

11-26-2007

## Dear Mr. President:

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### ScholarWorks Citation

Couturier, Mark, "Dear Mr. President:" (2007). *Features*. 26.  
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/26>

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## Dear Mr. President:

### Advise to President Truman on Recognizing the Jewish State

By Mark Couturier

Sixty years ago this week, the United Nations, with strong support from the United States, voted to partition Palestine and create an independent Jewish state. The next year, on May 14, 1948, the Provisional Government of Israel proclaimed the new State of Israel and President Truman immediately issued a statement of U.S. recognition. The creation and recognition of Israel fueled a conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians that had been ongoing since the second decade of the 20th century. On May 15th, 1948, Palestinians invaded Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war began. Conflict has continued ever since.

The following policy statement, written by Hauenstein Center intern Mark Couturier, reconstructs the original arguments provided to the President Truman by his top aides to justify the recognition of Israel.

Washington - February 23, 1948  
Mr. President:

The rapidly deteriorating situation in Palestine carries with it grave implications on a regional and global scale and thus demands decisive action on the part of our government in order to alleviate the crisis. It is no exaggeration to say that the course we choose to take in this matter could very well affect the long-term national security and prosperity of this country and its allies and determine the future of stability in the Middle East. In light of the serious nature of this problem, it is essential that you be presented with all major policy options as well as their potential benefits and drawbacks. Hopefully, this report will aid you in your attempt to find a solution to this vexing issue.

Before I go into a thorough examination of the viable choices that are available to our government, I will first give a quick summary of the origins of this crisis so that you may better comprehend the gravity of the situation and make a more informed decision. Great Britain acquired Palestine as a League of Nations mandate at the end of the First World War. Jews had begun to immigrate to the area in significant numbers at the end of the last century, mainly from Eastern Europe. While most of them came to Palestine to escape religious persecution and establish agricultural settlements, the emerging Zionist movement played a pivotal role in the arrival of these newcomers.<sup>[1]</sup> On November 2, 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, which proclaimed that government's support for the establishment of a "Jewish national home."<sup>[2]</sup> In response to this document as well as the large influx of Jewish émigrés into Palestine, the Arabs began to protest and engage in violence as a means of forcing the British to change their immigration policies in the mandate. In 1929, Arab militants conducted a massacre of Jews in the town of Hebron, killing sixty-seven. They also carried on a countrywide rebellion that lasted from 1936 to 1939 and left thousands of people dead. In response to the attacks leveled at them, the Jews began to organize their own paramilitary groups, such as *Haganah*, *Irgun*, and *Lehi*. In May 1939, the British government finally acceded to Arab demands by issuing the White Paper, which resulted in a virtual halt of Jewish immigration to Palestine.<sup>[3]</sup>

The recent war in Europe and the murder of over six millions Jews by Nazi Germany has added a new dimension to the problem in the Middle East. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish Holocaust survivors are currently trapped in horrendous living conditions. The overwhelming majority of them have nowhere to go. They cannot return to their native countries due to the unremitting hostility that awaits them.<sup>[4]</sup> Also, many industrialized countries are, for the most part, closed to foreigners. As for Palestine, the British have largely refused to relax their tight immigration restrictions for fear of angering the local Arab population. This rigid policy has resulted in the smuggling of thousands of displaced persons into the mandate and attacks on British military and law enforcement personnel by Jewish terrorists from *Irgun* and *Lehi*.<sup>[5]</sup>

In late 1945, a group of American and British officials was commissioned to look into the Palestinian issue and come up with possible ways to resolve the crisis. The Anglo-American Committee -- as the group came to be known -- concluded its investigation in April of the following year. The report of the committee called for the immigration of one hundred thousand displaced persons to Palestine as well as the continuation of British rule there until a trusteeship under the auspices of the United Nations could be established in the mandate. However, these conclusions were shelved due to refusal on the part of the British to move on the recommendations before they could reach a consensus with the Americans on a comprehensive political solution to the Palestine problem.<sup>[6]</sup> Shortly after, another committee of Americans and British officials met in London and hammered out the Morrison-Grady Plan. This plan broached the idea of making Palestine a unitary federal state comprised of semi-autonomous Arab and Jewish provinces.<sup>[7]</sup> Also included was the entry of the one hundred thousand displaced persons into the mandate. The recommendations of the second joint committee seemed to provide the basis for a viable resolution to the Palestine crisis -- as you yourself acknowledged, Mr. President -- but, unfortunately, domestic considerations forced us to back off from the idea.

