support as well.16 Nearly every existing source on this subject details the State Department’s devout

15 Curtis, “Truman Adviser”, Hahn, Caught in the Middle East, 29.
16 Manuel, American-Palestinian Relations, 345-348.
opposition to the recognition of Israel. The US envoy to the United Nations at this time was dedicated to developing a trusteeship in Palestine to bring peace to the region before establishing any official boundaries or recognition for any country.\textsuperscript{17} Despite these efforts by the two agencies designed to be the President’s experts on foreign policy, Truman followed his heart and the advisors who agreed with him, to support the Zionists and the plan for partition. This essay will seek to understand why he did so.

This essay fits into the established literature by countering the claims Bain and Hahn that President Truman supported the UN Plan for Partition, and more broadly, the foundation of the state of Israel, solely for domestic political gains. It will explain that Truman had held his beliefs regarding a homeland in Palestine for Jews long before he became president. Finally, it will argue that Truman knew and understood the foreign policy risks he was taking, and that the opportunity to create a Jewish homeland outweighed those risks.

\textbf{Overview of Palestine 1945-1948}

Palestine refers to the area that encompasses present day Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. It is the historic home of the Jews before their diaspora in 69 CE. In the nearly 1900 years since the Jews had been scattered across the globe, Arabs from the surrounding areas had become the majority ethnicity and Islam had become the dominant religion in the region, although a Jewish minority remained. Great Britain had controlled the region since the end of World War I, and remained in control during and after World War II. The image below shows Palestine in 1922 after it had been separated from Trans-Jordan by the British government. The Balfour Declaration, the document that promised to eventually create a Jewish state in Palestine, was one of the official policies guiding the British during this time period. The other document guiding them was the Sykes-Picot Agreement, establishing the borders of the Middle Eastern

\textsuperscript{17} Gendzier, “U.S. Policy”
colonies and countries at the end of World War I. In this agreement, the British had agreed to form an Arab state in Palestine whenever the time came for the end of the British rule there. Therefore, the British had promised Palestine, a territory approximately the size of New Jersey, to two different ethnicities with a history of conflict. This dual promise would become the basis for both the Arab and Jewish movements for statehood in the wake of World War II.

Map showing the territory that became Palestine upon its’ division from Trans-Jordan. *Palestine and Trans-Jordan after 1922*. Dartmouth College, Middle East Maps Collection.

During World War II the British were preoccupied with fighting the Nazis in Europe and could not give much attention to the events unfolding in Palestine. In fact, shortly before World War II broke out, the British had issued a document known as The White Paper, in regard to the
influx of Jews into Palestine. The White Paper allowed for 75,000 Jewish immigrants to be allowed into Palestine over the course of the following five years. Any more Jews that wished to immigrate there would only be allowed if accepted by the Arab-led government. Despite the international community’s acceptance of the Balfour Declaration, the British government ratified the White Paper. This proved to be a general rejection of the Balfour Declaration, and greatly favored the Arabs of Palestine.

This was far less favorable than the Jews in Palestine had hoped for. The German Nazis were creating an atmosphere in Europe that was rapidly deteriorating the quality of life for the Jews of the continent. This fear had pushed the Jews in Palestine to argue for greater numbers of immigrants to be allowed entry. Therefore, the Jews in Palestine refused to accept the White Paper document as law. This shows that the Jews not only felt threatened by Nazi Germany and their anti-Semitic policies, they felt betrayed by the British who did not appear ready to live up to the promise they made to the Jews in the Balfour Declaration.

Not only did the Jews of Palestine reject the White Paper, but one week after the White Paper became law, a US Senator from Missouri named Harry Truman “insert(ed) in the Congressional Record strong criticism of the British White Paper on Palestine, saying it is a dishonorable repudiation by Britain of her obligations.” Truman had been a senator for less than 6 years when he put that statement on Congressional Record. This gives a look into Truman’s intentions long before he was considering the presidency or future elections. This was

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19 “The White Paper”
20 The League of Nations had ratified the Balfour Declaration, ensuring that Britain would work toward the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.
a man who supported the Jewish cause, and rejected the idea of Britain not living up to its’ promise in the Balfour Declaration.

