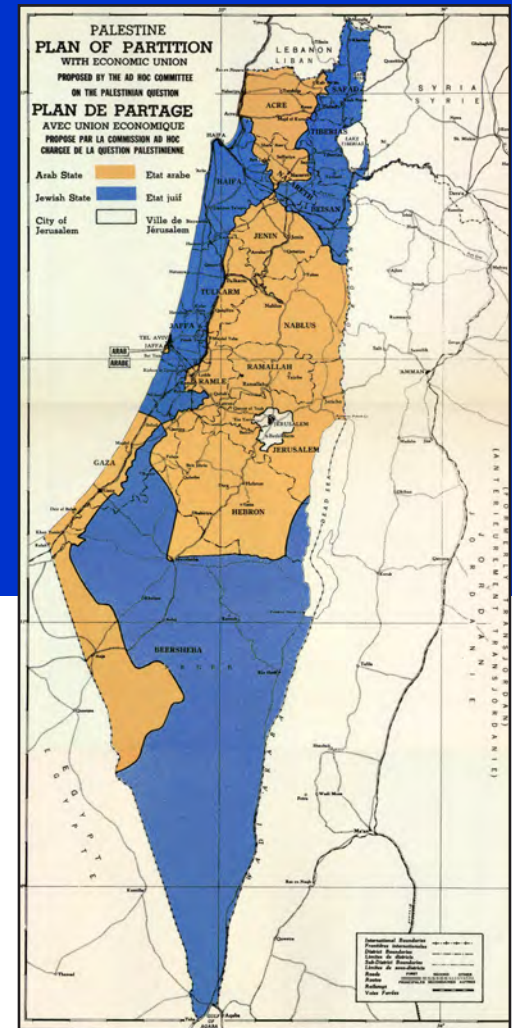


# Looking Back Looking Forward

## Israel at 60 Part I: The UN Partition Plan



“...The existence of an international commitment to the Jewish people, the flickering still of a spark of conscience in the world, the widespread recognition that the commitment must be honored, even if only in part, even if only a helpless, homeless, stateless folk was its object...”

- David Ben-Gurion, October 1947

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# Introduction

Sixty years ago, the State of Israel was only a vision.

Looking back in 2007, we may find the history surprising. Countries have arrived on the scene after decolonization and the fall of empires, by bloody revolution and peaceful divorce. But the Jewish state—the expression of Jewish self-determination, thousands of years in the making—bears a rare mark of international legitimacy.

In fact, the United Nations specifically recommended its establishment. By voting to partition the British Mandate for Palestine, the UN sought to affirm its own basic principles. From the start, Israel was meant to coexist peacefully with an Arab state next door. The process was transparent and democratic, as every country had an equal say. And in the end, the consensus was strong.



*The United Nations General Assembly deliberates at its temporary home in New York, 1947.*

# Introduction

This publication is one in a series marking Israel's sixtieth anniversary. We take this opportunity to celebrate its remarkable achievements. While Israel remains a work in progress, its embrace of the values of democracy, openness, and equality—even as it continually struggles for its survival in a hostile environment—deserves the world's recognition.

But prior to any of Israel's history comes the international movement for its founding. This document tells the story of international support for the creation of the Jewish state, culminating in the passage of UN Resolution 181 on November 29, 1947.

Sixty years ago, the State of Israel was only a vision—shared by Soviets and Zionists, Guatemalans and Americans. With moral courage and clarity, the international community saw the basic rightness of Jewish self-determination and deemed it worthy of endorsement.

With six decades of eventful, challenging history to consider, the remarkable consensus favoring Israel's founding might easily be overlooked. Now is the time to remind the world of its vision, and to reflect upon Israel's efforts to realize it.

# The Balfour Declaration

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was a memo from the British Cabinet to Zionist leaders, pledging British support for the creation of “a Jewish national home” in Palestine. A concerted effort by Chaim Weizmann, noted British chemist and Zionist leader, helped to obtain the declaration. Balfour’s words gave the Zionist cause new diplomatic weight.

President Harry Truman later wrote: “The question of Palestine as a Jewish homeland goes back to the solemn promise that had been made to them by the British in the Balfour Declaration of 1917—a promise which had stirred the hopes and the dreams of these oppressed people. This promise, I felt, should be kept, just as all promises made by responsible, civilized governments should be kept.”<sup>1</sup>

Foreign Office,  
November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

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"

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Arthur James Balfour', is written over the typed text of the letter.

