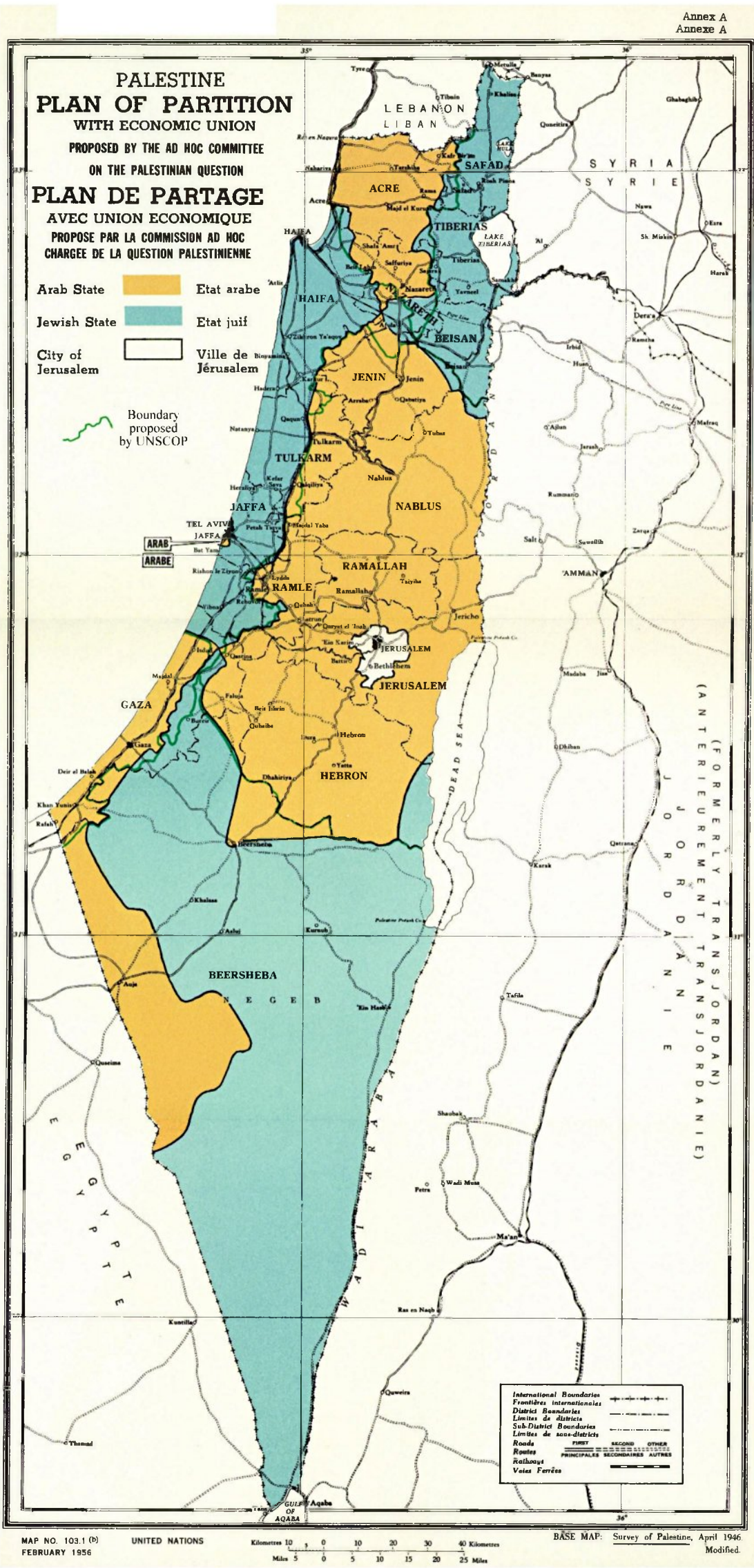


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The UN
Partition Plan:

70
years of
conflict
later

While territorial division remains the focus of the peace process, some believe that the core issue of the conflict is a rejection of any Jewish sovereignty

THE MAP of the UN Partition Plan for Palestine adopted in 1947. (Wikimedia Commons)

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• CHARLES BYBELEZER/THE MEDIA LINE

Considered by many as being arguably the most significant day in modern Jewish history, November 29, 1947 signals the first time in 2,000 years that the international community moved to actualize the national aspirations of the wounded, albeit unbroken, Jewish people.

