



## REVISITING THE UNGA PARTITION RESOLUTION

WALID KHALIDI

*This article examines the 1947 UN resolution recommending the partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state as the fulfillment of fifty years of Zionist efforts to establish a Jewish state in Palestine and as the opportunity to expand that state. The article analyzes the components of the partition plan itself in the light of the demographic and land ownership realities of the time and discusses the implications to the present day of the general acceptance of the Zionist version of events.*

IT IS A PLATITUDE OF HISTORIOGRAPHY that victors in war get away with both the loot and the version of events—a version that they bequeath not only to their own posterity, but to friends and foes alike. This platitude has resounding resonance on the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution of 29 November 1947 recommending the partition of Palestine. The partition resolution meant, in effect, the establishment of a Zionist state on Palestinian soil irrespective of the wishes of the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants and was taken by the Zionist leadership as a green light to launch their long-contemplated and delayed conquest of such a state. To most Westerners, thoroughly imbued with the Zionist version of events, this last statement would seem shockingly wrongheaded. But so it would to many young Western-educated Palestinians, thus attesting to the potency and relevance of platitudes of historiography.

In retrospect, and in the light of half a century of contemplation, what is most striking about the Zionist version of the background, nature, circumstances, and aftermath of the 1947 partition resolution is the extent to which it has become the paradigm or lens through which the entire history of the Palestine problem and the Zionist-Arab conflict prior and subsequent to the resolution itself is viewed and judged. To verify this proposition, one has only to recall how consistently and how often in books, articles, conference papers, editorials, op-eds, readers' letters, group discussions, or even private conversations relative to the Palestine problem—and nowadays the Middle East peace process—the UN 1947 partition resolution is explicitly or by implication (if only prefatorily) assumed to be the defining moment in which a

---

WALID KHALIDI, a founder of The Institute for Palestine Studies and its general secretary, has taught at Oxford University, the American University of Beirut, and Harvard University. From 1982 to 1996, he was senior research fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard.

legal, moral, fair, balanced, pragmatic, practicable (albeit with minor blemishes and flaws) "compromise" formula for the resolution of the conflict was accepted by one party in a statesmanlike and accommodating mode and brusquely rejected by the other for reasons difficult to fathom but assumed to be rooted in the arcane realms of religious or cultural atavism.

### HISTORICAL AMNESIA

So defining a moment has this 1947 UNGA partition resolution become in the victor's version of events that a collective amnesia has descended to obliterate all its antecedents in the distant, intermediate, and more immediate pasts. It is as though the partition resolution were the *fons et origo* of the Palestine problem rather than the catastrophic (for the Palestinians) culmination of everything that had preceded it since the birth of political Zionism.

Thus, starting with the distant past, no correlation is entertained or attempted between the partition resolution and that real and clearly definable starting point of the modern conflict: the Basel Program at the First Zionist Congress in 1897. The hidden agenda of that program, formulated some fifty years before the 1947 UN resolution and long before the Holocaust, is explicated with brutal frankness and in classical imperialist fashion in Theodor Herzl's little-publicized draft for a "Charter" for the colonization of Palestine.<sup>1</sup>

Nor is any correlation entertained or attempted between the 1947 UN resolution and its intermediate antecedent, the prolonged nightmare of the British rule (1917-47) during which the leading Western democratic country suspended democracy in Palestine to facilitate, with bayonets, the laying down of the infrastructure of Zionist power in the country in the teeth of mounting Palestinian resistance. Equally forgotten in historical invisibility is the crushing by British military might of the desperate Palestinian national rebellion<sup>2</sup> against the Royal Commission (Peel) Report of 1937 calling for the partition of the country and the consequent destruction of all effective Palestinian political and military organizations.

Forgotten, too, is the crystallization during this same period of Zionist thinking vis-à-vis the Palestinians, particularly in the person of the paramount leader, David Ben-Gurion, as attested by his foremost biographer, Shabatai Teveth. It is to Teveth that we owe our knowledge that, as early as 1936, Ben-Gurion had decided that the only relationship possible with the Palestinians was a "military" one, since they would not accept a Jewish majority nor unrestricted Jewish immigration<sup>3</sup>—this at a time when the Jews constituted not much more than a quarter of the population.<sup>4</sup> Teveth also informs us that Ben-Gurion, inspired by the Peel Report, which he accepted, considered "a Jewish state in part of Palestine [Peel's suggestion] as a stage in the longer process towards a Jewish state in all of Palestine." Lecturing to Mapai activists on 29 October 1937, Ben-Gurion explained that the realization of the Jewish state would come in two stages: the first, "the period of

building and laying foundations," would last ten to fifteen years and would be but the prelude to the second stage, "the period of expansion." The objective in both stages was "the ingathering of the exiles in all of Palestine."<sup>5</sup> It is because of these views, Teveth tells us, that Ben-Gurion made no attempt to contact Palestinian leaders after 1936.<sup>6</sup>

We also learn from the official history of the Haganah that in the summer of 1937, ten years before the UN partition resolution, Ben-Gurion ordered the Haganah commander of Tel Aviv, Elimelech Slikowitz ("Avnir"), to draw up a plan for the military takeover of the entire country in anticipation of Britain's withdrawal from Palestine expected in the wake of the Peel Report. (It is curious that no Zionist history in English of which I am aware makes any mention of the "Avnir plan," the model for Plan Dalet some ten years later, although its Hebrew source helpfully provides a map of the military stages of the envisaged conquest of Palestine.<sup>7</sup>) Equally illuminating for this period is the persistent preoccupation of the top echelons of Zionist leadership with the modalities of the "transfer" (euphemism for ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population from any future Jewish state).<sup>8</sup>

---

*In the summer of 1937, Ben-Gurion ordered the Haganah commander of Tel Aviv to draw up a plan for the military take-over of the country in anticipation of Britain's withdrawal.*

