

A JOINT PROJECT OF THE SOVIET UNION AND THE USA ON THE EVE OF THE COLD WAR

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Abstract: In this article is described the collaboration supported by the United States of America and the Soviet Union to solve the problem of the creation of Israel's State. There are described the diplomatic mechanisms, the taken initiatives and the effects of the same ones in the dynamics of the Palestinian question. The UN resolution dated 29th November 1947 contained passages about the creation of both states within ten months but as superpowers did not press for the creation of the independent Palestinian state along with the independent Jewish state the possibility of securing long-term stability for the Middle East was lost.

Keywords: USA, URSS, Palestina, Israel.

The Jewish people are a nation repeatedly scattered by their history. The very cradle of this nation, its symbolic heart and soul is the Holy Land. Political Zionism based the Jewish people's rights for the land of Palestine on historical arguments, justifying the necessity of Israel state with the passages of the Bible. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding Prime Minister would often refer to the Scriptures as "our land register". When Zionists reacquired the territory of Palestine nearly two thousand years after Jerusalem was destroyed, they spoke of a return to the land of their Biblical heritage (Gen 17:8) and of liberation from the Arab/Muslim occupation which lasted more than a millennium. A group of Zionists, whose main aim in life was to return home after two thousand years of exile, devoted themselves to the idea that Israel be established on ancient land – a few indeed added they were carrying out the will of the Almighty. Palestinian Arabs however, who saw Zionism as a false ideology, failed to understand the arguments and claims of the Jewish people as it was not Arabs but Roman conquerors that had levelled Jerusalem

and had driven out the Jews from Palestine eighteen centuries before, in 70 AD. Rome was in turn succeeded by Byzantium and it was only after the Prophet's death and the fall of the Byzantine rule that the territory passed under Arab control. Palestine started to become an increasingly Islamised Arab territory only after these events. From the end of the 19th century both Zionists and Arabs in the area repeatedly gave voice to the deep-seated wish to return to circumstances and conditions of historical times. The initial step in this process, ie. determining what point in time should be returned to, is nevertheless a primary source of conflict. Since the historical scale of events here is measured in centuries or millennia, it seems to be impossible to avoid entering into a downward spiral of claims and demands. Great Britain's policy regarding Palestine essentially proved to be unacceptable for the Arabs and most of the Zionists living in the area as early as the second half of the 1930s. Increasingly outspoken and sharp criticism against British guardianship was heard both from Arabs and Zionists in the years before and during World War II. After the Zionist Congress at the Biltmore Hotel, New York, in May 1942, Zionists clearly made efforts to force the British to abandon Palestine. Britain went through several lean years after World War II: everyday life in the country was plagued by the shortage of fuel in addition to rationing, queueing and privation. British strategic and political interests would have demanded Palestinian territories to stay under British control but the policy regarding Palestine failed; the British decided to withdraw their mandate in February 1947 and transfer the supervision of the Palestinian problem to the UN. In the subsequent twelve months the British were almost completely occupied with the task of withdrawing troops from India, Ceylon, Burma and, finally, Palestine.

Neither of the opposing parties in Palestine seemed to be willing to reach an agreement: Palestinian Arabs did not have a reason, while Zionists were not in the position to compromise. Jewish and Arab interests diverged to such a degree that a fair solution based on general consensus was widely thought to be impossible. Agreement by negotiation and mutual concessions was also not to be expected.

