

Perspectives in history: Understanding Different Views - The UN Partition Plan and 1948

Sustainable Peace Education



MACRO - The Center for Political Economics

21 Pinsker St, 6342113 Tel Aviv, Israel
Tel +972 3 5251057 / Fax + 972 3 5251058
macro@macro.org.il
www.macro.org.il

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The 1947 Plan for the Partition of Palestine/ Land of Israel (United Nations Resolution 181)

1. Which of the writers seems most convincing to you? Explain why. Explain why the other writers are less convincing.
2. Discuss the question – Was the Palestinian opposition to the Partition an understandable and inevitable step or was it a historic mistake and expressed contempt for a democratic United Nations resolution? Does this rejection on the part of the Palestinians indicate that they do not have the right to a state?
3. Discuss the question – Did the Jewish side sincerely accept the plan to partition the country into two states or did it support the resolution as a justification for establishing a Jewish state that would take control of the whole area?
4. Discuss and attempt to reach a conclusion about the question – Should the Partition Plan be implemented today? Would the Palestinians and the Israelis honour the partition resolution in the future (Would the two peoples stand behind an agreement to partition the land into two states)?

Itzhak Galnoor – The Debate on the Partition Plan and Boundaries during the British Mandate

The proposal of the UN Commission on Palestine was to cancel the British Mandate, to establish two independent states in Palestine/ Land of Israel – a Jewish one and an Arab one, with economic union between them and to turn Jerusalem into an international trust under the administration of the United Nations. The proposal divided the country into seven regions: each country would have three regions under its sovereignty with points of intersection between them and Jerusalem would have separate international status. The proposal gave the Jewish state an area of 16,000 sq.km – some 62% of the territory of western Palestine. In that area more than a half million Jews and some 380,000 Arabs were then living (more than 40% of the inhabitants of the proposed state). In the Arab state there were some 800,000 Arabs and the 10,000 Jews would constitute less than 2% of the population. The great novelty of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) plan in comparison to those preceding it was the proposal to establish a Palestinian Arab state unconnected to Transjordan.

The plan of United Nations Committee was considered a great victory for the Zionist movement despite the odd territorial structure of the proposed Jewish state, and even though it did not include most of the Galilee and Jerusalem and left 39 Jewish localities outside its borders. The leadership of the Zionist movement had accepted the proposal of the United Nations Commission with a great majority by September 1947. Ahdut Haavoda, Hashomer Ha'Tsair and the Revisionists¹ still opposed the partition but this was weak opposition because it was clear that most of the Jewish public enthusiastically accepted the proposal. The Zionist decision to adopt the partition plan was fundamentally instrumental in achieving a sovereign state rather than abiding by loyalty to the entire territory of Palestine. It was the politics rather than the geography that brought about the Zionist agreement to the Partition Plan during the British Mandate.

The United Nations Partition Plan was never put into effect because of the opposition of the Arabs in the territory and outside it. The result was that the partition was put into effect by force in the wake of the war and the Armistice Agreements of 1948-1949. In terms of this partition, the borders of the State of Israel encompassed territory of some 20,600 sq.km. – some 75% of the territory of western Palestine. The Palestinian leadership which had boycotted the UN committee rejected the Partition Plan. The Palestinian leadership opposed any con-

1. Ahdut Havoda and Hashomer Hatsair were two socialist Jewish parties that later forged to form 'Mapam'. The Revisionists were a right wing Zionist movement that called for military and diplomatic action to form a Jewish state.

cessions to the Jews, demanding that an Arab state should be established in the whole of Palestine, in this they were just like the aggressive denouncers among the Jews. The options were couched in terms that compelled them to choose all or nothing: control of the entire land, or continuing to be subjugated to Britain. While the position adopted by the Zionist leadership since 1937 gave legitimacy to the very idea of establishing a Jewish state (and to partition) the position of the Palestinian leadership did not achieve anything. One way or another, the whole of Palestine was lost in this way for a long period.