# The British Mandate

At the close of World War I, the Sykes-Picot Agreement defined, with Russian consent, British and French spheres of influence in the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The postwar allied conference at San Remo in 1920 reaffirmed British control over Palestine. These new “mandates” were supposed to be managed “until such time as they are able to stand alone.”<sup>2</sup> The borders of the Mandate for Palestine were formally defined by the League of Nations in 1922. But in May 1923, the British split off most of the Mandate into the Emirate of Transjordan, which became mostly autonomous under Emir Abdullah.



*“... The Principal Allied Powers have agreed for the purpose of giving effect to the provisions of Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, to entrust to a Mandatory selected by the said Powers, the administration of the territory of Palestine, which formerly belonged to the Turkish Empire.”<sup>3</sup>*

# The Peel Commission

By the time 1947 arrived, the end of British rule over Palestine had been a long time in the making. During Arab uprisings in 1936, the British government had dispatched the Palestine Royal Commission, under Lord Peel to investigate the source of local discontent.



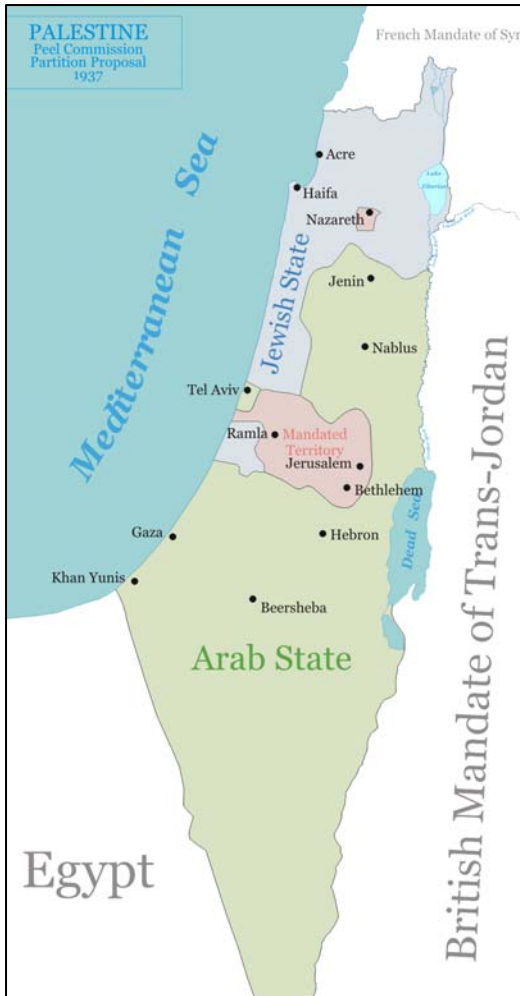
*Left: An armored Jewish "defense bus" during the Arab revolt of the 1930s.*



*Right: Lord Peel arrives in Palestine, 1936.*

The Peel Commission had found two “strongly nationalist” peoples living on the same land, with “no question of fusion or assimilation between Jewish and Arab cultures.” Seeking a way to extract Britain from a job it didn’t want, the commission had suggested partition.

# The Peel Commission



“The British people ... are bound to honour to the utmost of their power the obligations they undertook in the exigencies of war towards the Arabs and the Jews. When those obligations were incorporated in the Mandate, they did not fully realize the difficulties of the task it laid on them. They have tried to overcome them, not always with success. The difficulties have steadily become greater till now they seem almost insuperable. Partition offers a possibility of finding a way through them, a possibility of obtaining a final solution of the problem which does justice to the rights and aspirations of both the Arabs and the Jews and discharges the obligations undertaken towards them twenty years ago to the fullest extent that is practicable in the circumstances of the present.”<sup>4</sup> — Peel Commission Report

Many Jews wanted to negotiate for more land, but mainstream leaders like David Ben-Gurion accepted the basis of Peel’s plan. The Arab leadership in Palestine rejected the idea of partition.

# World War II and the Holocaust

World War II compelled the British to defend the territory of the Mandate from immediate threat rather than define its political future.

The British White Paper of 1939, issued by the government of Neville Chamberlain, officially limited Jewish immigration to Palestine to 75,000 from 1940-1944. At a time when European Jewry desperately sought to reach the shores of Palestine, British policy forbade entry to those escaping Nazi persecution.