Last May the U.N. formed a committee -- the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) -- in an attempt to find a solution to the Palestine issue. After three months of investigation, the group presented its recommendations at the end of August. A majority of the members indicated in the report that they favored partitioning Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish States and placing Bethlehem and Jerusalem under U.N. control. A month later, the British colonial secretary made an announcement to the General Assembly in which he stated the intention of his government to end its mandate in Palestine and evacuate all British troops from the area by the following May. On November 29, the Assembly voted on and approved the passage of U.N. Resolution 181 -- which calls for implementation of the Partition Plan -- by a vote of thirty-three to thirteen.<sup>[8]</sup> While the Jews have been largely supportive of the measure, the Arabs have flatly rejected it. A vicious civil war has broken out between the two sides since the United Nations vote, which has only served to further exacerbate the precarious situation we now find ourselves in.<sup>[9]</sup>

One course of action that we might take to solve the problem in Palestine would be to implement the partition plan and help set up sovereign states for the Jews and Arabs. After all, this is the solution that the United Nations approved after lengthy deliberation. Also, given our active support of Resolution 181 as well as your previous statements in support of the Zionists' goal, we would be remiss to neglect our obligations at this crucial point and downplay our vital role as a leader in the Middle East. One immediate advantage to this action would be the resolution of the DP issue. The Jews of Palestine would throw their doors open to their European brethren and absorb them into the new state with relative ease. It should also be mentioned here that the creation of a Jewish homeland would right a grave historical wrong. In light of the horror and suffering that they have endured in the last war, it would seem imperative that the Sons and Daughters of Abraham be granted a place where they may always find refuge from external dangers.<sup>[10]</sup> Ethical considerations are equally as important in these matters as those concerning policy. It is also worthy of note that this position is one shared by an overwhelming majority of Americans.<sup>[11]</sup>

It is the opinion of Mr. Clifford that our active support of the Partition Plan would be "consistent with American interests in the Middle East and in accord with traditional policy in the area." A Jewish state in the Middle East could serve as a bastion of republicanism in a region that has virtually no tradition of democratic rule. Such a development could well prove to be a benefit to our national security in the long run.<sup>[12]</sup> It is the opinion of some in the State Department and the intelligence agencies that an independent Jewish state would choose a Communist government and align itself with the Soviet Union. According to these people, several military reports indicate the increasing presence of Soviet agents into the *Yishuv* (Palestinian Jewish community). However, Mr. Clifford denies the veracity of these claims and says maintains that such an outcome is unlikely given the fact that Jewish society seems to be founded upon the values of the free enterprise system. Also, it should be noted that many Jewish émigrés to Palestine are refugees from Communist regimes and that the *Yishuv* receives financial backing largely from the American Jewish community, which is staunchly opposed to the tenets of Marxism. The only way that Communism could triumph in a Jewish State would be as a result of a military vacuum and the failure of United Nations control in the area. Indeed, Mr. Clifford concludes that a free Jewish state "would have the strongest possible orientation to the United States."<sup>[13]</sup>

Active support for the implementation of the Partition Plan would not only be in our best interests but also in the best interests of the Jewish people. On the other hand, if we fail to exercise our duty in this regard, our neglig



President Harry S. Truman and Israeli President Dr. Chaim Weizmann

crisis on the pretext of restoring peace and stability in the region. Were such an event to occur, it would likely escalate tensions between our two countries and possibly trigger a catastrophic war.<sup>[14]</sup>

Another argument in the case for implementing partition deals with the upcoming presidential election. There are many supporters of the Zionist cause in this country who might wield a significant degree of influence in key states in November.<sup>[15]</sup> While domestic political considerations should not weigh too heavily on decisions regarding vital matters in foreign affairs, I feel it is essential that you be familiarized with the full implications of each course of action, be they international or domestic.

One significant disadvantage to this option is that the United States could be compelled to dispatch a sizable military force to buttress the new Jewish state. Reports from the Defense Department indicate that the Jews of Palestine -- who number only six hundred thousand people -- are faring poorly in the ongoing civil war in the mandate. The Arab forces have managed to break the Jews' communication lines and isolate many of their communities. The situation has also enflamed the populations of surrounding Arab states, an ominous development that may result in their involvement in this imbroglio. It is the opinion of many in this government that should this happen, the Jews would be doomed without the help of outside forces.<sup>[16]</sup>

Should America intervene militarily, the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimate that such a move would necessitate a force of at least one hundred thousand men. Due to the present size of our army, partial mobilization will be required to reach this number. Also, we would not be able to count on our British allies to aid us in this endeavor, due to their desire to extricate themselves from this situation and avoid angering the Arabs. Indeed, it is likely that the United States would end up providing the bulk of any international force sent to the mandate to impose partition. In addition, several members of the defense establishment predict that an American deployment to the area could ignite an Arab war aimed at "driving the Jews into the sea."<sup>[17]</sup>