Since the area was becoming a buffer zone for superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union urged the political settlement of the problem. Several schemes came to light regarding the independence of Palestine in spring 1947: the plan of an Arab state with two ethnic groups was discussed along with the idea to establish a district-based system. The United States was in favour of the division of Palestine and the formation of the independent Jewish state. The Soviet Union supported the initiative of an independent state with two ethnic groups in the territory of Palestine but then Andrei Gromiko, the first Soviet ambassador to the UN, who had witnessed the Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam meetings of 'the three Great' as a Soviet Foreign Office clerk, officially declared in May 1947 that the Soviet Union was ready to accept a two-state proposal as long as economic unity between the two newly formed countries was maintained. The territory of Palestine is indeed not sufficiently large for two nations; the division scheme was thus reasonably considered by many as totally absurd. At the same time, it was this proposal that the two superpowers came to agree on. Although the atmosphere of the region was no less than explosive, the US and the Soviet Union only managed to reach an agreement of principles and took no steps beyond this to ensure peaceful passage into independence for both the Arab and the Jewish state.

The history and fortunes of the Jewish state thus bear the mark of United States policy from the mid-1940s. This pro-Zionist policy at the time was personified by President Harry S. Truman, who firmly supported Zionists in their struggle for independence and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Introducing the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, the United States halted the stream of immigrants arriving from the Eastern part of Europe, leaving only a very small opening at its gates for immigrants. These doors were not to be opened wider for those wishing to escape anti-semitism during Hitler's

times, either. Instead, Americans channelled Jewish immigration in the direction of Palestine. The United States continued its policy to cut out Jewish immigration in the post-war years as the 1924 quota was still valid in 1965, more than four decades later. At the same time the superpower took a firm stand against any British restrictions concerning the settlement of Jewish refugees in Palestine. At the end of August 1945 President Truman asked the British government to immediately receive a hundred thousand European Jewish immigrants in Palestine. It was not only the numerous and influential American Jewish community that stood behind this type of policy. A significant part of American citizens came to support the cause of Israel out of a sense of guilt and remorse towards the Jewish people. There were also some who were driven to back the Jewish state precisely because they were anti-semitic: they believed this would put an end to Jewish immigration into the United States once and for all.

The American Jewish community took a few effective steps within the circles of US officials; President Truman publicly committed himself to the cause of a Jewish state in Palestine as early as autumn 1946. As opposed to a hundred and fifty years of seclusion, the American continent at the time no longer existed in lofty isolation. The United States, although geographically distant from the Middle East, was by now actively involved in the events of the region. In addition to the very large war damage compensation paid by the Germans, the economy of the Jewish state was set afoot by financial aid from Washington and the affluent American Jewish community after 1948. The unshakeably strong American-Israeli allegiance, however, dates back only to the years following the Suez crisis.

It was not sympathy for the Jewish people that drove the Soviet Union to openly support the cause of an independent Jewish state in May 1947. Up to Stalin's death (1953) the Soviet Union did not show particular interest in the affairs of the Middle East. Stalin on the other hand was convinced that he needed to keep an eye on Great Britain in this region, as well. Soviet Russia and later the Soviet Union considered Great Britain its primary opponent in the first half of the 20th century. The Soviet leaders still failed to conceive of the growing power of the United States in global politics in 1947; thus they concentrated on weakening the old rival, Great Britain. A few more years had to

pass before the Soviets realised that Britain was hopelessly struggling in the Middle East. Anti-British Soviet sentiments in the Middle East are clearly shown by the fact that in August 1947 Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Nukrashi effortlessly convinced the Soviet leaders to represent the Egyptian political aim in the UN General Assembly to terminate British military presence in Egypt¹.

Putting an end to British presence in the Middle East was not the single reason for the Soviet Union to consider its vested interest the formation of an independent state with two ethnic groups or the division of Palestine into an independent Jewish and an independent Arab state. Since one of the Soviets' primary goals was to turn the political map of the world full red, they saw a potential Communist ally in the Jewish community of the region: a significant part of these Jewish people were dedicated leftists. After a few years it became evident for the Soviets that Israeli "socialism" based on the social democrat trade union Histadrut (which was a decisive power factor among Jews in Palestine) and on the kibbutz movement failed to live up to expectations. They also had to face disappointment in their hopes for an Israel cooperating with the Soviet Union to diminish the influence of Western countries in the Middle East.