At the outset of World War II, David Ben-Gurion, then chairman of the Jewish Agency, declared: “We shall fight the war against Hitler as if there were no White Paper, and we shall fight the White Paper as if there were no war.”<sup>5</sup> The Jews of Palestine attempted to save as many of their European brethren as possible. Yet, despite the pressure of world opinion, including the repeated requests of U.S. President Harry S. Truman, the British refused to lift the restrictions on immigration.



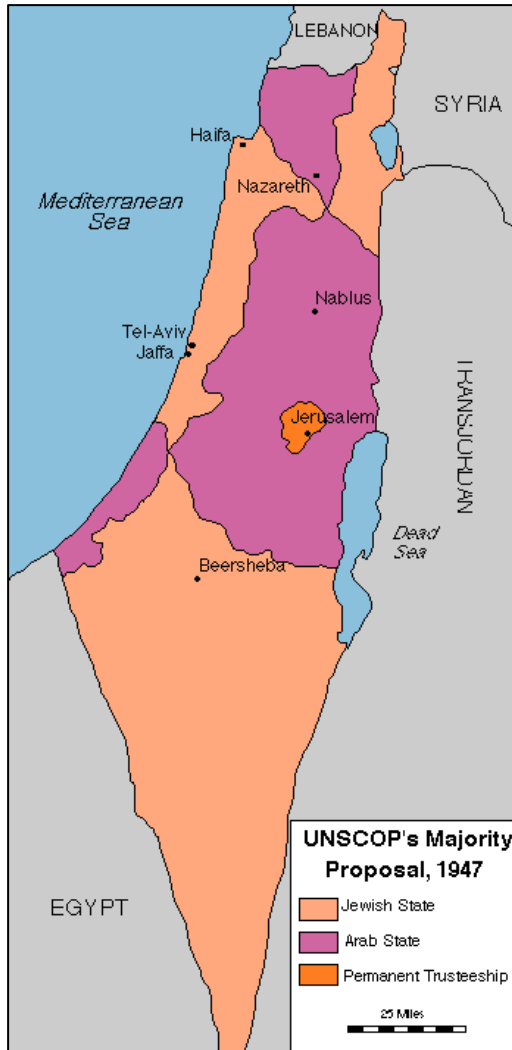
*Carrying Jewish refugees refused entry to Palestine, the Exodus is a disturbing icon of the British Mandate's treatment of Holocaust victims.*

# World War II and the Holocaust

As a result of the British refusal to allow refugees into Palestine, some Jewish underground forces carried out violent attacks against the British. In 1946, the *Irgun*, a Jewish militia, blew up the headquarters of the British administration, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Though the *Irgun* called the British authorities to warn them of the impending attack in advance, there was no evacuation, and 92 people were killed. Other Jewish groups, including the mainstream *Haganah*, condemned the attack.



Following the bombing, the negative publicity resulting from the growing chaos in Palestine helped to undermine British and international support for the Mandate. It also caused the U.S. Congress to delay granting the British vital loans. Moreover, the spiraling situation required large numbers of already war-weary troops. In response to these pressures, the British announced their desire to terminate the Mandate and withdraw.



The British government called for an end to the Mandate by May 1948. As a result, the UN met in special session in April 1947 to form a Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), intended to investigate the current situation and to propose a solution. It sent an eleven-member delegation, chaired by Justice Emil Sandström of Sweden, to evaluate conditions in Palestine. They toured the territory and its surrounding region, as well as displaced persons camps in Germany. The delegation also spoke to local populations—though the official institutions of the Palestinian Arab community refused to cooperate.

Ultimately, the majority recommended that the British Mandate should be terminated and that “partition will provide the most realistic and practicable settlement.”<sup>6</sup> Jerusalem and Bethlehem were to remain under international control. Seven of UNSCOP’s eleven members—Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, the Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, and Uruguay—endorsed this conclusion, sending it to a vote before the General Assembly.

# The Rationale for Partition: Righting Wrongs



*“We have followed the fate of the Jewish people with even greater sympathy since the time of the German occupation of Poland, when the mass extermination of millions of Jews in our country established a community of suffering between the Jews and the Polish nation...”<sup>7</sup>*

*- Oskar Lange, Representative of Poland to the UN*

There’s no question that the atrocities of the Holocaust shaped countries’ behavior as they contemplated whether to endorse partition. Many representatives cited the horrors of Nazism at the podium before the General Assembly. But the world also recognized a need to right historical wrongs that weren’t limited to the previous decade. Uruguay noted the long history of “discrimination and alienation, [the] persecution of a section of humanity” endured by Jews.