Given the Jewish rejection of the White Paper, Palestine’s Jewish population actively fought to maintain their right to ignore the laws set out in the White Paper. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, sympathy for the Zionist cause was high around the world. In addition to support from around the world, a huge number of Europe’s Jews were displaced due to the war and the Holocaust, giving many Jews that had never desired to live in Israel an emerging sense of Zionism. While thousands of Jews decided that the United States, Britain, and other European countries presented better opportunities for a new life, many of the displaced Jews decided that Europe held too much heartache, pain, and loss for them to remain, and decided that Palestine was the best answer for them. This caused a serious complication in the already massive refugee crisis in Europe.

The policy the British enacted with the passage of the White Paper made Jewish immigration to Palestine extremely difficult, especially in the aftermath of World War II. This was exacerbated by the refugee crisis that was occurring throughout Europe, where millions of Displaced Persons (DPs) and the surviving Jews were left in humanitarian camps across the continent. Additionally, many European countries were not in a position to accept a large number of Jewish refugees. Much of Europe had been destroyed in the war, either by Allied bombings or the German’s “scorched earth” policy. The Germans had destroyed roads, bridges, and train tracks throughout Europe in their retreat, leaving the transportation network all but destroyed. The Allied bombings in Europe had often been inaccurate or specifically designed to terrorize the populace, which had left thousands of cities in ruins. Many European countries, especially countries that fell to the Soviet Union, were far more concerned with rebuilding their
towns and infrastructure than they were with finding homes for Jewish Holocaust survivors. Although many of these surviving Jews wished to immigrate to Palestine, the British did not want to risk their relations with the Arabs of Palestine and Trans-Jordan by allowing a large number of Jewish immigrants.22 Therefore, the British sought to deny asylum seekers and DPs entry into Palestine in order to maintain the balance they believed they had found there.

President Truman and the US supported the idea of allowing Europe’s Jews to immigrate there. On October 4, 1946, Truman demanded the British government to allow 100,000 of Europe’s displaced Jews to be allowed entry to Palestine, which put tremendous pressure on the British to be more open about their immigration policy.23 As Arieh Kochavi stated, in order for Britain’s plan to maintain balance in Palestine to work, the “…British needed the cooperation of both Eastern and Western European governments and, even more so, the backing and collaboration of the Americans.”24

With America not cooperating though, a minor conflict broke out between the two governments. On the same October day that Truman called on the British to allow 100,000 Jews to be allowed entry, the British government headed by Prime Minister Clement Attlee released a statement regarding the US demands. According to an Associated Press report the British government “regretted” President Truman's new pronouncement on Palestine and believed it would ‘prejudice’ a settlement of the problem of Palestine's future.”25 This was not the first blow in this debate though. Around one month prior, Truman had complained that “…the British high-handedness in Palestine made it more difficult for (the United States) to protest Russian

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This shows that Truman’s frustration with the British policy toward refugees had been building since the end of the war, and his October 1946 call for the British to admit 100,000 Jews into Palestine was the climax of that frustration. These actions show that President Truman was committed to taking humanitarian action in wake of the Holocaust.

President Truman’s frustration came from more than the refugee crisis however. Throughout World War II there had been growing conflict within Palestine between Jews and Arabs for dominance of the area. Both sides felt that they had a right to the territory because of the contradicting policies that the British had promised to both sides of the conflict. The Arabs in Palestine clung to the Sykes-Picot Agreement that had promised them governance of the area after the British relinquished possession of the territory. Contrarily, the Jews held onto the Balfour Declaration, which had promised the British government would “view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people…”

These contradictory promises gave both sides what they believed was the moral advantage, and was the motivation for an increasingly violent conflict for control of Palestine. Therefore, due to the ongoing conflict in Palestine, the massive issue of Jewish migrants in the wake of the Holocaust, and the American involvement in the political and humanitarian spheres, Britain was ready to be done with Palestine and grant it independence. In 1947, when Britain had realized that Palestine was spiraling out of control, it sent the matter to the United Nations.

