



Israel at Sixty
The Road to Independence



AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Israel at Sixty The Road to Independence

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Introduction

Euphoria swept the streets of Jewish Jerusalem on the evening of November 29, 1947, when the UN backed the establishment of a Jewish state by the partition of Palestine.

Then, the reality set in. Local Arab populations rioted, neighboring countries supported the use of force, and the ruling British authorities remained hostile to Jewish statehood. Its difficult quest for lasting peace and security was just beginning.

Through the years, Israel has triumphed over existential challenges. The fight to proclaim a new state was no less difficult than the eventual effort to defend it. And tough political maneuvering abroad sought to make sure that the world followed through on the UN's promise.

Even once it came into being—in and of itself a challenge—Israel had to fend off a coordinated assault by neighbors determined to eradicate it. Conflict claimed the lives and livelihoods of civilians.

But more important than the fight, of course, was what the Zionists were fighting for. With the Holocaust scarcely a memory, Jews saw a real opportunity to finally govern themselves in their ancient homeland. The challenge of creating a unified, democratic Jewish state out of physically separate settlements on fiercely contested territory was obvious. But the challenge was embraced.

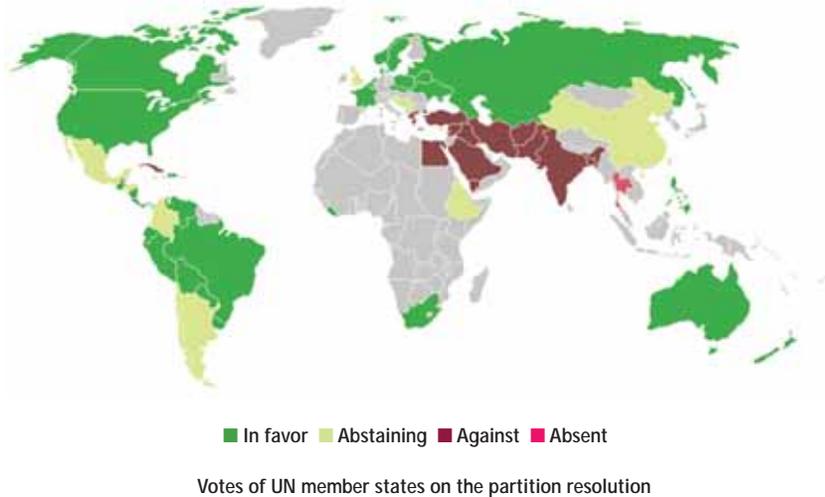
On the sixtieth anniversary of Israel's independence, we retell the story of its deliverance from danger into statehood, and celebrate the foundational values that make it what it is.

The UN Partition Plan

On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly, in a historic vote, decided to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The period before the vote had witnessed the rise of violence between the two populations of Mandatory Palestine, and the British were ready to cede control of the tumultuous region.

UN Resolution 181 passed the General Assembly by a surprisingly wide margin of 33 in favor, 13 against, and 10 abstaining. Representatives from countries ranging from Guatemala to the Philippines, from the United States to the Soviet Union, publicly endorsed a Jewish state as a basic expression of fairness, self-determination, and the Jewish connection to the land of Israel.

The Jewish reaction was overwhelmingly positive. The Jewish Agency, the de facto government of the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in Palestine), strongly supported partition. The Arab leadership, however, rejected it—for its inclusion of Arabs in Jewish territories, and fundamentally, for its premise of Jewish sovereignty.



A War Begins

November 29 was full of promise, but this reverie was soon shattered. The following day, Arab riots broke out in Jerusalem, and on December 1, the Arab Higher Committee, the central political organization of the Arab community of Palestine, enacted a three-day general strike. Extreme reactions to the passage of Resolution 181 spiraled out of control—murders, retaliations, and counter-retaliations became commonplace, and the toll of victims soared on both sides of the conflict.



Once partition was announced, Arab volunteers—many from outside Palestine—formed small militias that attacked the Jewish population.

In order to derail the creation of a Jewish state and gain control over a Palestine that would soon be free of British rule, Palestinian Arab militias began to attack Jewish villages and kibbutzim. Retaliation by Jewish militias further exacerbated the violence.

While the Partition Plan specified that the Mandate should end in August, the British soon made clear their intention to withdraw by May 15—and not to carefully structure the transition. The promise of an impending power vacuum shaped both sides' behavior. Once violence erupted, Jewish forces saw the need to gain the upper hand before the British left.