In spite of disagreement between Arabs and Zionists, the matter of the independent Jewish state did not get stuck in the UN in 1947. The propaganda work carried out by the Jewish Agency at international organisations to weaken and discredit the Arab position proved to be successful.

The Palestine affair was discussed at a UN General Assembly meeting in autumn 1947. The newly founded worldwide organisation passed one of the most significant decisions of the recent historical past on 29th November 1947 with thirty-three votes in favour, thirteen against and ten abstaining: Palestine was split into an Arab and a Jewish state. UN Resolution No. 181 set the territory of the Jewish State in fourteen thousand and a hundred square kilometres (fifty-five percent of Palestine) with a population of half a million Jewish people, four hundred thousand Arabs and an entirely disregarded Bedouin community counting several ten thousand. The Arab State was to be established on a territory of eleven thousand and a hundred square kilometres (forty-five percent of

Palestine), populated by seven hundred twenty-five thousand Arabs and ten thousand Jews.

Jerusalem and surroundings, counting approximately a hundred thousand Jews and as many Arabs was given neutral status as an international zone (*corpus separatum*). The proposal was drawn up with a blind eye to demographic circumstances as well as issues of land possession and the officials who laid it out exhibited a highly creative way of handling statistical data. At the time the resolution was passed as little as six percent of Palestinian land had been bought by Jewish people. Moreover, it was not Palestinians but Syrians and Lebanese owning real estate in Palestine that topped the list of sales.

Due to the fact that two-thirds of Palestine's population were Arabs the independent Jewish state should have been established as a Jewish and Arab one. Zionist leaders on the other hand only considered the forming of a sovereign Jewish state as an acceptable option. Ben-Gurion, wishing to establish an independent state for ten million Jews saw the territory proposed in the UN resolution as unacceptably small. From the very start he conceived of the borderlines set by the UN General Assembly as encompassing but a core of a country for all Jews, which will perforce have to be expanded. The UN settlement plans were accepted by the Jewish Agency, which, under the leadership of Ben-Gurion pressed for the rapid establishment of a state. Although Zionists were dissatisfied with the division lines contained in the UN resolution, they considered them sufficient to anchor future plans. This means that the passing of UN General Assembly resolution No. 181 coincided with the birth of a programme in Zionist leaders' minds to expand territorial boundaries. They considered expansion inevitable; wars had to be faced even if they demanded a major sacrifice from the Jewish population.

The international community gave its support to Zionism in 1947 and created a new situation in global politics. The independence that was granted by the international community to Israel without the consent of the Arab political communities in the region caused a political landslide with effects rather difficult to estimate at the given time. With this decision the superpowers pumped an amount of tension into the Middle Eastern region to last until the

present day and there is no way of knowing what consequences might arise in the future.

The Jewish state owes its existence primarily to the United States and the Soviet Union but on 29th November 1947 several Latin-American countries also voted for the creation of an independent Israel. The neighbouring Muslim Arab countries sharply rejected both the seemingly compromise-oriented resolution for division and the existence of Israel on Palestinian territory: they were appalled to the extent of risking the anger of the international community by refusing to accept the unjust division. Arab leaders rolling out a series of passionate and offended speeches, at times mixing in overtones of threat and intimidation hoped that Zionists would be unable to carry out the resolution for division. As soon as the last words of the UN General Assembly debate died away, and the resolution was made public, armed conflict commenced in the territory of Palestine and within weeks, war was afoot: Jewish paramilitary troops in Palestine soon seized areas not designated for Jews; at the same time, Arab commandos were carrying out attacks against Jewish targets². While in December 1947 the Arab countries passed a decision at the Cairo session of the Arab League to employ regular troops if necessary to prevent the implementation of the UN resolution, as a result of aggressive action by legal and semi-legal Zionist military units Palestinians and Palestinian Arabs felt unsafe in their own homeland and started a wave of mass immigration, a veritable exodus from the land of Palestine. Seven to eight hundred thousand Palestinian Arabs were reduced to homelessness and poverty within a year. This was in fact the realisation of the fifty-year dream of Zionist settlers: the relocation of Arabs³, or, in Theodor Herzl's words, their removal.