More important, the Holocaust wasn’t nearly the whole story. Set amidst the dissolution of empires, the rise of postcolonial nationalist movements, the still uncertain role of the new United Nations, and the moral reflection that followed years of worldwide violence, the debate over partition was really a debate over the future of the postwar world.

# The Rationale for Partition: Self-Determination

*“... The decision to partition Palestine is in keeping with the high principles and aims of the United Nations. It is in keeping with the principle of the national self-determination of peoples.... This decision will meet the legitimate demands of the Jewish people, hundreds of thousands of whom, as you know, are still without a country, without homes, having found temporary shelter only in special camps in some Western European countries.”*

*- Andrei Gromyko, Soviet Representative to the UN*



*Soviet Representative Andrei Gromyko signs the UN Charter in 1945.*

In fact, the world's mistreatment of Jews raised a broader issue: The Jews were a people separated from its homeland, a nation without a state. If Jewish history had shown anything, it was that Jews' protection would not be guaranteed until their self-determination was fully exercised. Gromyko's speech, among others, underscored the centrality of self-determination in the UN system. One of the organization's express purposes, as outlined in its Charter, was the maintenance of "friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination."<sup>8</sup> Partition advanced this purpose.

# The Rationale for Partition: Strategic Concerns

*“Could we act otherwise, especially since the partition plan is presented with the full endorsement of the great powers which are more directly interested in the case, and, on which lies the greater share of responsibility for the proposed solution?”*

*- Arthur de Souza Costa, Representative of Brazil to the UN*



Some countries endorsed partition in part for strategic reasons. For the U.S., partition advanced an interest in calming an area of instability. “Our policy was an American policy,”



*Truman and Clifford*

Truman later wrote, “because it aimed at the peaceful solution of a world trouble spot.”<sup>9</sup> The U.S. was also competing for influence with the Soviet Union. But U.S. support was hardly guaranteed. Many in the State Department, including Secretary George Marshall, a recent war hero, thought the U.S. should placate oil-rich Arab states instead. Calculated prodding by White House Counsel Clark Clifford helped to convince Truman otherwise. “I kept the ramrod up the State Department’s butt,” Clifford said, to ensure that the U.S. maintained its global prestige by lobbying to keep allies like the Philippines in line.<sup>10</sup>

# The Rationale for Partition: Equality of Nations



*“In the brief history of our organization, and even in the history of modern times, this represents something new. This fundamentally justifies the idealism displayed by men and peoples when in the name of justice and solidarity, they drew up and signed the Charter of the United Nations, which is the new law of the world. Formerly, in the course of history, in past centuries, things were done differently; other methods were used and the immediate objective was different. ... Nations no longer foregather, nor does the General Assembly meet, to redraw the old colonial map of the world. They meet today to define and place, on their true basis of justice and liberty, the fundamental principles of social sovereignty.”*

*- Enrique Rodríguez Fabregat, Representative of Uruguay to the UN*

Some of the strongest rhetorical support for the Jewish cause came from small nations that had struggled against domination by colonial powers. For them, the establishment of Israel, through a democratic procedure, represented precisely the opposite of imperialism and colonialism. For Uruguay, the UN Charter and the new era of international politics that it heralded were “an extraordinary advance in the moral progress of the world.” The founding of Israel was the tangible expression of its basic principle of global equality.

# The Rationale for Partition: Religious History

*“In Palestine, a Jew may not visit the tomb of Abraham, the common ancestor of both Arabs and Jews, nor the tombs of Isaac and Jacob, forefathers of the Jewish race. No Jew dare risk entering the mosque which was once the great temple of Solomon, the most celebrated Holy Place of the Hebrew religion, because if he did so he would be killed. Years of propaganda have filled the ... hearts of the Arabs with a rancor which makes any efforts at conciliation and the establishment of friendly relations seem useless today.”*