The United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, outlined in Resolution 181 and adopted by the General Assembly, recommended the division of British Mandatory Palestine into two states: one Jewish and one Arab. Despite reservations – primarily that a non-contiguous and vulnerable Israel would be created on less than 20% of the territory originally envisioned by the 1918 Balfour Declaration – the Jewish pre-state leadership accepted the plan. By contrast, Arab governments unanimously rejected it, effectively charting the course for seven decades of conflict.

At the time, some leading Jewish figures among the Revisionist Zionists also objected to the UN initiative. The underground Irgun, for example, led by Menachem Begin, who would become Israel’s first right-wing prime minister in 1977, warned that partition would result not in peace but, rather, would lead to a “war on our existence and future.”

Former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations Gabriella Shalev recounted to The Media Line the excitement that permeated throughout most of the Jewish community in the run-up to and aftermath of the vote on Resolution 181. “It was very historic and the motion was very dramatic. Everybody was sitting by their radios. When the result was announced, I was among those on the shoulders of their parents and we were dancing in the streets.

“I look back and I wonder what has changed,” she expounded, “because at the time the UN embraced the [concept] of Israel, which is very different than today. I also wonder what would have happened had the Arabs accepted the resolution. Since then, things have deteriorated.”

Indeed, immediately following the resolution’s passage fighting broke out in Palestine, which, following Israel’s unilateral declaration of independence on May 14, 1948, exploded into full-blown war. Seven Arab armies invaded the nascent Jewish state in the first of four battles of attrition against Israel, including those in 1956, 1967 and 1973.

Instead of extinguishing Jewish sovereignty, though, Israel would capture additional lands, including half of the Golan Heights from Syria, which was ultimately annexed, as well as the Sinai Peninsula, returned to Egypt as part of the 1979 peace treaty between the countries. Israel also gained control over east Jerusalem (eventually annexed as well), the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which today comprise the core territorial elements of a second intended partition plan commonly referred to as the peace process. This US-led effort aims to realize what Resolution 181 could not – to achieve co-existence by dividing contested land between Jews and Arabs.

The prevailing narrative suggests that Israeli-Palestinian tensions stem from the prolonged occupation of these areas, however, they in fact preceded the 1967 war – and the onset of Israeli control over the contested lands – by decades.

In the 1920s, then-leader of the Palestinian Arabs

Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem under British rule, was notoriously antisemitic and incited violence against Jews. This included the 1929 Hebron pogrom, which killed nearly 70 Jewish civilians, sparked by a false rumor that they were planning to seize control of the Temple Mount. In the 1930s, Husseini led the campaign against the Peel Commission, which had been set up by the British to explore the possibility of revisiting the partition of the land.

During World War II, the Palestinian Mufti collaborated with Nazi Germany and even made a trip to Berlin to meet with Hitler in order to discuss the implementation of the “Final Solution” for the Jews living in Palestine. He likewise lobbied local British authorities to strictly adhere to the infamous 1939 White Paper, which prevented European Jewry from fleeing the genocide by immigrating to Palestine. (By then, Britain had effectively backtracked, largely due to Arab pressure, on its promise to promote Jewish sovereignty in the region and had already allocated more than 75% of Mandatory Palestine to what would become the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan).

Such was the context in which Resolution 181 was both formulated and rejected by the Arabs. For the Arab community that would become known as “Palestinian,” it would be another 16 years before Yasser Arafat in 1964 formed the Palestine Liberation Organization, which went on to wage a bloody insurgency against Israel for three decades until the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Arafat ostensibly committed to a “two-state solution” with Israel that would culminate in the creation of a self-governing Palestinian entity in the West Bank and Gaza; however, he rejected a comprehensive American-mediated Israeli peace proposal at Camp David

‘There is regret on the Palestinian side for not having accepted the original partition plan, which resulted in us losing everything’



DAVID BEN-GURION reads the declaration of Israel’s independence in Tel Aviv in 1948. (Kluger Zoltan/GPO)

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FOREIGN MINISTER Shimon Peres signs at the White House the 1993 Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements commonly referred to as the 'Oslo Accord,' as US President Bill Clinton and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat look on. (Avi Ohayon/GPO)

THE GRAND MUFTI of Jerusalem Haj. Amin Effendi el-Husseini in 1929. (Wikimedia Commons)

in 2000 and instead launched the second intifada, the years-long Palestinian terrorist campaign characterized by the suicide bombing of Israeli buses and cafes.