---

As for the immediate antecedents of the partition resolution, they, too, are forgotten. No correlation is attempted between the partition plan and the relentlessly ruthless campaign of terror against the British (erstwhile architects of the Jewish National Home) by both the Haganah and the so-called "dissident" Irgun (IZL) and Stern (Lehi) organizations carried out between 1945 and 1947. Lehi, of course, had started earlier and had established links with Nazi Germany as of 1940 on the grounds that Britain was the greater enemy, whereas the Irgun (led by Menachem Begin, recently arrived in Palestine from Poland) unleashed operations against the British in Palestine even as British forces under General Montgomery were probing the Western defenses of the Nazi heartland in Central Europe. To be sure, the Haganah under Ben-Gurion tried selectively to keep its distance from the "dissidents," but this did not inhibit it from carefully orchestrated joint operations with them against British "targets" in Palestine in 1946. It was during this period that an innovative array of tactics was first introduced into the Middle East by the Zionist forces, including letter bombs, parcel bombs, vehicular bombs (the ultimate weapon in urban warfare), the whipping and lynching of British soldier hostages, booby-trapping their corpses, and electrically detonated mines against civilian targets.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to these tactics, which culminated in the attack on the Mandatory headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem on 22 July 1946, in which 41 Arabs, 17 Jews, and 28 Englishmen<sup>10</sup> were blown to smithereens, an all-pervasive atmosphere of terror seized the Palestinian civilian population—a presumably not unintended effect. It was this same atmosphere that propelled the British government, with its garrison of 100,000 crack troops (in-

cluding the elite Sixth Airborne Division of World War II Arnhem fame)<sup>11</sup> to call it quits, particularly as the other arm of the Zionist grand strategy constituted continuous, cumulative pressure via the new American president, Harry Truman, who had succeeded Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945.

The Jewish campaign against the British did not mean that Ben-Gurion considered his relationship with the British to be a "military" one or that he sought an all-out confrontation with them. Quite the contrary, we are assured by Teveth that he saw the relationship as an exclusively "political" one.<sup>12</sup> In other words, all Ben-Gurion wanted from Britain at this stage was to clear out of the way so that he could pursue his "military" relationship with the Palestinians and the Arab countries. And pursue it he did, with the method, the deliberation, and the single-mindedness with which he was supremely endowed, in a massive program of arms acquisition and military buildup, including purchases initiated in 1945 with American Jewish tax-exempt contributions from the U.S. War Assets Administration of heavy military industrial machinery sold as scrap.<sup>13</sup> All this is amply documented in the official history of the Haganah and in Ben-Gurion's own memoirs.

That Ben-Gurion's sights were set on war is no inference or conjecture. To quote Teveth yet again, Ben-Gurion was determined as early as 1942 to remove Chaim Weizmann from the presidency of the World Zionist Organization (an objective which he achieved at the twenty-second Zionist Congress in August 1946) because he considered him "incapable of guiding Zionism down the tortuous road to a state and was not built to lead the Yishuv or the nation in the war to establish it."<sup>14</sup> No less indicative of Ben-Gurion's intent on war is the series of military plans (A, B, C, and D), but particularly Plan Dalet (D), the refined version of the 1937 "Avnir plan" and the new master plan for the conquest of Palestine which Ben-Gurion ordered Haganah's General Staff to draw up during the period.<sup>15</sup>

Another crucial and ignored factor in the immediate background of the partition resolution is President Truman's persistent harassment of and pressure on Britain during 1945-46 "to let as many Jews into Palestine as it is possible to let into the country," as he put it soon after his return from the Potsdam Conference in 1945.<sup>16</sup> He subsequently scaled this down to the immediate admission of 100,000 Jews on the grounds, according to his daughter, that "with 600,000 Jews and over 2,000,000 Arabs in Palestine, another 100,000 would not unbalance the population."<sup>17</sup> But it was his use of this demand as a battering ram against the British and his public support on Yom Kippur (4 October 1946) for a Jewish Agency plan for partitioning Palestine that destroyed all possibility of Anglo-American cooperation in the resolution of the Palestine problem (the only hope of a relatively peaceable outcome). This contributed decisively to Britain's resolve to abandon the Mandate and remove itself as a buffer between Jew and Palestinian—a strategic objective of Ben-Gurion's at least since 1939.