United Nations: UNSCOP and Partition

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27 Balfour, Letter to Rothschild.
28 Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 36-38.
On February 14, 1947, Great Britain officially declared their intention to leave the fate of Palestine up to the United Nations, allowing the newly formed international body to decide what should be done with the increasingly troublesome territory.29 In May of 1947, the UN created the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). UNSCOP consisted of the delegates from 11 UN member states: Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, India, Iran, the Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, Uruguay and Yugoslavia.30 In the following months, UNSCOP compiled a massive eight section report that contained their findings and suggestions for a peaceful solution in Palestine. On August 31 of the same year, UNSCOP presented their findings to the UN General Assembly.

UNSCOP’s resolution for Palestine became known as the Partition Plan. It was recommended unanimously by all eleven members of the committee. Under this plan, Palestine was to be divided into two separate states; one Jewish and one Arab. Because of Jerusalem’s religious importance to both peoples, it would be “an international enclave.”31 It would be divided between the two groups, with Arabs being members of the Arab state, and Jews being members of the Jewish State. The image below shows how the territory was to be divided under the partition plan.

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29 Despite allowing the UN to decide the fate of Palestine, Britain remained in control of it until a decision could be made by the international community.
31 UNSCOP Report.
Map showing the proposed partition of Palestine.  *UN Partition Plan, November 29, 1947. Myths and Facts website.*

There were strengths and weaknesses to this partition plan, as it was an attempt at compromise rather than a solution that one side would immediately accept. Therefore, the committee decided to attempt to partition Palestine along demographic lines. In Section II parts 12 and 13 the committee explains that there were approximately 1.2 million Arabs living in Palestine in 1946, compared to approximately 608,000 Jews. Even though Arabs consisted of two-thirds of the population of the territory, the committee decided to partition Palestine’s land area nearly exactly in half. Because of this divide, it was impossible to divide the territory into

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32 UNSCOP Report
two states that were both strictly Jewish and Arab. The Arab state’s population was to be made up of well over 90% ethnic Arabs, with a small Jewish minority. Contrarily, the Jewish state was to be made up of between 55-60% Jews, with a large Arab minority. These numbers come from the demographics of the areas that were assigned to each of the planned states in accordance with the UNSCOP proposal.

The UN plan was presented to both the Arab and Jewish groups in Palestine. The Jewish group, led by David Ben-Gurion, approved of the plan, because it gave them an opportunity for statehood. The Arab League rejected the plan, because it rejected any plan that allowed for Jewish statehood in Palestine. Many of the Arab League refused to even meet with UNSCOP. As Hahn says, “Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Arab League protested that UNSCOP was biased against Arab interests, and Palestinians boycotted the hearings.” While rejecting the Partition Plan, the Arab League threatened violence should the plan be accepted, promising armed resistance to the implementation of the plan for partition. However, because the bill was recommended by the committee, it was sent to the floor of the UN General Assembly.

The Arab and Jewish division over UNSCOP’s plan left the United States with a big decision in regard to their vote. President Truman and his top advisors were divided. All interested parties had major concerns regarding the topic, and it became an intensely debated subject on all sides. On one side was President Truman with his domestic advisors, led by David Niles and Clark Clifford. Against them was the State Department, led by Loy Henderson and Secretary of State George Marshall.

33 UNSCOP Report
34 Hahn, Caught in the Middle East, 35-37.
35 In 1947 the Arab League consisted of what is today Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen.
36 Hahn, Caught in the Middle East, 37.
State Department Opposition

The State Department’s Near East and Africa division at this time was considered to be the expert on the United States foreign policy towards the region. The leader of that division was Loy Henderson, and his stance on the issue was that US support for the partition plan would damage increasingly positive relations with Arab countries in the Middle East.\(^{37}\) His stance was supported by the majority of the foreign policy experts at Truman’s disposal, and became the official position of the State Department.\(^{38}\) The primary reason for the State Department’s opposition was that they took great pride in the increasingly beneficial relationship that they felt they had helped create between the United States and the Arab countries of the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia. The State Department believed that supporting the plan for partition would threaten the US relationship with those countries. They had great reason to hold this belief, as shown by the Arab Palestinians refusal to meet with UNSCOP and the anger felt by the surrounding countries towards the committee.\(^{39}\)