The Key Players: Jewish

The Haganah was the defense force of the Jewish state-in-waiting. It was under the direction of the Jewish Agency, the body elected by world Jewry and responsible for the Yishuv. Led by David Ben-Gurion, it had anticipated war and raised funds and covertly bought arms. Conscription began in late 1947, and the Haganah grew from a paramilitary to a legitimate army in under a year. It became the backbone of the IDF, incorporating or dissolving other groups.



The Palmach was its elite “extension,” a strike force created by the British to fight Vichy-controlled Syria that then refused to disband. Its members often had strong ties to kibbutzim and a secular socialist identity. Many of its revered commanders became the elite of the new Israeli society.

Two main groups operated outside, and often at cross-purposes with, the Haganah and the mainstream Yishuv authorities. The Irgun was the paramilitary arm of the Revisionist Zionist movement, which sought to drive out the British and establish a Jewish state spanning both sides of the Jordan River. The Lehi, or Stern Gang, like the Irgun, targeted civilians.

The Key Players: Arab

Neutral and partisan observers alike agree on the fragmented and ineffective nature of Arab leadership and military efforts in the period of 1947-48.

The Arab Higher Committee was the main Arab political body. It had been established during the 1930s by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Mohammad Amin al-Husseini (right), who openly collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. It was a largely unrepresentative group, yet it was the face of Palestine’s Arabs to the UN and around the world.



The mufti’s nephew, Abd al-Qader al-Husseini, returned from exile to command a militia called the Army of Holy War. Focused on Jerusalem, he orchestrated bombings in its Jewish neighborhoods and organized a blockade of the city.

In February 1948, the Arab League, pushed by Syria, organized the Arab Liberation Army, which was funded, armed, and backed as a proxy by the Arab states. While the army attacked the strongholds of the Yishuv, it also served as a way for the Arab countries to control the Palestinian independence effort and for Syria to check Jordan’s regional ambitions.¹

Jordan had become autonomous in 1921 and an independent kingdom in 1946. King Abdullah seemed more interested in uniting Arab lands under his rule than in preventing a Jewish state. Under his authority was the Arab Legion, Jordan’s British-trained and British-commanded army. The Arab Legion mostly stayed on the sidelines of the civil war between the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs, planning to wait for the British departure and then move to annex Arab Palestine. It controlled Arab territories around Jerusalem before attacking the city on May 15.

Two Different Attitudes

The Jewish Agency made multiple appeals to the United Nations to send in an international force that would keep the peace. But the international community was largely uninterested.

Meanwhile, as official communiqués to the United Nations (below) make plainly clear, the Arab position was rejectionist. Attacks and ambushes against civilian targets drew reprisals. Casualties came at an estimated rate of 100 deaths and 200 injuries each week.

United Nations

Nations Unies

DECLASSIFIED

**GENERAL
ASSEMBLY**

**ASSEMBLEE
GENERALE**

A/AC.21/10
15 February 1948

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

13. In conclusion, the Arab Higher Committee Delegation wishes to stress the following:

(a) The Arabs of Palestine will never recognise the validity of the extorted partition recommendations or the authority of the United Nations to make them.

(b) The Arabs of Palestine consider that any attempt by the Jews or any other group of powers to establish a Jewish state in Arab territory is an act of aggression which will be resisted in self-defense by force.

(g) The Arabs of Palestine made a solemn declaration before the United Nations, before God and history, that they will never submit or yield to any power going to Palestine to enforce partition. The only way to establish partition is first to wipe them out - man, woman and child.

Isa Nakhleh, Representative of the Arab Higher Committee, February 6, 1948.²



Princess Mary Street, Jerusalem. The British covered the entire block with barbed wire to deny Jewish and Arab access and prevent armed clashes.

A Three-Sided Conflict?

In early 1948, three car bombs exploded in Jerusalem's Jewish downtown. The most deadly, on February 22, killed 53 people on Ben-Yehuda Street. It had been planted by British deserters employed by Abd al-Qader al-Husseini.

The bombing pushed Jewish and British forces to a state of near warfare. Weeks earlier, British policemen had arrested four Haganah members and deliberately released them in the Arab Old City to be lynched, leading Haganah to instruct its members to forcibly resist arrest. Irgun and Lehi fighters killed ten British soldiers on February 22. The British then retaliated against the Haganah, raiding a garrison, confiscating its weapons, and intentionally leaving it open to an Arab assault that killed ten.

