

Israel's Declaration of Independence: Historical Background and Chronology

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In 1917 Chaim Weizmann, scientist, statesman, and Zionist, persuaded the British government to issue a statement favoring the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The statement which became known as the Balfour Declaration, was, in part, payment to the Jews for their support of the British against the Turks during World War I. After the war, the League of Nations ratified the declaration and in 1922 appointed Britain to rule in Palestine.

This course of events caused Jews to be optimistic about the eventual establishment of a homeland. Their optimism inspired the immigration to Palestine of Jews from many countries, particularly from Germany when Nazi persecution of Jews began. The arrival of many Jewish immigrants in the 1930s awakened Arab fears that Palestine would become a national homeland for Jews. By 1936 guerilla fighting had broken out between the Jews and Arabs. Unable to maintain peace, Britain issued a white paper in 1939 that restricted Jewish immigration into Palestine. The Jews, feeling betrayed, bitterly opposed the policy and looked to the United States for support.

While President Franklin D. Roosevelt appeared to be sympathetic to the Jewish cause, his assurances to the Arabs that the United States would not intervene without consulting both parties caused public uncertainty about his position. When President Harry S. Truman took office, he made clear that his sympathies were with the Jews and accepted the Balfour Declaration, explaining that it was in keeping with former President Woodrow Wilson's principle of "self determination." Truman initiated several studies of the Palestine situation that supported his belief that, as a result of the Holocaust, Jews were oppressed and also in need of a homeland. Throughout the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, the Departments of War and State, recognizing the possibility of a Soviet-Arab connection and the potential Arab restriction on Oil supplies to the United States, advised against U.S. intervention on behalf of the Jews.

Britain and the United States, in a joint effort to examine the dilemma, established the "Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry." In April 1946, the committee submitted recommendations that Palestine not be dominated by either Arabs or Jews. It concluded that attempts to establish nationhood or independence would result in civil strife; that a trusteeship agreement aimed at bringing Jews and Arabs together should be established by the United Nations; that full Jewish immigration be allowed into Palestine; and that two autonomous states be established with a strong central government to control Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the Negev, the southernmost section of Palestine.

British, Arab, and Jewish reactions to the recommendations were not favorable. Jewish terrorism in Palestine antagonized the British, and by February 1947 Arab-Jewish communications had collapsed. Britain, anxious to rid itself of the problem, set the United Nations in motion, formally requesting on April 2, 1947, that the U.N. General Assembly set up the Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). This committee recommended that the British mandate over Palestine be ended and that the territory be partitioned into two states. Jewish reaction was mixed -- some wanted control of all of Palestine; others realized that partition spelled hope for their dream of a homeland. The Arabs were not at all agreeable to the UNSCOP plan. In October the Arab League Council directed the governments of its member states to move troops to the Palestine border. Meanwhile, President Truman instructed the State Department to support the U.N. plan, and, reluctantly, it did so. On November 29, 1947, the partition plan was passed in the U.N. General Assembly.

UN Resolution 181, defined the outline of a settlement in Palestine creating both a Jewish and a Palestinian homeland. The 1947 UN Partition divided the area into three entities: a Jewish state, an Arab state, and an international zone around Jerusalem.

At midnight on May 14, 1948, the Provisional Government of Israel proclaimed the new State of Israel. On that same date the United States, in the person of President Truman, recognized the provisional Jewish government as de facto authority of the new Jewish state (de jure recognition was extended on January 31). The U.S. delegates to the U.N. and top ranking State Department officials were angered that Truman released his recognition statement to the press without notifying them first. On May 15, 1948, the Arab states issued their response statement and Arab armies invaded Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war began.