*- Jorge Garcia Granados, Representative of Guatemala to the UN*

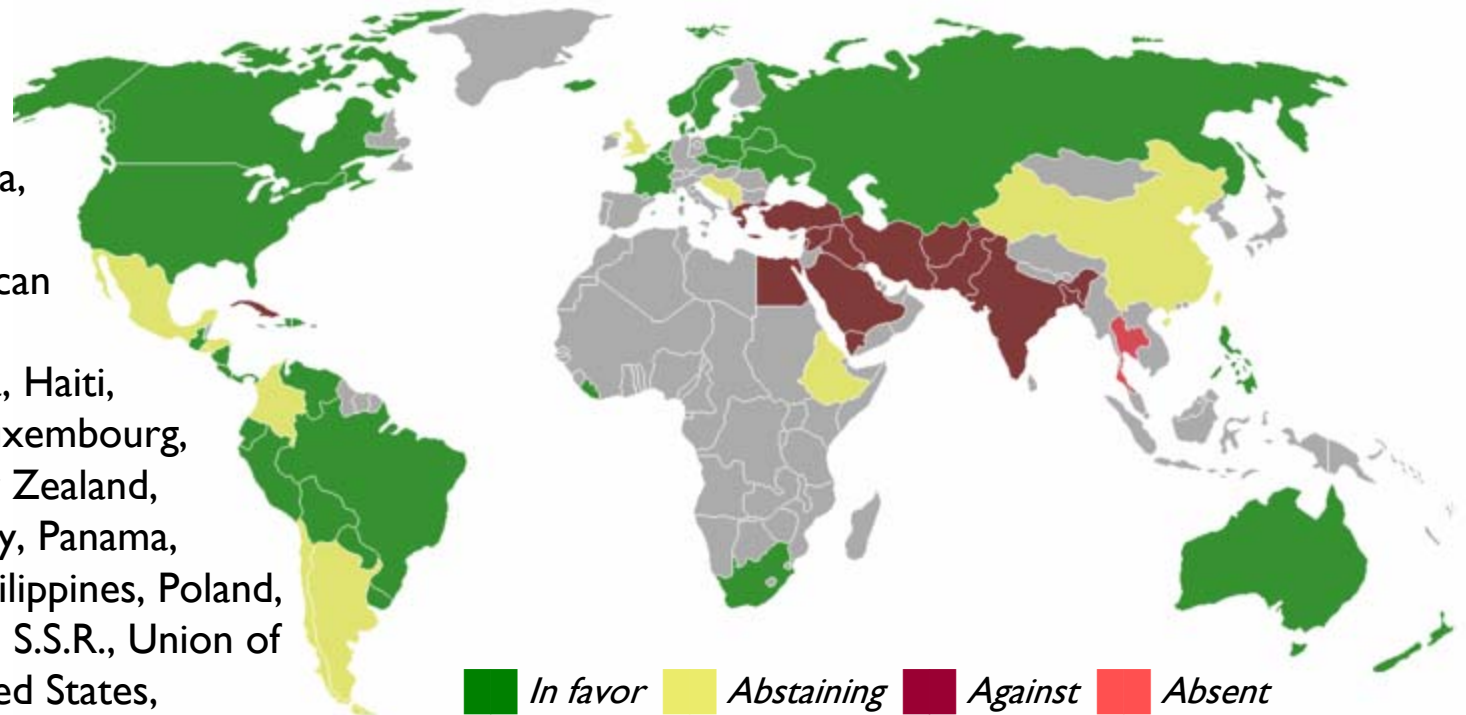


Advocates for partition noted the connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. As Garcia pointed out, Jewish statehood was necessary for Jewish religious expression. President Truman once said, “I am Cyrus,” labeling himself a modern version of the Persian emperor who allowed the Jews to return to their land.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, his desire to end the exile was motivated by a deep connection to Biblical history. He cited Psalm 137 as his favorite: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, as we remembered Zion.” And Winston Churchill, a self-proclaimed Zionist, agreed. He later described Israel’s founding as “an event in world history to be viewed in the perspective not of a generation or a century, but in the perspective of a thousand, two thousand, or even three thousand years.”<sup>12</sup>

# The Vote

## In favor: 33

Australia, Belgium,  
Bolivia, Brazil,  
Belarussian S.S.R.,  
Canada, Costa Rica,  
Czechoslovakia,  
Denmark, Dominican  
Republic, Ecuador,  
France, Guatemala, Haiti,  
Iceland, Liberia, Luxembourg,  
Netherlands, New Zealand,  
Nicaragua, Norway, Panama,  
Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland,  
Sweden, Ukrainian S.S.R., Union of  
South Africa, United States,  
U.S.S.R., Uruguay, Venezuela



**Against: 13** – Afghanistan, Cuba, Egypt, Greece, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Yemen

**Abstained: 10** – Argentina, Chile, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Honduras, Mexico, United Kingdom, Yugoslavia

# The Jewish Response

Though some Jews had wanted the whole of Palestine as a Jewish state, most welcomed the partition plan as the opportunity to realize the Jewish dream—a home in the land of Israel.