The State Department held their blossoming relationship with Saudi Arabia in special regard due to the United States’ increasing dependency on oil. The State Department had worked hard during and after World War II to endear themselves to Arab leaders, especially King Ibn Saud, the Saudi leader. President Franklin Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud had worked closely together before Roosevelt’s death, and Truman wished to continue that relationship, but on his own terms. This meant acknowledging to King Ibn Saud as early as August of 1945 that he wished to expand Jewish immigration into Palestine. Truman did this in an attempt to lay the groundwork for future US support for the Zionist movement for Jewish statehood in Palestine.

\(^{37}\) Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 35-37.
\(^{38}\) Ibid.
\(^{39}\) Ibid.
In October of 1946 when President Truman called on the British to allow 100,000 Jewish refugees into Palestine, he also implied that he would support a plan to partition Palestine, long before the British had relinquished the matter to the United Nations. Not only did Truman’s comments undermine and anger Great Britain, they angered the Arab countries of the Middle East. The surrounding countries responses were exactly what the State Department feared: According to Hahn,

“Lebanon branded the statement ‘wholly antagonistic to the Arabs’ legitimate right to their country,’ and Iraqi leaders discussed breaking diplomatic relations with the United States. Saudi leaders accused Truman of supporting ‘Zionist aggression’ and warned that they would consider reprisals ranging from an economic boycott to ‘underground guerilla warfare against Americans throughout the Arab world.’ Officials of the Arabian-American Oil Company warned that they might re-charter as a British corporation to avoid the anti-U.S. backlash.”

Thus, President Truman’s effort to minimize Saudi frustrations with his plans was thwarted by the mere implication that the United States would support the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Not only did this frustrate the Saudis, but the entire Arab League protested the idea. The Arab League refused to accept the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine. They believed that Palestine was an Arab territory that belonged to the Arabs that had lived there for centuries. Therefore, the Arab League and the Arabs living in Palestine refused to consider any plan that allowed for a Jewish state to be created.

The State Department was also frustrated, aware that they were supposed to be the country’s foreign policy expert, and they were not being listened to. They could see the progress they had worked so hard to foster with Arab countries being rapidly wasted over an idea that they fundamentally disagreed with. In an interview in 1973, Loy Henderson recalled warning

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41 Hahn, “Caught in the Middle East,” 36.
President Truman and Secretary of State Marshall of the futility of their position before the UN vote on the Partition Plan:

“I pointed out that the establishment… of a Jewish State in Palestine, unless such a State would be acceptable to the Arab world, would cause much bloodshed and suffering, would alienate the people of that world who have been placing much trust in the United States, might result in the loss to the free world of the use of the great resources of the Middle East, and that the continued existence of such a State could cause suffering, expense, bickering, and damage to the United States internally and internationally for many years to come. I said that undoubtedly the Soviet Union would try to take advantage of the situation by penetrating into the Middle East.”

While the State Department’s warning of anger in the Middle East was the primary reason for their opposition to the partition plan, Henderson also addresses another at the end of that statement: Fear of increasing the influence of the Soviet Union. The Cold War was just beginning, but the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union was already heating up. Loy Henderson was the vocal leader of concern against the spread of communism in the Middle East. His concerns in regard to the Soviets went hand in hand with his concerns about angering the Arabs of the Middle East. Henderson believed that if the US pushed the Arabs of the region far enough, they would turn to the Soviets, and the US influence in the area would be all but lost. While this was early in the Cold War era before the official policy of “Containment” had begun, this shows the ideology was already in place within the State Department to minimize the influence of the Soviet Union wherever possible. However, Henderson’s concerns about the Soviet Union may have been misguided.