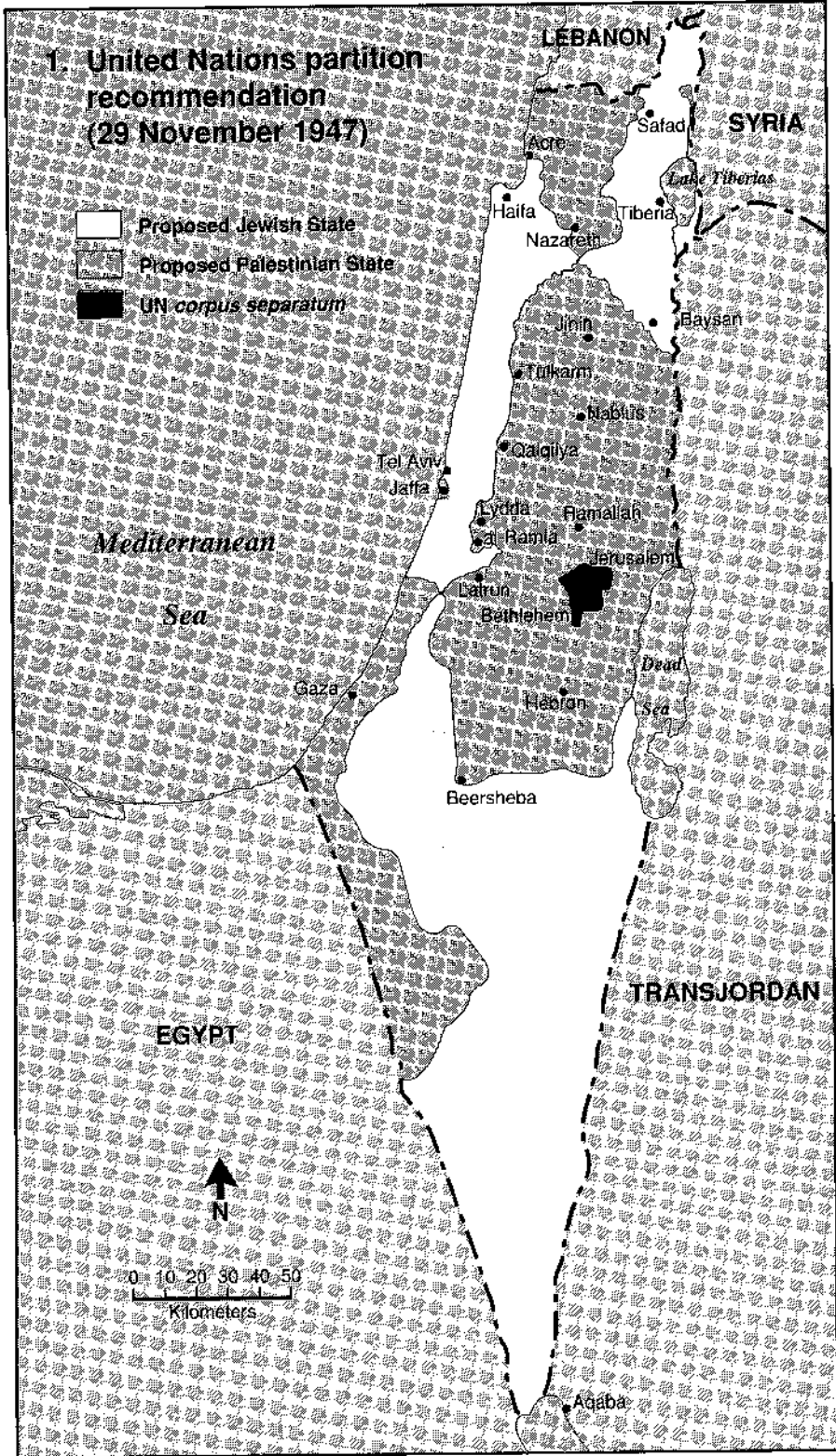
It has been stressed by Truman himself and others that the policy line he took on Palestine during 1945-47 was motivated largely by human consider-

ations for the Jewish refugees in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Even forgetting that 1948 was his first presidential election year, one would have been less skeptical had Truman simultaneously urged the admission of Jewish refugees into the United States. In the years 1932–43, the vast continent of the United States had received 170,883 Jews, while the minuscule Palestine had received 232,524 during the same period.<sup>18</sup> An opportunity for the United States to share the burden with other nations presented itself at the United Nations in the general debate on the report of the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) preceding the UNGA partition resolution. UNSCOP, which had been sent to the Middle East earlier in 1947, had unanimously recommended that the Jewish refugee problem be considered an “international responsibility.” Neither the UN as a whole nor the United States as its paramount leader rose to the moral occasion.

### PARTITION WITHOUT CONSENT

No, the UN 1947 partition was not the legal, moral, fair, balanced, pragmatic, practicable “compromise” formula that it is made out to be. That it was legal at all is moot. The UNGA altogether failed to address the very serious legal challenges posed by the Arab delegations in the form of draft resolutions submitted to the UNGA meeting to discuss the Palestine problem. The Arab delegations requested that before a decision be taken, the International Court of Justice be asked for its opinion on the following subjects: (a) whether or not Palestine was included in the Arab territories that had been promised independence by Britain at the end of World War I; (b) whether partition was consistent with the objectives and provisions of the Mandate; (c) whether partition was consistent with the principles of the UN Charter; (d) whether its adoption and forcible execution were within the competence or jurisdiction of the UN; and (e) whether it lay within the power of any UN member or group of members to implement partition without the consent of the majority of the people living within the country. The voting on the issue of UN competence to partition Palestine—a combination of (d) and (e)—is particularly instructive. The draft counter resolution that said that the UN *did* have the authority was carried by only 21 votes to 20 in the Ad Hoc Committee whose total membership was 57.<sup>19</sup>

Nor is there much evidence that moral considerations played a significant role in the pro-Zionist votes of the member states or that these were genuinely motivated to alleviate the plight of European Jewry. In the spirit of UNSCOP’s above-mentioned recommendation of international responsibility for the Jewish plight, the Arab delegations had proposed a draft resolution to the effect that “Jewish refugees and displaced persons . . . should be absorbed in the territories of members of the UN in proportion to their area, resources, per capita income, population, and other relevant factors.” The resolution in the UNGA, again meeting as an ad hoc committee, was not carried. The voting was 16 to 16, with 25 abstentions.<sup>20</sup>



Apropos the morality of the UN partition resolution, the arm-twisting tactics utilized by Washington to pressure the smaller nations to vote in its favor against their own inclinations and better judgment have been amply documented,<sup>21</sup> while even a cursory reading of the general debate preceding the vote reveals the serious moral misgivings about partition entertained by many of its proponents. Equally striking is the convergence of opinion about partition between the United States and the Soviet Union on the very eve of the cold war. It is left to the reader to impute considerations of compassion to Moscow, when its driving motive was to hasten Britain's withdrawal from one of its principal Middle Eastern strategic bases in Palestine.