Another potential drawback of military intervention in Palestine is the torrent of domestic anti-Semitism that might accompany such a course of action. While the American people generally favor the idea of establishing a Jewish state in the Middle East, Secretary Forrestal feels that such support would surely erode if American soldiers end up doing much of the fighting and dying on behalf of that state. Indeed, polls indicate that a vast majority of the public is against any kind of military involvement in the area, especially if that involvement was unilateral. Also, many people over at State and Defense believe that were American troops to enter Palestine to enforce the partition plan, they would encounter a considerable degree of armed resistance from both the Arab and Jewish paramilitary forces. Such a scenario could only exacerbate any possible anti-Semitism at home.<sup>[18]</sup>

Another potential outcome of this course of action that must be considered is the possibility that an independent Jewish state would attempt to pull the United States into its affairs. To achieve this goal, the Jewish state might have the various Zionist organizations in this country use their political and financial power to pressure our government to support that state's policies in the Middle East. If this scenario were to come to pass, it could create a situation whereby a foreign government is able to exert undue influence over our policies vis-a-vis other nations.<sup>[19]</sup>

Probably the most serious drawback of implementing the partition plan is the affect it would have on our relations with the Arab states. Most of the people in the Moslem world do not want to see a Jewish state created in their midst. In light of the fact that the Arabs make up the overwhelming majority of the population in the Middle East and possess access to the bulk of that region's natural resources, it might be prudent for us to avoid taking any course of action that would alienate them, thus denying ourselves the possibility of forging crucial partnerships in a strategic part of the world. It is imperative that we maintain the ability to tap into the abundant oil reserves of the Middle East. Supporting partition would hamper this ability and forfeit any potential alliances with the Arabs. Indeed, our Saudi friends have been under tremendous pressure from Iraq and Transjordan to cut off all diplomatic and economic ties with us.<sup>[20]</sup> Were we to come out in full support of the partition plan to the point of sending troops into Palestine on behalf of the Jews, the Arabs might cut off oil supplies to the West. Such action would not only spell potential disaster for us, but also for our European allies. Middle Eastern oil is an essential component to the revival of the Western European economies. If Western access to that oil were denied in any way, such a turn of events would put the Marshall Plan in grave jeopardy and render our allies vulnerable in the face of the Soviet menace.<sup>[21]</sup> Several supporters of partition in the administration maintain that such an outcome would be highly unlikely to occur. They point out that many of the Arab countries are heavily dependent on American dollars as well as American trade, and would not wish to do anything that would jeopardize their relationship with us. While this is no doubt true, it is also possible that the populations of those countries might force their leaders to take an anti-American stance for fear of being overthrown.<sup>[22]</sup>

Another disadvantage to this option is the potential rise of anti-American sentiment in the Arab world that would surely result as a response to our actions. Such sentiment could endanger the lives of many Americans residing in the Middle East as well as the lives of Jews in Arab countries. American businesses and cultural institutions would also be adversely affected. Arab regimes would most likely shut down American schools and universities and nationalize or expropriate American companies. Many of our citizens would lose their financial investments in the region, which are estimated to total hundreds of millions of dollars.<sup>[23]</sup>

This option may also have an adverse affect on our ability to contain the threat of Communism. Due to the particular location of the Middle East, it is imperative that we be allowed to maintain strategic air and naval bases in the region. These bases will serve as potential launching pads for attacks on vulnerable points in the Soviet Union in the event of war between our two countries. In light of the present decline of the French and British in the area, the United States has an obligation to fill the void and assume its rightful leadership role. Yet, this task will be difficult to accomplish if we are denied access to those bases, and our ability to face the Russians will be seriously hampered.<sup>[24]</sup>

Another potential fallout from this course of action would be the defection of the Arabs to the Soviet camp. Several officials from the State and Defense departments are of the opinion that such a scenario could facilitate Soviet penetration into the region -- a move that would bring about serious repercussions.<sup>[25]</sup> It is of the utmost importance for our containment policy that we keep the Soviets out of the affairs of the Middle East to the extent that we are able to do so. For the reasons outlined above, we must avoid having a population that is hostile to us in that part of the world. As far as State and Defense are concerned, this consideration outweighs any potential benefit that we could derive from supporting a Jewish state. In relation to this issue, it must be pointed out that, regardless of Arab opinion, any intervention that would place American troops near the Russian border might provoke the Soviets into sending their military into the region -- possibly as part of an international force -- under the guise of promoting stability. As you well know, any encounter between American and Soviet soldiers in such circumstances could trigger an all-out war between the two superpowers.<sup>[26]</sup>