When the UN Plan for Partition came to the floor of the United Nations’ General Assembly, the Soviet Union voted in support of the plan. When seen through the light of the

Soviets, however, this makes sense from their perspective. As the Soviet Union swept through Eastern Europe during World War II, they were continually discovering more and more evidence of the Holocaust. When the war ended, the Soviets were in control of Central and Eastern Europe, and with it, millions of displaced persons from the war. This also meant the Soviets were in control of countries that had been ruined by the war, and were resisting the implementation of communism and their forced integration into the Soviet Union. The various nationalities of the countries under their control did not necessarily agree with the communist ideals that attempt to strip away nationalism in order to promote the equality of all workers. The Soviets had their work cut out for them, and solving the “Jewish problem” in those countries was an additional task that needed to be done. A way to solve this problem was the creation of the Jewish state in Palestine. It gave Eastern Europe’s Jews a homeland that they could go to, and gave the Soviets a solution that cost them far less than relocation and redeveloping homes for the Jews.

As Gorodetsky points out, it also gave Stalin a chance to anger the British. As Gorodetsky points out, it also gave Stalin a chance to anger the British.45 Stalin had become increasingly frustrated with the American and British cooperation to limit Soviet influence outside of Europe. Therefore, his policy point on supporting the Jewish state was to limit British influence in the Middle East. Since the Soviet Union had very little influence on the Middle East to begin with, Stalin decided that it was worth limiting British influence in the area, and creating state’s that were independent of their colonizers was a way to do that.46 Stalin also realized that since the Soviet Union was not actively involved in the creation of Israel, little harm could be done to his relations with the Arab countries of the Middle East as a result of his vote in favor of the partition plan. Contrarily, the American government was risking a major blow to

46 Ibid.
their relations with their Arab allies with their support for the partition plan. Stalin saw a low risk strategy that could benefit the Jewish refugees under his control in Eastern Europe, and he took it. This shows a flaw in the State Department’s argument against the partition plan. While Loy Henderson and others were concerned with the Soviets making a grab at the United States’ lost influence, the Soviets were playing their own games in the Middle East.

Perhaps the biggest strike against the State Department’s opposition to the partition plan was their lack of an alternative plan in the lead-up to the UN General Assembly vote. President Truman’s domestic advisors were handing him a concrete, actionable plan that had international support in UNSCOP’s proposal. The State Department officials that were opposing the plan were not offering Truman an alternative. They simply disagreed with the idea of US support for the plan that was before them. Without a concrete plan to contrast UNSCOP’s, it was hard for President Truman to side with the State Department.47

Clark Clifford’s and David Niles’ Advocacy

President Truman also had advisors advocating for his acceptance of the UN Plan for Partition. His personal assistant, David Niles, and White House Counsel Clark Clifford were two of his advisors that played a leading role in encouraging him to accept it. Clifford cited a recent election in New York where a Democrat had lost to a third party candidate in an election for Senate because the third party candidate had opposed Truman’s lack of active support for the creation of a Jewish state.48 David Niles was pushing Truman to support the plan for partition because Niles saw the Republican Party’s next presidential candidate, Thomas Dewey, preparing to announce his support for the plan. Niles wanted Truman to support the partition plan before

47 The State Department helped come up with a plan after the UN vote (the Bernadotte Plan), after it had already been decided that Palestine would be partitioned: Too little, too late.
48 Curtis, “Truman Advisor.”
Dewey, in order to head off any political support that Dewey would be able to gain from announcing his support for it before Truman did.\textsuperscript{49}

Clifford and Niles had also seen the massive amount of support coming in from around the country in favor of the US support for a Jewish state in Palestine. Both these men were concerned that Truman was not going to be able to beat Dewey in the upcoming presidential election in 1948. They believed that the best way gain a large amount of public support was by supporting the plan for partition. McCulloch explains, “Hundreds of thousands of postcards flooded the White House mail…thirty-three state legislatures passed resolutions favoring a Jewish state in Palestine. Forty governors and more than half the Congress signed petitions to the president.”\textsuperscript{50,51} Clifford and Niles understood that a movement this strong could make or break the upcoming mid-term elections. More importantly, they knew that the subject would play a major role in the next presidential election. These men understood that after years of Democratic rule under Franklin Roosevelt, the country was clamoring for change.