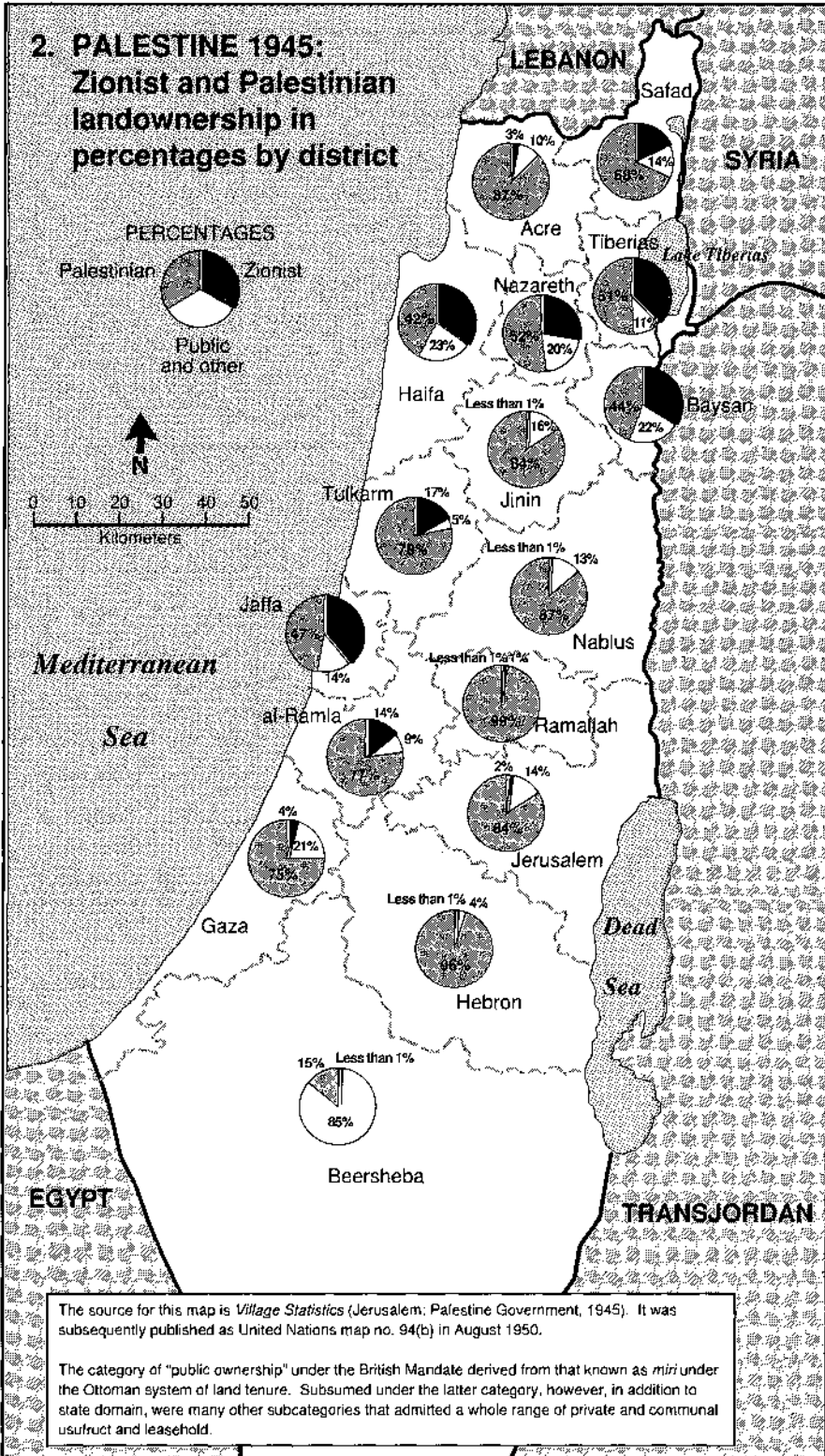
But how fair, balanced, pragmatic, and practicable was the UN 1947 partition plan itself? In gross terms, the partition resolution awarded 55.5 percent of the total area of Palestine to the Jews (most of whom were recent immigrants) who constituted less than a third of the population and who owned less than 7 percent of the land. The Palestinians, on the other hand, who made up over two thirds of the population and who owned the vast bulk of the land, were awarded 45.5 percent of the country of which they had enjoyed continuous possession for centuries.

Looking at the situation in greater detail, Palestine was a country of 27 million dunams (4 dunams = 1 acre). Its population in December 1946 was just under 2 million (1,972,000): 1,364,000 Palestinians and 608,000 Jews.<sup>22</sup> The partition plan divided the country into eight sections: three Jewish, three Palestinian, an international enclave (*corpus separatum*) including municipal Jerusalem and the surrounding villages, and an enclave for Jaffa that would be part of the Palestinian state, albeit completely surrounded by the Jewish state (see map 1).

In terms of population, the proposed Palestinian state would have 818,000 Palestinians (including the 71,000 Palestinians of the Jaffa enclave) and less than 10,000 Jews. The Jerusalem enclave would have 105,000 Palestinians and 100,000 Jews. The Jewish state would have about 499,000 Jews and about 438,000 Palestinians; if the Jaffa enclave, totally encapsulated by the Jewish state, had been included, as had originally been proposed by UNSCOP, the Palestinians would have outnumbered the Jews in the Jewish state as well (see map 2).<sup>23</sup>

At the time, one of the arguments frequently raised by the Jews against a unitary state in Palestine had been the unfairness of Arab majoritarian rule over the Jewish minority. Commenting on this argument, the Pakistani delegate at the UN, Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, remarked: "If it is unfair that 33 percent of the population of Palestine [the Jews in the proposed unitary state] should be subject to 67 percent of the population, is it less unfair that 46 percent of the population [the Arabs in the proposed Jewish state] should be subject to 54 percent?"<sup>24</sup>