The Siege of Jerusalem

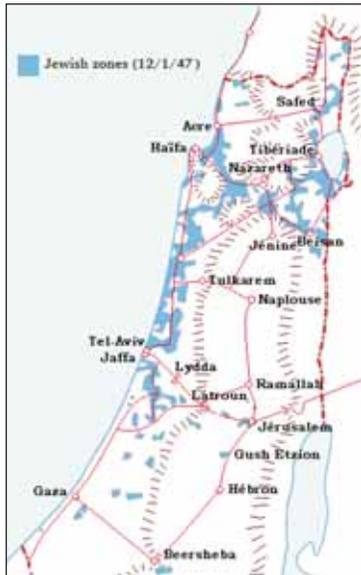
With the bulk of the Jewish settlement in Palestine on the coast, Jerusalem's Jewish population was highly vulnerable, connected by a single road to Tel Aviv, and deep within Arab-designated territory. The road to Jerusalem wound through hills where Arab forces could fire upon passing supply vehicles.

In February and March, convoys bringing food, arms, and other basic supplies from the western Jewish population centers were repeatedly ambushed. The situation in Jerusalem grew increasingly desperate. Food was rationed, and British authorities began to fear that severe food shortages would result once they withdrew. At times, British forces intervened to evacuate the fighters escorting the convoys, but they did not ensure that supplies got through.³

In early April, the Haganah launched Operation Nachshon, a counteroffensive that was the Haganah's first brigade-level operation. Reflecting a deep connection to Biblical Jewish history, the operation took its name from Nachshon ben Aminadav, the first man to walk into the Red Sea before it parted.

The operation succeeded in taking enough surrounding territory to restart the flow of goods to Jerusalem, relieving some of the pressure. The numerous Arab militias generally proved to be disorganized and poorly supplied, and their commander, al-Husseini, was killed on April 7.

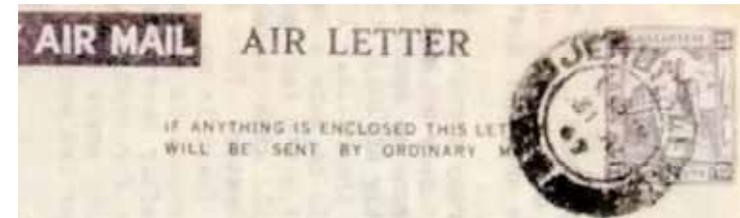
It was during Operation Nachshon, while Haganah forces were trying to capture the key high village of Kastel, that Irgun forces attacked the strategic hilltop Arab village of Deir Yassin. The assault, which resulted in over 100 civilian casualties, remains a much-discussed focal point of the Arab narrative today. Historians continue to debate the intentions of the Irgun fighters, as some reports suggest they tried to evacuate the village. Nonetheless, the incident deeply angered much of the mainstream Jewish leadership. After the incident, the Jewish Agency sent a telegram offering its apologies to King Abdullah of Jordan.⁴



When it was besieged, Jerusalem was isolated from the rest of the Yishuv (blue patches), and accessible by only one route through Arab territory.

As Operation Nachshon relieved the pressure on Jerusalem-ites, an American student who was caught up in the siege wrote in a letter to her parents:

The convoy was enormous—over two hundred lorries—and not a shot fired at it. For two weeks the Palmach has been carrying out an intensive operation battling every inch of the way with the Arabs for control of the hilly territory, dominated by the Kastel fortification. My friends were in the thick of this all-out effort to open the road for our convoys. Dare we hope that this is the beginning of clear traffic?



For the first time in months life is looking a little brighter. It started when people ran into the streets to greet the convoy, and the first thing they saw were the heartwarming words, "If I forget thee, oh Jerusalem," chalked on the lead lorries.

Zipporah Porath
Letter from Jerusalem
April 18, 1948⁵

Countdown to the Mandate's End

With May 15 approaching and the clock ticking on the British presence, Arab forces continued to attack, and the Haganah launched a series of offensives in April and May. Among the major Jewish goals were uniting Jewish population centers, defeating hostile militias, and controlling strategic routes and territory that could easily be used by invading Arab armies once the British left.

The efforts, though imperfect, met with a good deal of success. By mid-May, Jewish forces had contiguous control of important territory near the Syrian and Lebanese borders and had taken possession of today's West Jerusalem and some of the Old City.