Another disadvantage to throwing our weight behind the partition plan that must be considered is the possibility of an irreparable split in the administration -- a development that could have serious repercussions both for matters concerning policymaking and the upcoming election. Several members of the State Department remain staunchly opposed to the idea of partition, and if the administration were to take this particular course of action without managing to bring these people onboard, the result could well be resignations in key positions.<sup>[27]</sup>

A second option in dealing with this crisis would be for us to support the idea of placing Palestine under a trusteeship administered by the United Nations. Taking such a position on the issue would absolve the United States of any responsibility for the enforcement of the partition plan and allow our government to avoid being seen as actively supporting the establishment of a Jewish state. The Trusteeship Plan would also give more time for the U.N. to seek a possible compromise between the Arabs and Jews.<sup>[28]</sup>

One of the drawbacks of this option is that it could face rejection from both sides and only serve to further exacerbate the conflict. The trusteeship also has the potential of jeopardizing the chances of creating any future Jewish state, for if the matter were referred to the United Nations, there is a high probability that the Arabs would employ a combination of military and diplomatic measures to ensure that such a state never comes into existence.<sup>[29]</sup> We could also expect to face stiff opposition from the pro-Zionist forces in this country, which would doubtless have significant repercussions in the upcoming elections.

Enforcement of the Trusteeship Plan will also necessitate the deployment of American troops to the region -- possibly more than would have been required under the partition plan. The dispatch of a military force to Palestine carries with it the same implications as those I have outlined above in the first option, especially if trusteeship is opposed by both Arabs and Jews.<sup>[30]</sup> Moreover, if we succeed in defeating Resolution 181 in favor of the trusteeship proposal, we run the risk of seriously undermining the United Nations. Such a development could erode the credibility of the infant organization and weaken its ability to mediate future conflict around the globe.<sup>[31]</sup> Also, abandoning our support for the partition plan -- particularly in light of our monumental efforts to convince members of the General Assembly to vote for it -- could possibly result in

irreparable damage to our credibility as a leader in the world. Naturally, such a development would cause some of our allies to question our decisiveness and make them reluctant to send troops to Palestine as part of a multilateral force, should that sort of action be required.<sup>[32]</sup>

A third possible course of action would be for this government to refuse to implement the partition plan without officially endorsing the trusteeship proposal. Choosing this option would allow us to retreat from our previous stance on partition -- while not actively opposing it -- and release us from any potential military commitments in the mandate. In doing this, we could avoid antagonizing the Arabs in the Middle East as well as the pro-Zionist forces in this country. As the situation deteriorates in Palestine, the United Nations might act on its own accord and take the necessary steps to postpone implementing Resolution 181 and set up a trusteeship in the area.<sup>[33]</sup> Also, taking a step back from this conflict and assuming a neutral stance would put us in a position to observe events as they unfold in the mandate and allow us to consider any future options that may arise.

There are some potentially serious drawbacks to this course of action, however. The United Nations could be seriously weakened by our inaction and ultimately lack the ability to act on the provisions of either the partition or trusteeship plans. If the organization is to be a guiding force for peace and stability in the world, it must be able to show that it possesses the strength to carry out its resolutions. Without the support of the United States, this task will prove to be exceedingly difficult -- if not impossible -- to accomplish.<sup>[34]</sup> Should the United Nations fail in its efforts to impose partition or trusteeship in Palestine, there is the possibility that the international body could be forced to turn to the Soviet Union for assistance -- a grave possibility for the reasons mentioned above. Also -- as with the second option -- this course would undermine our credibility at a time when it is needed most.

While the action we eventually take in this matter will be wholly at your discretion Mr. President, it is my belief that the last option I have outlined offers the best chance for a resolution to this crisis. While a decision to withhold American troops from the Middle East could incur a Soviet intervention in the region, such an outcome is possible in the other two cases as well. Backing off from openly supporting partition while simultaneously maintaining a noncommittal stance toward trusteeship will allow us to bide our time and see if better alternatives present themselves in the future. In light of our dependence on the Arab states for their friendship and resources, it would be national suicide for us -- and possibly for our European allies -- to get involved in a potential war for the sake of a tiny Jewish state, however noble such an undertaking might prove to be. Even if a temporarily neutral posture were to cost the administration a great amount of political and financial support at home, I believe that domestic considerations should not in any way take precedence over issues relating to foreign policy. The stakes are simply too high. How we act today could very well affect the state of our great nation as well as the international community for decades to come.

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[18] Cohen, *Truman*, 177.

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[29] Clifford, *Counsel*, 8.

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