Examining the three components of the envisaged Jewish state, one notes that in the southern sector—the Negev—the Jews numbered 1,020 whereas the Arabs numbered 103,820. In other words, the entire sector was given to 1





percent of its population. In the northern sector—Eastern Galilee—the Palestinian population was three times greater than the Jewish population (86,200 as against 28,750). Only in the central sector—the coastal plain between Tel Aviv and Haifa and the inner plain (Esdrateon) southeast of Haifa—did Jews constitute a majority (469,259 as against 235,760 Palestinians). But even here, the majority in terms of geographic spread was more apparent than real. Out of the total Jewish population in this section, 304,000, or almost 65 percent, lived in Haifa and Tel Aviv. Thus, the Jews constituted a minority in the countryside of this sector as well.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of land ownership, despite over seventy years of intensive, centrally organized and internationally financed colonization since the early 1880s, Jewish-owned land on the eve of the partition resolution amounted, according to Jewish sources, to 1,820,000 dunams, or less than 7 percent of the total land area of the country.<sup>26</sup> Now, at the bang of his gavel confirming the partition resolution, the president of the UNGA (Trygve Lie, no friend of the Palestinians) “awarded” the Jews 15,000,000 dunams for the Jewish state. Within the borders of this state, Jewish-owned land at its most inflated estimate amounted to 1,678,000 dunams, or 11.2 percent. And of the 7,500,000 dunams within that state considered cultivable (the rest being desert), only 1,500,000 dunams were Jewish owned, while the remainder—fully 80 percent—was owned by Palestinians. Meanwhile, of the 12,000,000 dunams “awarded” to the Palestinian state, only 130,000 dunams—about 1 percent—were owned by Jews. Finally, the international enclave of Jerusalem would contain 187,000 dunams, virtually all of which would be alienated from the Palestinian state, since the Jews owned only 12,500 dunams there.<sup>27</sup>

But it was not only the extent of the land allotted to the Jewish state that was at issue. The *best* lands were incorporated within it—most of the fertile coastal plains (from Jaffa to Haifa) and *all* the interior plains (from Haifa to Baysan and Tiberias). These included almost all the citrus and cereal producing areas. Half of the former and the vast bulk of the latter were owned by Palestinians. Citrus was the main export crop of the country, accounting before World War II for 80 percent of the total value of exports. As to cereals, Palestine had already been obliged to import about half its grain.<sup>28</sup> Thus, alienating virtually the entire existing production areas of these two principal commodities from the predominantly agricultural Palestinian state-to-be constituted by itself an economic coup de grâce. As if this were not enough, a full 40 percent of Palestinian industry<sup>29</sup> and the major sources of the country’s electrical supply fell within the envisaged Jewish state.

Except for West Jerusalem, which fell within the *corpus separatum* and only about a quarter of which was Jewish-owned,<sup>30</sup> the frontiers of the Jewish state were delineated so as to accommodate not only 99 percent of the Jewish colonies but also all Jewish urban or suburban agglomerations with

---

*Despite over seventy years of intensive colonization, Jewish-owned land on the eve of the partition resolution amounted to less than 7 percent of the total land area of the country.*

---

plenty of surrounding areas for natural growth and expansion. Not so with regard to their Palestinian-inhabited counterparts. Of a total of about 800 Palestinian villages, at least half fell within the Jewish state. Jaffa (Palestinian population: 71,000), the historical Palestinian port and vibrant center of Palestinian cultural and social life, was not only confined within its municipal borders, with no living space for any growth or development, but was also cut off from the orange groves that bore its name and were its principal source of economic livelihood. Haifa—the main port of Palestine, the terminal of the oil pipeline from Iraq, the petroleum depot for the entire country, seat of the most active entrepreneurial sectors of Palestinian society with almost as many Palestinians as Jews (71,000 as opposed to 74,000)—fell squarely within the Jewish state. Many of the other major Arab towns included in the Palestinian state—Tulkarm and Qalqilya, Lydda and Ramla, Gaza, Majdal, and Bersheeba—were left just inside its borders but without their most fertile lands or economic hinterlands. The upper reaches of the Jordan River, and therefore control of the major source of riverine water supply to the Palestinian state, were vested in the Jewish state. The whole of Lake Tiberias and its rich fishing industry, traditionally in Palestinian hands, was incorporated within the Jewish state. The bulk of the Palestinian state, restricted to the central highlands, was landlocked with no direct access to the Red Sea southward or the Mediterranean westward. Its two other coastal towns (apart from isolated Jaffa) had no harbors or port facilities. The only airport (near Lydda) in the country with international connections went to the Jewish state, leaving the Palestinian state with no air access either. To be sure, partition was postulated on the basis of an economic union between the two states, but in the absence of a political agreement on the principles either of partition or an economic union, it was fatuous and extraordinarily irresponsible to tie the one to the other.

To put all the foregoing in some kind of comparative framework, one might, for example, look at the partition of India which was ongoing at the same time. In India, the areas in which the Muslims constituted more than 50 percent of the population were clearly delineated in the east, around Dacca, and in the northwest in the areas from Karachi to Lahore to the borders of Afghanistan. In Palestine, the bulk of the Jewish population (66.5 percent) was confined to three urban municipal areas (West Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa). In the countryside, the Jews had no territorial base akin to that of the Indian Muslims. Thus, in only one of the sixteen subdistricts of the country (Jaffa-Tel Aviv) did they constitute more than 50 percent of the population. In the remaining fifteen subdistricts, their percentages in descending order were: Haifa (47 percent), Jerusalem (38 percent), Tiberias (33 percent), Baysan (30 percent), Ramla (22 percent), Tulkarm (17 percent), Nazareth (16 percent), Safad (13 percent), Acre (4 percent), Gaza (2 percent), Bersheeba (less than 1 percent), Hebron (less than 1 percent), and 0 percent each in Jinin, Nablus, and Ramallah subdistricts. Thus, in India, partition was be-

tween two peoples, each *in situ* with its own territorial base. That is largely why the Hindu and Muslim leaderships in India, despite the deep reluctance on the part of the former, were able to reach an agreement on partition. This was not so in Palestine.