The Syrian-backed Arab Liberation Army commander Fawzi al-Qawuqji prepares his largely ineffective militia before an April attack on Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'Emek, in what is now northern Israel. Haganah troops helped the kibbutz stage a successful counterattack. Ben-Gurion had instructed that no Jewish settlement should be evacuated in the face of attack.



A State Is Born

On May 14, 1948, just before the official expiration of the British Mandate for Palestine, the Jewish People's Council gathered at the Tel Aviv Museum and listened to the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel read aloud by David Ben-Gurion, who soon became its first prime minister.

The declaration served as the official announcement that a new Jewish state, named the State of Israel, had been established in former British Palestine, in a land that was previously settled by the ancient Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The precise language of the document, especially with regard to borders and religion, was hotly debated among the early Yishuv leaders, but the final document was signed by all thirty-seven members of the governing body of the Yishuv.

The United States formally recognized the nascent state eleven minutes after the Declaration was signed. Three days later, Israel was recognized by the Soviet Union.

Though a lively democracy, Israel has no written constitution. The words of the Declaration and the promises it makes to the citizens of Israel, in conjunction with principles of government known as the Basic Laws, form the backbone of Israeli democracy.

The Declaration establishes Israel's dedication to values of "freedom, justice and peace." The document also ensures Israel's commitment to social and political rights. The document promises these rights to all its citizens—regardless of religion, race or sex. Despite a vigorous debate over issues of religion, the declaration ultimately guarantees freedom of worship, conscience, language, education, and culture.

The exact definition and parameters of these freedoms remain hotly debated issues within of Israeli society. Yet, while Israel has not perfected its democracy, the principles that defined the state in 1948 are the principles that remain its ongoing ethos today.

Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948.

An Outstretched Hand ...

"THE STATE OF ISRAEL is prepared to cooperate with the agencies and representatives of the United Nations in implementing the resolution of the General Assembly of the 29th November, 1947, and will take steps to bring about the economic union of the whole of Eretz-Israel."

"WE EXTEND our hand to all neighbouring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighbourliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East."

Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel—
May 14, 1948

... And a Belligerent Response

"This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre, which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades."⁶

Arab League Secretary-General Azzam Pasha—May 15, 1948

"The invasion of Palestine by the Arab States was the first armed aggression which the world had seen since the end of the war."⁷

UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie

The day after Israel became independent, the Arab League announced their intention to invade it. Their ostensible justification? "Nothing more than to put an end to the prevailing conditions in Palestine," to restore "order," and to protect the principles of the UN Charter.⁸ But their intentions were surely otherwise. Thousands of Iraqi, Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian troops invaded Israel, while Jordanian forces went directly toward Jerusalem. The ensuing war would last, with intermittent



truces, into 1949. It would finally end through a series of cease-fires, with Gaza under Egyptian control, the West Bank and East Jerusalem under Jordanian rule, and the rest belonging to Israel.

Refugees



Jewish refugees from Arab countries flooded into Israel during and after 1948. These Moroccan refugees were still in a tent camp in 1951.

The 1948 civil war and the subsequent Arab-instigated War of Independence created refugees on both sides of the conflict. Jews living in the Etzion bloc and the Old City of Jerusalem were driven out of

their homes into the new Jewish state. Jewish refugees from Arab lands were soon absorbed into the fabric of the Israeli society. After 1948, age-old Jewish communities in Arab countries were harassed into leaving.

The ultimate circumstances of the Palestinian refugees were not as favorable. The chaos of war and the decentralized nature of the Arab leadership created a rapid breakdown of order. Fearing destruction at the hands of the Jewish army, the Arab leadership in Palestine fled, leaving chaos behind. The mass exodus that followed created roughly 700,000 Palestinian refugees.⁹ These refugees—whom all neighboring Arab countries except Jordan have refused to fully absorb and integrate for sixty years—remain an unfortunate reality of the Middle East conflict.



Fleeing the horrors of war, much of the Arab population evacuated their homes in 1948.

Support from Abroad

“There comes a time when morality overrides politics. After 2,000 years of persecution of the Jews, the establishment of Israel was one of the greatest humanitarian causes in all of human history.”

—Royal Air Force pilot Gordon Levett



Israel’s independence was enabled by critical international support, in the form of both military assistance and needed legitimacy.