Israel is the first large-scale project of the UN and one of its most ambitious. It is a commonplace to say that each resolution and agreement is valid to the extent it is observed. This maxim is especially true with respect to the post-war decades of the Middle East. According to the Charter of the United Nations the UN General Assembly resolutions are merely recommendations and not acts of mandatory force complemented by a set of legal sanctions. The international legitimisation of Israel's existence still rests on the recommendatory resolution No. 181, which was not to be accepted by opposing parties either at the time it

was issued or decades later, and which could not have come into effect in the legal sense of the phrase. Ben-Gurion nevertheless pointed to this resolution when he declared the Jewish state, saying that it had given the legal frame for independence and utterly disregarding it whenever it came to questioning Israel about designated borders. Although Israel was created under the aegis of the UN, it is still a matter of dispute from the point of international law whether a Jewish state was ever created, how it was created, and if it exists, what its territory might be. Whatever happened in Palestine in the years 1947 and 1948 came to pass in the field of superpower political games. Political and moral issues pushed international law into the background. As decisions were not made locally but by superpowers, the Jewish state gained international recognition following its declaration. The actual decisionmakers made every effort to spread a cloak of legality over procedures in order to disperse doubts raised by international law about the creation of the Jewish state. Processes were controlled to seemingly harmonise with extant international law and the three principles in international law on the criteria for statehood: recognition, actuality and the right of self-determination. Recognition by the United States was undoubtedly premature as the creation of the new state was uncertain at this time. Truman made his decision in opposition to his State Secretary's legal stance, which deemed the recognition of a new state an interference with the affairs of a pre-existing one until a stable and effective government was formed⁴.

The Jewish state created with the consent of the United States and the Soviet Union was sheer insufferability for resident Arabs, whose resistance was now viewed by Israel as rebellion to be suppressed by way of reprisal. In disputing the existence of Israel state, the Arab countries in the Middle East at the time argued that the Palestinian Arab right of state to self-determination was no less valid than any other nation's right of self-government and considered it unacceptable that legal arguments always favoured the victorious countries in the international political arena.

Arab politicians appealing to the right of people to self-government regarded the international community's 29th November 1947 resolution on dissolution invalid as it was passed without observing the right of word for the Arab inhabitants of the region and without previous

consultation with Arabs. The unanimous opposition of the six Arab UN member states (Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen) had also been completely disregarded. The Arabs would not hear of a Jewish state in the territory of Palestine and considered it unacceptable for a people living in diaspora to possess the right of self-government exclusive to in situ nations and the overt practising of the right of self-government at the expense of another nation.

Israel was created by denying Palestinian Arabs their right of self-government although the mandatory system replacing the openly colonial structure had been designed to prepare inhabitants for self-government during the transitory period of international control. A peculiar paradox manifested itself in the region in 1947-48: the West failed to carry out its mission of legal protection in Palestine but was able to put into effect a UN General Assembly dissolution resolution, which had no mandatory force in international law as it contained no obligation but merely a recommendation. The Arabs could not hold up Zionist expansion just as they had been unable to resist mandatory policies.

The UN resolution dated 29th November 1947 contained passages about the creation of both states within ten months but as superpowers did not press for the creation of the independent Palestinian state along with the independent Jewish state the possibility of securing long-term stability for the Middle East was lost.

NOTES

¹ Podeh, Elie-Winckler, Onn (eds.), *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*. Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2004, 232.

² Goldschmidt, Arthur, *A Concise History of the Middle East*. Boulder, Westview Press; Folkestone, Dawson, 1979.

³ For a detailed discussion of the transfer problem see: Israeli historian Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*.

⁴ Crawford, James, *The Creation of States in International Law*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, 434, 235.