Lexicographically, a compromise is a "settlement by arbitration or by consent reached by mutual concessions."<sup>31</sup> It is an "arrangement of a dispute by concessions on both sides," a "partial surrender of one's position."<sup>32</sup> The distinctive ingredients of a compromise would seem to be consent, mutuality, and the circumscribed nature of what is to be surrendered to reach it. These ingredients are logically and substantively linked to one another. Mutuality in particular presupposes a certain symmetry in the quality of the reciprocated concessions. It is not easy to discern the contours of such a symmetry in the 1947 UNGA partition resolution. Even the proconsular Peel, for all his airs of what Burke called the "cold neutrality of an impartial judge," had seen in which direction the ostensible balance of concessions tilted. "Considering," he wrote in his report, "what the possibility of finding a refuge in Palestine means to many thousands of suffering Jews, we cannot believe that the distress occasioned by partition, great as it would be, is more than Arab generosity can bear."<sup>33</sup>

As to consent, it is incontestable that Zionist decision making had never been predicated on Palestinian consent—not at the time of the Basel Program (1897), the Balfour Declaration (1917) or its incorporation at San Remo into the Palestine Mandate (1920), or the Biltmore Program (1942)—indeed, not at any of the landmarks of the Zionist enterprise. Chaim Weizmann succinctly sums up the question of consent when he recounts his 1944 meeting with President Roosevelt: "I maintained the thesis that we could not rest our case on the consent of the Arabs; as long as their consent was asked, they would naturally refuse it."<sup>34</sup>

Thus, too, was absence of consent at the heart of the 1947 UNGA partition resolution. Ever since the Peel Report's recommendation of partition (itself much less radical than its UN successor) triggered a massive escalation in the Palestinian rebellion in 1937, there had been no illusions among the Zionist leadership or outside observers about the visceral and dedicated Palestinian resistance to the principle of partition. Similarly, all the members of the Arab League (with the exception of Transjordan) had unequivocally expressed their opposition to partition prior to the 1947 UNGA resolution. Nor were there any illusions among the Zionist leadership or any of the UN member states supporting partition that it could be implemented other than by the use of massive force in the face of Palestinian and Arab resistance. How else, in the absence of Palestinian and Arab consent, could the Zionist domain expand from 7 percent to 55.5 percent of the land of Palestine assigned to the Jewish state, a 900-percent increase in territory, thick with Palestinians?

### ZIONIST VERSION TRIUMPHANT

If the victor's version of the 1947 UN partition resolution served to obfuscate the relevant antecedents, it also served to enhance the already dominant image in the Western world of the pristine innocence of the Zionist protagonist, while deepening the perceived iniquity of the resolution's victim, the Palestinians.

The Zionists had been on the strategic offensive since 1897. And they had been so because it was they who from the start had bent every nerve in pursuit of a total revolution in the Palestinian status quo in terms of demography, land possession, intercommunal power balance, and sovereign political control. Indeed, their program qualifies as a prototypical example of Hans Morgenthau's preeminent non-Marxist definition of imperialism in modern Western international political theory.

From the Zionist viewpoint, partition was a giant stride toward the vindication of the movement's *raison d'être*. Its two core values—Jewish sovereignty and the "ingathering of the exiles"—were now within reach: the first immediately, the second more feasibly than ever. Indeed, ever since Peel, partition had become the tactical objective of the mainstream Zionist leadership as formulated by Ben-Gurion, while Revisionist Vladimir Jabotinsky's camp, which spawned Lehi and IZL, continued openly to advocate a Jewish state to be established by force on both banks of the River Jordan. To be sure, Ben-Gurion publicly veered toward Revisionist theses when in 1942 he drew up the Biltmore Program defining the Zionist objective as "the establishment of Palestine as a Jewish commonwealth" (as opposed to the partitionist concept of a Jewish commonwealth *in* Palestine). But by the spring of 1946 Ben-Gurion had reverted to the tactical espousal of partition, a posture maintained up to the 1947 UNGA resolution.

Thus partition, provided it involved a Jewish state in the greater part of Palestine (which the 1947 UNGA plan certainly did) was the public Zionist mainstream demand of the moment. In accepting the UNGA resolution—

---

*In accepting the UNGA resolution—even if the acceptance was genuine—the Zionists were in essence "accepting" their own demand.*

---

even if the acceptance were genuine—the Zionists were in essence "accepting" their own demand. It is difficult to see why a moral kudos appertains to the party that accepts its own program, and eternal opprobrium attaches to the party that rejects a transaction it perceives to threaten its national existence. A compromise does not come about if its putative provisions are congruent with the wishes of one side but

anathema to the other. Nor does it come about by declaration of the triumphant beneficiary and its third party supporters.

But was Ben-Gurion's "return" to partition in 1946–47 genuine? Was he really reconciled to the loss of Jerusalem in the *corpus separatum* and the noninclusion of Western Galilee and the Etzion Bloc near Hebron in the Jewish state? Even a superficial reading of the text of Plan Dalet would indi-

cate otherwise.<sup>35</sup> Here it is instructive to recall Ben-Gurion's reactions to Peel's proposals already noted.

Indeed, it was Ben-Gurion himself who at the time warned his colleagues against seeing his acceptance of partition as a concession. He explained that there was such a thing as "deep Zionism" and that there are stages in the understanding of Zionism. Teveth paraphrases Ben-Gurion's thoughts as follows: "Only those with deep Zionism would appreciate his doctrine of gradual implementation of the ideology. The Zionist vision could not be fulfilled in one fell swoop, especially the transformation of Palestine into a Jewish state. The stage-by-stage approach dictated by less than favorable circumstances required the formulation of objectives that appeared to be 'concessions' to Zionists at the lowest level of comprehension."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps also relevant in this regard is Ben-Gurion's entry in his diary of 14 May 1948, the eve of the establishment of Israel: "Take the American Declaration of Independence, for instance. . . . It contains no mention of the territorial limits. We are not obliged to state the limits of our State."<sup>37</sup>

Yet, as Ben-Gurion's Palmach battalions in the winter of 1947 were poised to pounce on fields they had not tilled and orchards they had not planted and towns and villages they had not built or lived in, the Zionists, by accepting the 1947 UN partition according to their own lights, also wrapped themselves in the sanctimonious garb of moral superiority as adherents, in a posture of self-defense, to the impartial will of the international community. By the same token, the Palestinians, who since 1897 had stood in dread of occupation and displacement by an alien people, for whom partition was the negation of their elemental birthright to the territorial integrity of their ancestral homeland, and who were now at the receiving end of a more predatory partition plan than Peel's ten years earlier, were dubbed the aggressors for not meekly submitting to the dismemberment of their country.