Truman was not expected to compete well against Thomas Dewey in the upcoming presidential election.\textsuperscript{52} Dewey was supporting the Zionist movement and was preparing to come out in support of the partition plan. According to Ottolenghi, “Niles knew that the Republican governor of New York, Thomas Dewey, was going to make a strong statement in favour of Jewish immigration (to Palestine) on 6 October (1947), and urged Truman to pre-empt Dewey, as the New York vote would be crucial in the upcoming elections.”\textsuperscript{53} Despite the massive movement of public support and Clifford and Niles’ encouragement, President Truman remained

\textsuperscript{49} Ottolenghi “Truman’s Recognition,” 973.
\textsuperscript{50} McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 603,604.
\textsuperscript{51} All of this happened during 1946, before the British had agreed to hand Palestine over to the UN.
\textsuperscript{52} Truman was not overly popular, and Dewey had been the Republican presidential nominee in 1944.
\textsuperscript{53} Ottolenghi, “Truman’s Recognition,” 970,971.
non-committal, listening to arguments from his advisors on both sides of the Palestine argument. In late 1946, he finally took an official stance.

President Truman implied support for a partition in Palestine and called on Britain to allow 100,000 Jewish refugees into the territory on October 4, 1946, successfully pre-empting Dewey’s statement in favor of Jewish immigration to Palestine. Many historians now believe that Truman’s actions in early October were directly connected to his efforts to stay a step ahead of Dewey in the upcoming presidential election, and to increase support for the Democratic Party before the mid-term elections that would be held on November 5, 1946. They further argue that Truman stayed on this course, listening to Clifford and Niles instead of the State Department, in order to appear more supportive of Palestine than Dewey was in an attempt to retain the presidency. Bain, Gendzier, and Hahn, all argue for this interpretation of Truman’s actions. They argue that Truman’s decision to support the UN Partition Plan was decided the moment he made this statement in favor of opening Palestine to more Jewish immigration. This argument vastly over-simplifies the decision.

**President Truman – The Decision**

On both sides, President Truman had trust advisors fighting for the cause they believed in. Clifford played an increasingly important role in President Truman’s administration, eventually countering the importance of one of the most popular men in the United States in the post-war years; Secretary of State George C. Marshall. While Marshall’s legacy as the Secretary of State is for designing the Marshall Plan that paid for Europe to be rebuilt, he was also arguably Truman’s most influential adviser. Given this, the fact that he was devoutly against the US supporting the partition plan should come as a surprise. However, Clifford was able to

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54 AP Report, “Jews Into Palestine.”
counter that influence, and pushed President Truman to support the Zionist movement and the partition plan, against the advice of many others in Truman’s inner circle. In fact, in a meeting just days before Israel became a state, Secretary of State Marshall said that if Truman went ahead with Clifford’s advice and recognized Israel before Palestine was out of British control, “…I would vote against you,” in the next election. This shows how firmly Marshall had decided that establishing a Jewish state in Palestine was the wrong move for the international community. It also shows that President Truman’s decision was far larger than his concerns for his political future. His desire to support Jewish victims of Nazism went back to 1939 when he demanded the British throw out the White Paper in order to be more helpful to Europe’s Jews. In 1943, while still serving as a Missouri senator he said “everything ‘humanly possible’ must be done to provide a haven for Jewish survivors of the Nazis.” The decision to support the partition plan was not one President Truman took lightly. Despite his inexperience in foreign policy, he understood the risks he was taking in making the decision that he did. He was willing to risk a hitch in US-British relations in order to push for a more permanent solution for the Jews. He understood the importance of Arab allies in the Middle East, and the Saudis importance to America’s long-term oil dependency. He understood that the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine would likely mean conflict in the region. Despite the Department of State’s frustration with him, they did not offer him a better alternative plan than UNSCOP’s, and Truman understood that the most workable course of action was the one he was being offered.