Mustafa Kabha – The Palestinians and the Partition Plan

In examining the Palestinian position towards the 1947 Partition Plan, we encounter sweeping generalisations and prejudices. These opinions are largely based on the assertions that all the events that happened to the Palestinians stemmed from their opposition to the Zionist movement and to any compromise with it, and that the actions of the Israeli side (including their deviations from the borders of the Partition Plan during the course of the war and the conquest of more than half of the territory allocated to the Arab state) stemmed mostly from their reactions to Palestinian acts of aggression. Those shaping Jewish public opinion came to sharp and decisive conclusions: the Arabs embarked upon acts of aggression and deserved their punishment; the residents of the villages fled even though representatives of the Jewish forces asked the village heads and representatives of urban neighbourhoods to remain in place; the Israeli forces did not expel or forcibly evacuate the Palestinian population. These decisive answers were voiced without coming to grips with questions like: Even if the Palestinians opposed the partition and embarked on hostile actions, does this justify the deviation from the partition boundaries that the Jews accepted with jubilation and dancing in the streets?

Walid Salem – Legitimacy or Implementation: the Paradox of the Partition Resolution; the hypocrisy of the Zionist movement and the Partition Resolution

Historical evidence reveals the hypocrisy of the Zionist movement with regard to the Partition Resolution. On the one hand, the Zionist movement overwhelmingly agreed to the resolution because it legitimized the establishment of a Jewish state. On the other hand, the Jewish leadership made arrangements to use the Jewish state that was to arise in order to annex territory and to expel Palestinians.

The Jewish State was given 16,000 sq. km of territory, but only 1,600 sq. km of it was owned by Jews. The rest belonged to Arabs who were living in the territory of the Jewish state. So it is clear that partition of this kind is, in effect, a declaration of war against the Palestinian residents. In addition, the Zionists wished to take over more than what was allocated to the Jewish state. Future prime minister Ben-Gurion stated, "There are no permanent arrangements in history, there are not eternal boundaries, and there are no final political claims. There will still be changes in the world, without any doubt." The Haganah² plan determined that it was possible to capture territory outside of the borders of the Jewish state and it was permissible to expel Arab residents. The Haganah set out to conquer Jerusalem which was intended to be international territory... From this it can be concluded that the Zionists related to the Partition Plan as a step on the path to rescinding Palestinian rights to self-determination...

2. The Haganah was the largest and most influential Zionist political movement at that time and its members later served in most of the key positions in numerous Israeli institutions.

Nazir Majalli – The Position of the Arab representatives to the Partition Plan – Crime and Punishment

The Arab position on the Partition Plan is well-known. In Israel it is most acceptable to say that the Arabs fought against the Partition Plan and refused to accept it. It is customary to assert that this is what the Arab leadership decided, and that decision led to war. These statements are correct. This decision was erroneous and foolish. Indeed not every Arab is willing to concede it in this way, particularly not before Jews. But it is the truth.