This extraordinary reversal of the fundamental relationship of the two protagonists to the UN 1947 partition resolution had many consequences. It enabled the Zionists to gloss over to this day their primary historic responsibility for the flight and expulsion of some 750,000 Palestinian townspeople and villagers and proffered a ready alibi from any moral obligation toward them. It removed until recently from serious scrutiny their occupation of some 518 Palestinian villages and twelve towns and their total destruction of some 400 of these villages.<sup>38</sup> It accorded "legitimacy" to their wholesale confiscation of this vast windfall of moveable and immovable Palestinian properties and their distribution as war loot among citizens of the new state. Above all, it became a justificatory umbrella for all subsequent Israeli actions, including the ongoing colonization of the occupied territories since 1967. With few exceptions, even the younger generation of Israeli revisionist historians are still unable to look this defining moment of 1947 fully in the face, and when considering it or its aftermath take cover instead behind the bush of military exigencies and their allegedly unintended civilian outcomes.

Ironically, a new generation of Western-educated Arabs, including not a few Palestinian historians (children or grandchildren of the 1947–48 victims themselves) have succumbed under constant bombardment by the Zionist version of events to the cathartic temptation of hindsight. Through this prism, they see features of the 1947 UN partition resolution that no contemporaneous Palestinian eyes could conceivably have recognized. This trend received added momentum after Madrid when, with political correctness in the ascendant, it was fashionable to lament the negativism of one's parents and grandparents in 1947. The fact that some four decades and seven Israeli-Arab wars later the Palestinians and other Arab leaderships have come to accept partition (and a much smaller Palestinian state than envisioned in the 1947 UN partition plan) as a pragmatic solution to put a ceiling on the suffering of the Palestinian people is no retrospective endorsement of the UN plan and its premises, nor a belated affirmation of its feasibility in 1947. Rather, it is a reminder of the poignancy of human attachment to territorial roots.

### IMPLICATIONS OF PARTITION

Only full Anglo-American cooperation in the years 1945–47 stood a chance of sponsoring a negotiated settlement. This was not so unthinkable between the two closest Western allies of World War II. Although opposed to partition, the countries of the Arab League pinned all their hopes during this period on diplomacy. None of them was even on speaking terms with the Soviet Union. None had made preparations for war. All were friendly to the United States.

But Anglo-American cooperation was impossible because of the manner in which Truman, innocent of all knowledge of the Middle East (or even of the number of Palestinians in the country) and paranoically suspicious of his own State Department, had chosen to handle the issue. This, combined with Zionist terrorism, caused Britain to opt out by referring the problem to the United Nations and to decide after the UN partition resolution to end the Mandate on 15 May 1948.

With Britain dismantling a thirty-year administration and pulling out its troops from the entire country within six months while refusing to implement partition, the buffer between Zionist and Palestinian was gone. With no successor power to hold the balance between the local protagonists and no negotiated settlement to regulate their relations and given their known respective intentions, all the cumulative pent-up feelings between them since 1897 were foreseeably bound to explode to the surface. In the contemporaneously analogous Indian situation, even with prior formal agreement under the British aegis on the principle of partition between the Muslim and Hindu leaderships, a relatively distinguishable division of the subcontinent into predominantly Muslim and Hindu provinces facilitating in theory their division, the existence of a vast Anglo-Indian army under British command and a

British viceroy in India to supervise the transition, pandemonium broke loose under the trauma of partition.

In Palestine, Ben-Gurion had achieved his specific objective of removing Britain from the scene. He had the support for partition of the two super-powers in his pocket. His military forces were at the ready. The frontiers of a Jewish state, far larger than Peel's, were already delineated on the UN map, and a green light was blazing from the United Nations headquarters. There was no restraining him.

This, and not who fired the "first shot," was the crucial determinant of subsequent events. Assuming the alleged first shot had not been fired by the Palestinians, is it really conceivable that no first shot would have been fired by the Haganah or by Lehi or IZL (both of which openly opposed partition and as openly insisted on the whole of "Eretz Israel") in the process of taking over the greater part of Palestine, which is what the 1947 UN partition resolution was all about?

\* \* \*

None of the foregoing was meant as an exercise in dredging up the past as an end in itself. The Arabs and Palestinians are committed to a peace process that could establish the basis of permanent coexistence between them and Israel. Madrid and Oslo are the starting points of such a process, despite the flaws of the latter, provided both Israel and Washington are equally in earnest about it. No lasting reconciliation is possible, however, if its ingredients are torn out of their historical context and based on a meretricious narrative of the past. It is in this spirit that this paper was written on this the fiftieth anniversary of the UN 1947 resolution, which ended one major phase of travail for Palestinians and inaugurated the one that is with us to this day.

## NOTES

1. See Walid Khalidi, "The Jewish-Ottoman Land Company: Herzl's Blueprint for the Colonization of Palestine," *JPS* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 30-47.

2. The rebellion started in May 1936 but was suspended in November when the Peel Commission arrived in the country. It was resumed, with increased violence, after the publication in July 1937 of Peel's report and lasted until the summer of 1939.

3. Shabatai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs: From Peace to War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 193.

4. In 1936, the Jewish population was 382,857 out of a total population of 1,388,852. See Justin McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

5. Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, pp. 189-90.

6. *Ibid.*, 164, 193.