Was Truman’s decision made with strictly humanitarian needs in mind? No. The enormity of all of these factors weighed on him. When he decided to support the plan for

56 Curtis, “Truman Adviser”
57 Curtis, “Truman Adviser”
58 Geselbracht, “The United States and the Recognition of Israel: A Chronology.”
59 McCullough, *Truman*, 595.
partition, he was supporting his domestic advisors advice. However, he was not doing it strictly for his political future, as those advisors were concerned with. Truman made the choice he did because it was what he had always wanted to do. His past record proves that he had wanted to support the Jewish plight long before he reached the Oval Office. His domestic advisors’ advice allowed him to follow his heart. He wasn’t just making a humanitarian decision. He was making a decision that allowed him to create a policy that he had always believed was the correct route for the country to go. He was taking advantage of the one competent plan towards Palestine that was being offered to him. While some historians choose to focus on the electoral benefits he reaped from his decision, they overlook the other factors that he balanced. That culminated on October 11, 1947 with President Truman instructing his delegation to the United Nations to accept UNSCOP’s proposal, and set the foundation for relationship between the United States and Israel that has continued to this day.60

Aftermath

With the US and Soviet support, UNSCOP’s Plan for the Partition of Palestine was approved by the UN General Assembly. On May 15, 1948, Israel announced its independence as a sovereign Jewish state. The United States, led by President Harry Truman and Clark Clifford, announced their recognition of the country 11 minutes later. Loy Henderson had predicted that “The Arabs in Palestine would certainly refuse to cooperate in setting up their state; the Arabs of the surrounding states would be likely to support them. There would surely be armed clashes.”61 This premonition of Henderson’s rang true immediately after Israel declared its independence. On the same day that Israel declared its independence, Egypt, Syria, Jordan,

60 Ottolenghi, “Truman’s Recognition,” 973.
61 McKinzie “Henderson Interview.”
Lebanon, and Iraq all attacked Israel, in an attempt to end their movement for independence.\textsuperscript{62} The results of that war were horrible for the Arabs of Palestine and for the Arab League more broadly.

The Israelis proved far more capable militarily than the invaders had imagined. The image on the left below shows the UN Partition lines that were set to be enforced upon the removal of the British on May 15, 1948. The image on the right shows the borders of Israel at the end of their war of independence in the first half of 1949.

The massive Arab loss in the war and lack of cooperation after the war ended the opportunity for an Arab state to be formed in Palestine the way the partition plan had called for.\textsuperscript{63} Instead, Israel was able to take command and control of the territory, with Jordan and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[63] Hahn, \textit{Caught in the Middle East}, 60-63.
\end{footnotes}
Egypt each controlling an Arab enclave in the otherwise Jewish state. Today, Israel’s border are quite similar to the borders that were created with the 1949 armistices, and the two-state solution is no closer to being enacted now than it was in 1949 when Israel first expanded the territory they were designated by the UN.

**Future Research**

While the subject of Palestine and Israel is not the first of President Truman’s enormous decisions to come to most historians’ minds, it is still a decision that has the potential to leave his legacy in debate. Obviously there are years of history that have shaped and molded the US-Israeli relationship to what it is today, and most of that cannot be linked to President Truman. However, the policy of full military support for Israel against its neighbors was initiated by Truman, and President Obama is the first US President to have a major conflict of interests with the Israeli government in decades. While the US has vowed to always stand by its allies, it has stood closer to Israel than to most. How significant was the legacy of Truman’s policy in the formation of the US-Israeli relationship that has led to the relationship we see today? This essay has left room for future research that would entail analyzing the progression of the US-Israeli alliance and relationship over the last 70 years.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


- This newspaper article shows the beginning of the conflict between the US and British governments over policy regarding Palestine. The first part of the article explains that Truman called on the British to allow 100,000 Jews into Palestine, and the second part explains the Brits frustration with this demand.


- This letter is the basis for the Zionist movement in Palestine, and it is one of the two governing documents that the British molded their Middle East policy around between the World Wars.


- This document shows that the British government had originally planned on turning Palestine over to the Arabs of the region, not the Jews, and set immigration limits on Jews seeking entry to Palestine in the lead-up to, and during World War II.


- This is the transcript of an interview with Loy Henderson, where he discusses his role in the State Department between 1943-1948. During this time period he worked closely with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine.

Numerous Senators. Memo to President Harry Truman. June 20, 1946. Truman Library.

- This memo contains a 15 point argument from 9 senators that demands Truman immediately allows 100,000 Jewish refugees into Palestine. The points also contain demands for the clarification of Palestine’s immigration policy, and for immediate British action.

