

# A Dream Restored

Reflections on the UN Partition Vote

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Cover photo: Jubilant residents celebrating the UN vote on November 29, 1947, in front of the Mugrabi Cinema in Tel Aviv.

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## Foreword

November 29, 1947, is a day that will resonate in history. On that day, the United Nations General Assembly voted to approve Resolution 181, recommending the termination of the British mandate for Palestine and partition of the country into two independent states, one Arab and one Jewish, with Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*.

The UN declaration granted international acknowledgment to what Winston Churchill had stated some twenty-five years earlier, that “the Jewish people ... should know that it is in Palestine as of right and not on sufferance.”

For the Jewish people, the resolution was a watershed, the fulfillment of a nineteen-hundred-year-old dream of return to Zion. The resolution formed the basis for the establishment, or more precisely re-establishment, of a home and haven for Jews from around the world, and of international recognition of sovereignty for a people who had for too long experienced both powerlessness and homelessness.

Moshe Dayan, in his memoirs, recalls his elation that day: “I felt in my bones the victory of Judaism, which for two thousand years of exile from the Land of Israel had withstood persecutions, the Spanish Inquisition, pogroms, anti-Jewish decrees, restrictions, and the mass slaughter by the Nazis in our own generation, and had reached the fulfillment of its age-old yearning—the return to a free and independent Zion.”

The momentous UN vote launched a cascade of events—the acceptance of the partition plan by the Jewish Agency, fierce denunciations by Arab states and parties, much bloodshed, struggles for Jewish immigration, and, five-and-a-half months later, the declaration of the State of Israel. Abba Eban, Israel’s consummate diplo-

mat, observed: “The period between December 1947 and April 1948 would be among the most perilous in the Jewish story.”

We stand now at the sixtieth anniversary of that historic moment. So much has happened in the interim—full-scale wars and wars of attrition against Israel, the dynamic growth of populations and economies, the ingathering of literally millions of Jews from the lands of their dispersion, the forging of an Israeli society and culture, and the evolving of a national identity by the Palestinians—yet the basic rationale behind the partition resolution of the need for two states for two peoples seems more compelling than ever. Though many particulars of the resolution now appear naïve and unenforceable, such as the plans for the internationalization of Jerusalem and for economic union, the underlying notion of a two-state solution remains persuasive.

Recalling November 29, 1947, Ambassador Eban said, “No one who lived that moment will ever lose its memory from his heart.” The memoirs gathered in this anthology evoke in moving and colorful prose what the partition resolution meant to the soon-to-be citizens of the Jewish state. And they likewise reveal the buoyant spirit that built the State of Israel and will surely sustain it in the future.

Amos Oz, perhaps Israel’s most poetic novelist, in his memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, described the scene in the streets of Jerusalem on the eve of November 29, 1947: “Then there was dancing and weeping on Amos Street, in the whole of Kerem Avraham and in all the Jewish neighborhoods; flags appeared, and slogans written on strips of cloth, car horns blared, and ... shofar blasts sounded from all the synagogues, and Torah scrolls were taken out of the holy arks and were caught up in the dancing....”

And yet, he added ominously, “[B]ut one in every hundred men, women, old folk, children, and babies in those crowds of Jews who were dancing, reveling, drinking, and weeping for joy, fully one percent of the excited people who spilled out onto the streets that night, would die in the war that the Arabs started within seven hours of the General Assembly’s decision at Lake Success.”

These memoirs capture the optimism and the joy felt on the eve of the fulfillment of a centuries-old Jewish aspiration, mixed with well-founded trepidations about what would come next. Obviously, these narratives contrast starkly with Arab descriptions of the events of 1947–48. Doubtless, how one remembers a watershed event shapes how one moves forward from it.

It is instructive to recall both the joys and the fears that gripped the Jewish people at this turning point in history sixty years ago, as well as the international legitimacy that was conferred on the notion of a Jewish state. To understand contemporary Israel requires both.

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