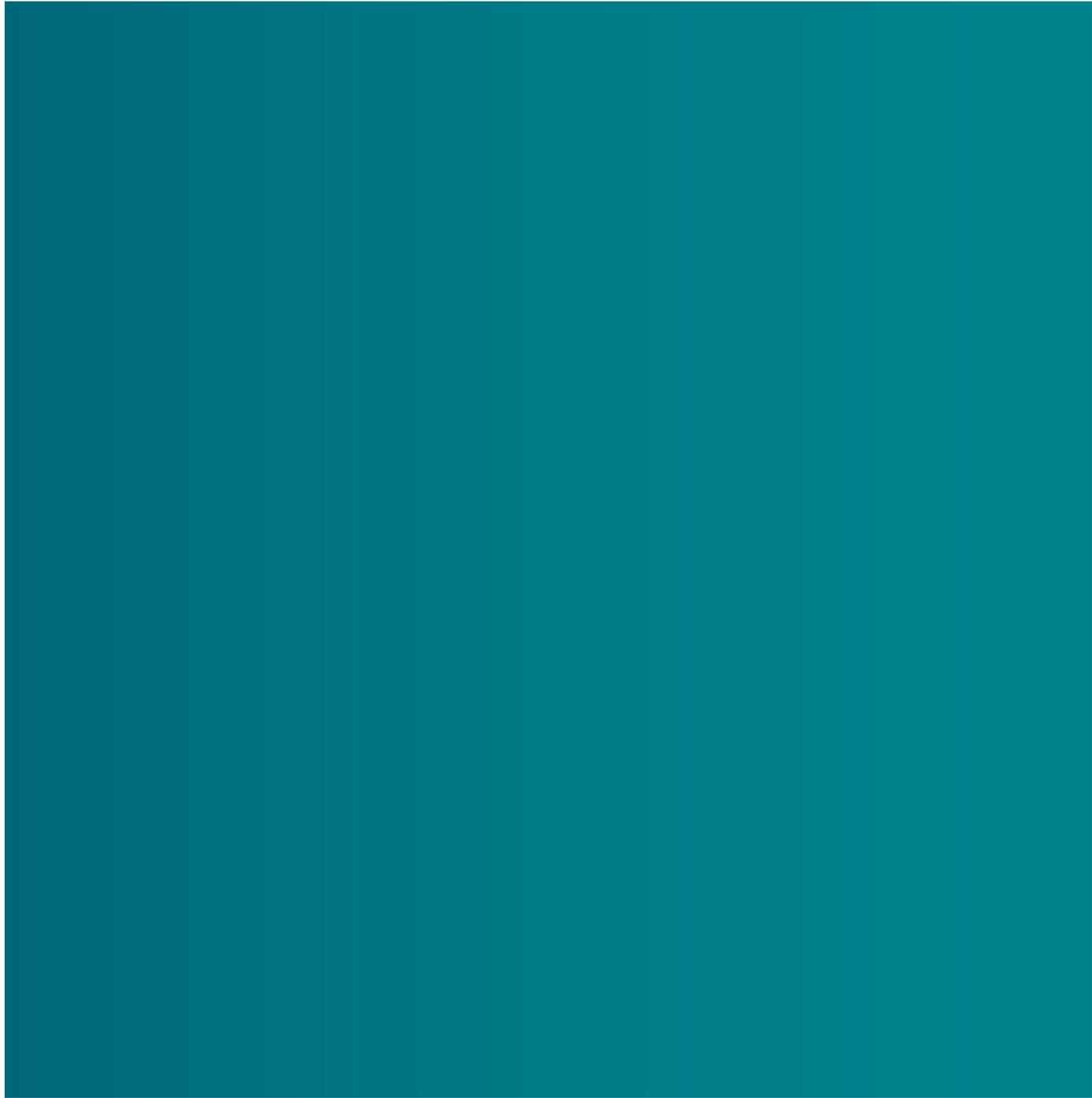
On the face of it, it would be possible to end the debate here, but I wish to try to understand how it was that a decision like this was reached. It must be acknowledged that the Palestinian people had no representatives or leadership. In contrast, the Zionists had educated intellectuals who drew up strategic plans, discussed every issue in depth, and debated in detail the subjects of water, geography, and geology. There was no Palestinian leadership. The Higher Arab Council was made up of a group of mukhtars (village heads), who were the representatives of some of the large families. They were never elected to their positions in any way or in any place, and they did not represent the law. There was no way for the public to express its positions.

So the Palestinian people had no representation, had no ability to express themselves and did not know what was happening around them. The overwhelming majority of the people (80%) were illiterate. They did not have television or radio. If it had been possible for the Palestinian Arabs to set up a real leadership, it is hard to know what they would have decided about the partition. It is possible that then, too, they would have decided against it, but that would have been based on calculated considerations and understanding of the Palestinian Arab interest. These words of mine are not intended to justify the Palestinian leadership and I have already said that it had acted foolishly. There is no doubt that this was a mistake, but the extenuating circumstances on which it was based should not be ignored.

My impression is that the countries of the world did not consider that they should help the Arabs to understand the point of view of the Jews. The Jewish leadership also bears responsibility for this. Everyone spoke about the “Jewish problem” as though it could be taken for granted. But the Arabs were not familiar with it. How could they know? Where could they have learnt it? In those days there were no electronic, or other, means of communication. The Bedouin also could not read newspapers.

Furthermore, it is my assertion that even today the Jewish leadership does not ensure that the Arabs understand the real Jewish problem. I am referring to two thousand years of suffering and persecution all over the world that reached its peak during the Nazi period with the plan to carry out genocide leading to the extermination of six million Jews. People do not know that or understand it. The Jews do not make sure that we know that. I speak from personal experience. I approached Jewish friends and asked them, “Tell me what happened to you? What concerns you? What is this Jewish problem? That is how I began to learn and understand that this is a real problem.

Let me emphasise again: I am not trying to justify the Arab position. The Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular know that they were wrong. They regret this mistake and expressed this in the correct and genuine manner in 1988, when the National Council of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation gathered in Algeria and declared not only that they accepted the Partition Plan but also accepted the solution of “two states for two peoples” in the 1967 borders.



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