Years later, after the Israel Defense Forces had quelled the violence by redeploying to major Palestinian cities and building a defensive fence and wall around much of the West Bank, Arafat's successor Mahmoud Abbas likewise dismissed a peace deal offered by then-Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert that would have created a Palestinian state in virtually all of the territories located across the 1967 borders.

Today, Abbas has signed a unity agreement with Hamas, a genocidal Palestinian group dedicated to the Jewish state's destruction, and his PLO, the dominant political body in the Palestinian Authority and "the sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people, refuses to accept the legitimacy of a Jewish state.

Despite these circumstances, Shalev conveyed to The Media Line her belief that the "Palestinians deserve a country of their own, and that this is in line with Israel's values as a democracy." Moreover, she continued, "contrary to what others say, I think that there are many people on both sides that will make compromises by giving up certain aspirations."

While Shalev stressed that "the two-state solution is the only way of ultimately ensuring that Israel remains both a Jewish and democratic state," she does not think the current conditions are ripe for a breakthrough; that is, in the absence of pressure by moderate Sunni Arab states, who have warmed to Jerusalem given the shared interest in curbing Shi'ite Iran's expansionism and potential nuclearization.

Irrespective, Shalev concluded, "while the hope that some kind of [final] agreement between Israel and the Palestinians persists, the very act of engaging in any formal peace talks could have a major impact on how the UN and the world view Israel."

According to Alon Liel, a former foreign affairs adviser to Ehud Barak and director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, "If the peace process is to be [resuscitated] it will be done so along different lines. For this to happen, however, requires a major earthquake to change the existing environment. With the current ingredients I do not see the possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

"Instead," he elaborated, "what we see happening more and more is the possibility that the land will not be divided and a bi-national state will be created. In this respect, the sides see things very differently. For the Israeli side, there is the option of keeping all of the land while granting some rights to the Palestinians. On the Palestinian side, this option is emerging as well. They view it as having full citizenship, though."

For many Palestinians, Resolution 181 is intricately connected to their so-called Naqba, the "catastrophe" of Israel's creation and the displacement of thousands of Arabs from their homes during the 1948 war.

Nabil Amro, a former Palestinian information minister who was involved in the peace talks at Camp David, told The Media Line, "There is regret on the Palestinian side for not having accepted the original partition plan, which resulted in us losing everything. Now we cannot go back in time and demand the same things.

"On the other hand," he elaborated, "the Israelis were smarter and [then-leader David] Ben Gurion had the foresight to take what was offered and to build on it."

As per the future prospects of peace, Amro explained, "We need to see the details of US President Donald Trump's prospective initiative before commenting on it. However, the two-state solution is still the most possible to implement, as Palestinians deserve their own country and the entire world supports this."

For his part, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, previously the deputy commissioner for international relations in Abbas' Fatah party, likewise acknowledged the need to achieve peace based on the two-state paradigm. "The UN partition plan accepted the principle of two states for two peoples," he told The Media Line, "which acknowledged the right of the Palestinians to a country. But the resolution gave the majority of the land to establish the Jewish state, even though this was disproportionate given the population at the time."

"As Palestinians," he continued, "we started to fight in the 1960s and we will continue to fight until we get our independent nation. Israel will never give equal rights to Palestinians and throughout the years the only thing it offered were racist policies and apartheid."

On the flip side, the lesson many Israelis take from the failure of Resolution 181 – and the ensuing seven decades of violence – is that the conflict with the Palestinians was never about territory, but, rather, a consequence of the Arab world's resolute refusal to countenance Jewish sovereignty over any lands in the Middle East.

"When it comes to Israeli officialdom," Liel told The Media Line, "the Arab rejection of the partition plan was used by the foreign policy establishment to blame the Arabs as the rejectionists. It became part of the Israeli narrative – that we do not have a partner for peace. The idea became [embedded] in the country's DNA."

Some 70 years later, these two competing interpretations of history in large part account for the inability to end the conflict. Accordingly, while territorial division likely remains a prerequisite to achieving peace someday, other groundwork may first have to be laid in order to bridge the gap between two vastly separated peoples.

The lesson many Israelis take from the failure of Resolution 181 is that the conflict with the Palestinians was never about territory, but, rather, a consequence of the Arab world's resolute refusal to countenance Jewish sovereignty over any lands in the Middle East