Though the United Nations imposed an arms embargo on Palestine, the Jewish cause was strengthened by foreign aid. Of particular note was the supply smuggled from Czechoslovakia, with the encouragement of the Soviet Union, in an effort known as Operation Balak. In order to finance the operation, Golda Meir relied heavily on a fund-raising campaign among American Jews.

Much of the materiel obtained in Operation Balak was flown to Palestine by Gordon Levett, a Royal Air Force pilot who left England and flew missions under cover of darkness to bring planes and arms to the Yishuv.¹⁰ He was one of roughly 5,000 foreign volunteers who came to fight for Jewish independence in Palestine—but one of the few non-Jews. Levett transported dismantled German Messerschmitt fighter planes, which were taken in pieces from Czechoslovakia, reassembled and repainted, and used as the backbone of the new Jewish state’s air force.

Support from Abroad: Truman's Courage

On the diplomatic side of the equation, the Jewish cause had been endangered when violence escalated after partition. In a famous policy about-face, largely as a result of the State Department's antipathy, the U.S. backed off its support for partition in March 1948. Fearing chaos, it advocated for a UN trusteeship.



“I think the proper thing to do, and the thing I have been doing, is to do what I think is right and let them all go to hell.”¹¹
—President Harry S. Truman on his recognition of Israel, March 22, 1948

When Israel's independence became an inevitability, the diplomatic establishment, led by Secretary of State George Marshall, lined up against recognizing Israel, citing the damage to strategic relationships with the Arab world. Chaim Weizmann launched a diplomatic offensive, helped by impassioned private pleas to President Harry S. Truman by Eddie Jacobson, Truman's old business partner.

But the key was ultimately the president himself. He explained his affinity for the Jewish people's quest to reestablish sovereignty in its homeland by citing his favorite psalm, Psalm 137, which lamented the Jewish exile from the promised land: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, as we remembered Zion.” Despite Marshall's promise to vote against Truman in the next election and Truman's self-acknowledged lack of dependence on Jewish votes, Truman's sense of history and justice trumped political calculation. He personally insisted that the U.S. recognize Israel immediately after its independence.¹²

Conclusion: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Israel's history, its tooth-and-nail fight for statehood, remains the starting point of its continued efforts to thrive in an inhospitable environment. Hardly “born in sin,” as its most virulent detractors claim, Israel was born with the imprimatur of the international community, but born in struggle—a struggle that was wholly unwelcome, bitterly difficult, and fundamentally just.

Israel received a stamp of international legitimacy in the form of UN support for partition. The Jewish acceptance of partition and the enthusiastic promises of the Declaration of Independence were the signs of a people ready, at long last, for the prospect of peace, sovereignty, and security. But the story did not end there.

Israel soon faced an attack on all fronts, which left it significantly larger in territorial terms, but acutely aware of its own vulnerability. In one form or another, this threat remains. Israel's early moments of struggle continue to shape it today.

Traveling a difficult road, Israel won its independence sixty years ago. It has not yet been allowed, however, to realize its right to peaceful independence. That journey continues.



Notes

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2. Excerpts made available by the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine, <http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf>.
3. Yoav Gelber, *Palestine, 1948: War, Escape, and the Emergence of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (Sussex Academic Press, 2006), p. 24.
4. Efraim Karsh, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Palestine War 1948* (Osprey, 2002), pp. 10, 40. See also Isidore Abramowitz, et al., "New Palestine Party—Letter to the Editor of the *New York Times*," December 4, 1948.
5. From Zipporah Porath, *Letters from Jerusalem, 1947-1948* (Jonathan Publications, 2005). Available online at www.zionism-israel.com.
6. Alan Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel* (Wiley, 2003), p. 81.
7. Trygve Lie, *In the Cause of Peace: Seven Years with the United Nations* (Macmillan, 1954), p. 176. Quoted by the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Historical Documents. www.mfa.gov.il.
8. Statement by the Arab League, May 15, 1948. Available at www.mideastweb.org.
9. Palestinian Arab refugee estimates are contested, and vary from about 520,000 (Israeli sources) to 726,000 (UN sources) to over 800,000 (Arab sources).
10. Joel Greenberg, "Fun Stuff in '48: British Gentile in Israel Air Force," *New York Times*, May 10, 1996.
11. Harry S. Truman and Robert Ferrell, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry Truman* (University of Missouri Press, 1997), p. 127.
12. See Michael Beschloss, *Presidential Courage: Brave Leaders and How They Changed America, 1789-1989* (Simon and Schuster, 2007), Chapter 28.

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