*“Jewish State”: Headline of newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth, November 30, 1947*

Amos Oz, the celebrated Israeli writer who lived through the experience, recalled: “Then there was dancing and weeping in Amos Street, in the whole of Kerem Avraham and in all the Jewish neighborhoods.... Bottles of fruit drink, beer and wine passed from hand to hand and mouth to mouth, strangers hugged each other in the streets and kissed each other with tears, and startled English policeman were often dragged into the circles of dancers and softened up with cans of beer and sweet liqueurs, and frenzied revellers climbed up on British armored cars and waved the flag of the state that had not been established yet, but tonight, over there in Lake Success, it had been decided that it had the right to be established.”<sup>13</sup>

# The Arab Response

Almost immediately after the successful vote for partition, violence erupted. It could hardly have been a surprise when the region's Arab countries later decided to help prevent the formation of Israel through the use of force. On November 29, they had declared their intention to disregard the decision of the international community.

“The Government of Saudi Arabia registers, on this historic occasion, the fact that it does not consider itself bound by the resolution adopted today by the General Assembly,” the Saudi representative declared. “Furthermore, it reserves to itself the full right to act freely in whatever way it deems fit, in accordance with the principles of right and justice.”



“Iraq does not recognize the validity of this decision,” said its representative, Mohammed Fadel Jamali. He vowed that his country “will reserve freedom of action towards its implementation, and holds those who were influential in passing it against the free conscience of mankind responsible for the consequences.”

# Conclusion

Rioting began almost immediately after partition was approved. “On the day after the vote, a spate of Arab attacks left seven Jews dead and scores more wounded,” writes the Israeli historian Efraim Karsh. “Shooting, stoning, and rioting continued apace in the following days.”<sup>14</sup> Sporadic acts of violence by Arabs against Jews rapidly spiraled into a major conflict.

Despite the stamp of international legitimacy, then, Israel still had a long way to go before statehood. That difficult journey, and the institutions it produced, will be explored in later publications in this series.

But partition itself has important implications for today’s public debate and for Israel’s place in today’s international system. Israel’s creation was surely shaped by the Holocaust, but it was at least equally a product of the full experience of Jewish history. Despite the unfavorable climate for Israel at today’s UN, Israel was created to embody the principles of the UN Charter. And in 1947, several countries endorsed Israel’s founding as an expression of anti-colonialism and as a sign that the nations of the world were finally on equal footing.

Sixty years ago, the State of Israel was only a vision. Looking back, it’s remarkable what the world was able to see.

# Notes

- [1] Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S Truman, Volume Two: Years of Triumph and Hope* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 132.
- [2] "Mandate for Palestine," *Encyclopaedia Judaica, Volume 11* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), p. 862.
- [3] *Ibid.*
- [4] "Summary of the Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," *Series of League of Nations Publications*, 30 November 1937.
- [5] William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East, Third Edition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), p. 275.
- [6] "United Nations Special Committee on Palestine Report to the General Assembly," 3 September 1947.
- [7] All quotations from the UN General Assembly debate may be found in the verbatim record of the debate on the Future Government of Palestine. UNGA A/PV 125-128, 26-29 November 1947. Available online at the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine, [www.unispal.org](http://www.unispal.org).
- [8] UN Charter, Article 1:2.
- [9] Truman, p. 157.
- [10] Michael Beschloss, *Presidential Courage: Brave Leaders and How They Changed America, 1789-1989* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), pp. 214-17.
- [11] Beschloss, p. 234.
- [12] David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 775. See also Yoav Tenenbaum, "The Last Romantic Zionist Gentile," available at the Churchill Centre, Winston Churchill Publications and Resources, [www.winstonchurchill.org](http://www.winstonchurchill.org).
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