• This article explains that President Truman was frustrated with the British policy in Palestine because it was limiting his moral authority over the Soviets plans for Eastern Europe.


• This article explains the lengths that Harry Truman went to ensure that his plan for Palestine was not diverted by underlings in the State Department that did not agree with his plans. It shows the marked conflict that surrounded this issue.


• This newspaper article explains that the British had agreed to cooperate with the US on the issue of unifying Germany on the contingent that the US supported the Brits’ idea of partitioning Palestine. This was without Truman’s approval however.


• This letter lays out the goals of the American Council for Judaism in response to the Jewish refugee crisis after WWII. He explained that winter was causing the rapid deterioration of refugee camps and that a determination on Palestine was vital to getting Jews out of the camps. He also requested that the UN declare Palestine a non-religious state.


• Harry Truman is addressing the country on the United States position in the United Nations towards the State of Palestine. Britain’s Mandate was ending two months in the future from this speech and he is explaining the US support for the Trusteeship plan.


• This is the full document compiled by UNSCOP and presented to the General Assembly. It contains the bodies summation of the issues, suggestions for resolution, and their solutions regarding Jewish refugees.

Secondary Sources - Books


• This is one of the first definitive books to argue that Truman had not supported Israel for humanitarian purposes, but rather for domestic political purposes. Bain also argues that
Truman’s role in the entire process is misunderstood and the President is given far too much responsibility for the overall way the government handled the situation.


- This book is laying the foundation for my research by detailing the history of Palestine and the Western powers political stances towards it from about 1920-1950. It also looks at Harry Truman’s personal and professional views on Palestine during his presidency.


- This book is the first definitive take on Harry Truman’s motivations towards the foundation of Israel. It portrays him as a humanitarian looking to help the Jews that had just survived the Holocaust. It shaped the views that historians took of Truman and Israel for over a decade.


- This colossal book is an in-depth analysis of President Truman, from his early life until his death. This essay uses the book to focus on the development of Truman’s policies, and to analyze the scope through which he saw the world.


- This book analyzes the role that the American Zionist movement had on US foreign policy between 1942 and 1947. In this work it is used for the background to the American Zionist movement and its specific influence on President Truman.

Secondary Sources - Articles


- This article analyzes the account of White House Counsel Clark Clifford, one of the key members of Truman’s inner circle. Clifford, unlike many in Truman’s inner circle, was pro-Zionist, and his account offers a look at the positions of many of the key players that advised Truman throughout the entire process.

• This article addresses the Palestinian refugee crisis in the wake of the wars surrounding Israel’s establishment. Focus on Israeli policy that continues to refuse re-admittance of refugees families from this war to Palestine.


• This article details the evolution of America’s view of Israel as an ally after its establishment. It also discusses the development of American policy towards the establishment from 1945-1948. It is markedly critical of US policy.


• This article is a chronology of the actions taken by Harry Truman beginning in 1939 in regard to his eventual decision in regard to Israeli statehood.


• This journal article is a detailed explanation of the USSR’s role in the creation of the state of Israel. In this essay it is used to explain why the American’s fear of Soviet influence creeping into the Middle East as a result of their support for Israel was unfounded.


• This article provides an analysis of America’s current status in the Middle East and questions the role that Truman’s decision to support Israel played in the US legacy of the region.


• This article analyzes the displaced persons/refugee crisis in the wake of World War II with its focus on Jews in Europe. In this essay it provides background knowledge for broader refugee crisis.


• This article examines the scope of the foreign policy decisions that aided Truman and his staff on their support of the foundation of Israel. It analyzes the broad foreign policy goals of the era and the specific goals that his plan for Palestine had.

Images
Palestine and Trans-Jordan, 1922. “Dartmouth College, Middle East Maps,”
https://www.dartmouth.edu/~gov46/pal-transjrdn-1922.gif

- This map shows the area of British control in the Middle East, focused on Palestine and Trans-Jordan.

Partition Plan, November 29, 1947. Myths and Facts
http://www.mythsandfacts.org/replyonlineedition/chapter-4.html

Israel after Armistice Agreement 1949. Jewish Virtual Library.
http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/israel49.html