7. Dinur Benzion, ed. *Sefer Toldot HaHaganah, Vol. II* (Tel Aviv: Zionist Library and Marakhot, 1964), pp. 749-54.

8. See Nur Masalha, *The Expulsion of the Palestinians* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).

9. For the use of letter bombs, see *The Times* of London, 5-7 and 10 June 1947, and *Sunday Times* of London, 24 September 1972. For parcel bombs, see *The Times*, 4 September 1947. For the hanging of hostages, see R. D. Wilson, *Cordon and Search* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1949), p. 132. For electrically detonated mines in market places, first used by the IZL in 1938, see Dinur Benzion, ed., *Sefer Toldot HaHaganah, Vol. III* (Tel Aviv: Zionist Library and Marakhot, 1955-72), p. 812.

10. Nicholas Bethel, *The Palestine Triangle* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1979), p. 263. Five "others" were also killed in the explosion, bringing the total to 91. Of these, thirteen were soldiers and three were policemen; the rest were civilians.
11. For an official history of the Sixth Airborne Division in Palestine, see Wilson, *Cordon and Search*.
12. Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, p. 193, according to which Ben-Gurion wanted Britain out of the way as early as 1939.
13. Benzion, *Sefer Toldot HaHaganah*, Vol. III, pp. 1234-35. An example of purchases made from the War Assets Administration was the purchase of fifty instruments used in the testing of ammunition production for a total of \$120 when the cost of each instrument would normally be \$18,000. *Ibid.*, 1236.
14. Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, p. 830. See *ibid.*, 823 ff, for Ben-Gurion's bitter verbal assault on Weizmann at the home of Rabbi Wise in New York just after the Biltmore Conference in 1942.
15. See Walid Khalidi, "Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine" and its Appendices A, B, and C in *JPS* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1988), pp. 3-70. For the text of Plan Dalet of March 1948, translated from Hebrew, see Appendix B (*ibid.*, 24). According to the plan's Introduction (reproduced in *ibid.*, 24-25), this plan was based on Plan B (September 1945); Plan C ("Gimmel" in Hebrew), also known as the May 1946 Plan; and the Yehoshua (Globerman) Plan, named after its author, who was killed in early December 1947. The finishing touches of Plan Dalet were made in March 1948. For Plan C, see Appendix A (*ibid.*, 20). According to the introduction to Plan Dalet itself, "Since these plans [i.e., Plan B, Plan C, Yehoshua Plan] were designed to deal with the situation inside the country, the first two plans deal with the first phase of incidents while the third plan deals with the possibility of invasion by regular armies from the neighboring Arab countries—the aim of Plan D is to fill the gaps in the previous plans to make them more suitable for the situation expected at the end of British rule in the country."
16. Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman, Vol. II: Years of Trial and Hope, 1946-1952* (New York: Signet, 1965), p. 162.
17. Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1973), p. 299. The Arab population of Palestine in 1947 was 1,350,000 at most.
18. American Jewish Committee, "Toward Peace and Equity" (New York, 1946), p. 73.
19. Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, *Palestine in the UNO* (Karachi: Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, 1948), p. 6ff.
20. *Ibid.*
21. See, for example, Kermit Roosevelt, "The Partition of Palestine: A Lesson in Pressure Politics," *Middle East Journal* 2, no. 1 (January 1948), pp. 13-16; and Carlos P. Romulo, *I Walked with Heros* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), p. 285ff.
22. Report of Sub-Committee 2 of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine to Ad Hoc Committee, 11 November 1947 (A/AC 14/32 and Add. I), Appendix A.
23. Report of Sub-Committee 2, paragraphs 57, 59.
24. Khan, *Palestine in the UNO*.
25. Population figures are based on Report of Sub-Committee 2, paragraph 56ff and Appendices A, B, and C.
26. Jewish National Fund, "Jewish Settlements in Palestine" (Jewish National Fund, Jerusalem, March 1948, Mimeographed), p. ii.
27. All landownership estimates are taken from Jewish National Fund, "Jewish Settlements in Palestine."
28. UNSCOP, *Report to the General Assembly by the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine* (Official Records of the 2nd session of the General Assembly, 1947, Supplement No. 11), chapter 2, paragraph 27.
29. Fred J. Khoury, *The Arab-Israeli Dilemma* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), p. 49.
30. During the Mandate, landownership in the New City of Jerusalem outside the Old City walls was as follows: Palestinian (40 percent), Jewish (26.12 percent), non-Palestinian Christians (13.86%), government and municipal (2.9 percent), and roads and railways (17.12 percent). The bulk of Jewish ownership was in the Western half of the New City. See legend to map of Jerusalem published by the Palestine Refugee Office, New York, 1951.



31. Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1988).

32. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

33. *Palestine Royal Commission Report*, Cmd. 5479 (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1937), p. 395.

34. Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error: The Autobiography of Chaim Weizmann* (New York: Schocken, 1966), p. 435.

35. See Khalidi, "Plan Dalet Revisited," Appendices B and C for planned operations outside the borders of the Jewish state envisaged by the UN partition resolution. The first paragraph of Plan Dalet (Appendix B; *ibid.*, 25) reads: "The objective of this plan is to gain control of the areas of the Hebrew state and defend its borders. It also aims at gaining control of the areas of Jewish settlement and con-

centration which are located outside the borders against regular, semi-regular, and small forces operating from bases outside or inside the state." Appendix C (*ibid.*, 34ff), "Operational Orders to the Brigades," lists the Palestinian towns and villages *inside* the Palestinian state to be occupied by each of the six Haganah brigades. These lists omit the towns and villages to be occupied by the most aggressive and best armed units of the Haganah—its mobile striking force, the three brigades of the Palmach.

36. Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*, p. 101.

37. Quoted by Michael Bar-Zohar in *Ben-Gurion: The Armed Prophet*, trans. Len Ortzen (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 133.

38. See Walid Khalidi, ed., *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).