

## Chapter 11 - Events on the Ground (a terrible title but you understand what I mean)

The situation on the ground in Palestine was following its own logic, independent of what was happening in Lake Success. In fact, the unproductive discussions in Lake Success were acting not as a brake but as an encouragement to belligerence. By February, the situation in Palestine was rapidly deteriorating. The British were withdrawing willy nilly. The group that was to be the United Nations authority in Palestine, the Palestine Commission, had not even entered the country and its advance guard was advising headquarters that events were overtaking its usefulness. Armed conflict between the Jews and Arabs (now supported from the outside) was escalating. Secret negotiations between the Jews and certain Arab parties that held out the possibility of avoiding war were inconclusive, and Palestine moved closer and closer to war. None of the main powers from outside the region were acting effectively to forestall war. The British, in fact, felt a certain amount of fighting would be necessary and indeed helpful in realizing their objective for the area -- a Transjordanian takeover of Arab Palestine. The United States failed to act directly and kept the United Nations Security Council from acting. The role of the United Nations was shifting away from being a legal successor and arranging for the transfer of powers to trying to quell the violence arising from the Arabs and Jews taking the matters into their own hands, in relative disregard for the wishes of an ineffectual United Nations.

The British, in order to avoid having any ostensible role in realizing partition, to avoid having to protect the Palestine Commission from the wrath of the Arabs, and to avoid having competing legal authorities in Palestine had forbidden the Palestine Commission from entering Palestine prior to two weeks before the British withdrawal was completed. There was little the Palestine Commission's advance group in Palestine could do except some very perceptive reporting that, often as not, was ignored in Lake Success. It met

with the British and with the Jews, but the Palestinian Arabs scrupulously avoided all contact with it.(1)

The Palestine Commission itself, still comfortably ensconced in New York, dithered away the precious little time it had to try to accomplish something.

...everything broke on the rock of the Commission's inertial, capable of spending entire afternoons in interminable discussions, they were smitten with deadly paralysis whenever it was a question of taking decisions and carrying them out.(2)

It could not bring itself to decide, let alone send anyone, to take control of the postal and telegram office, the railways, the public health facilities, the courts, and all the other administrative functions of government.

The British withdrawal, coupled with the absence of a United Nations authority on the ground in Palestine, meant that either Arab or Jewish authorities moved in to occupy the military and administrative vacuum left by the departing British. Ironically, then, British withdrawal was doing as much, if not more, to bring partition to realization than any positive, cooperative action might have. In effect, it was simply circumventing the proposed United Nations authority and helping establish "facts on the ground". According to the Palestine Commission's advance guard, de Azcarate

...after the Jews themselves and, perhaps, the United States government, no one contributed more to the partition of Palestine than Great Britain - and this was due not only to the Balfour Declaration of 1917, but also to the British government's policy in Palestine during the last six months of the Mandate. Under cover

of official obligations and responsibilities until the end of the Mandate, the British government lent passive, and at times active aid to the progressive transfer of powers and responsibilities from its own organisms in Palestine to Arab or Jewish institutions... This policy led to the creation of distinct and separate territorial zones where, under nominal British authority, the real authority lay in the majority of cases in the hands of Arab or Jewish bodies.(3)

For the last months before the British left, the various foreign consular authorities were dealing with either the Arab Higher Committee or the Jewish Agency rather than the British when there were problems. The real test of the United Nations became not the transfer of the administrative apparatus, but ending the conflict.

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However important the preparation for the transfer of powers to the Palestine Commission (and we have already seen that the transfer was being carried out at an ever-quickenning tempo, not to the Commission but to Jews and Arabs), everything was subordinate to the primordial question of whether it would be possible to put an end to the guerilla warfare now raging and to prevent it from degenerating into a "major" war when the Mandate expired.(4)

His concerns were well justified. In essence, war had begun as soon as the partition resolution passed. Anti-Jewish pogroms had broken out in Temen and other places.(5)

In the fall of 1947, after the UNSCOP report had been issued, but prior to the partition vote, Jon Kimche (a well-connected British journalist) arranged for Aubrey Eban and David Horowitz of the Jewish Agency to meet with

Azzam Pasha, Secretary General of the Arab League, in London. Horowitz proposed a plan for coordinating Arab and Jewish interests and ensuring a real peace. Azzam Pasha's response set the tone of all that was to follow:

The Arab world is not in a compromising mood. It's likely, Mr. Horowitz, that your plan is rational and logical, but the fate of nations is not decided by rational logic. Nations never concede, they fight. You won't get anything by peaceful means or compromise. You can, perhaps, get something, but only by force of arms. We shall try to defeat you. I'm not sure we'll succeed, but we'll try. An

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agreement will only be acceptable on our terms. The Arab world regards you as invaders and is ready to fight you. The conflict of interests among nations is, for the most part, not amenable to any settlement except armed clash.(6)

The Prime Ministers of the Arab League states met in Cairo from December 8 to 17 to devise their response to the partition vote. They had already decided in October to provide arms to the Palestinians, to station troops on the border, and to reconsider their oil concessions (a threat never realized).(7) Abdullah, who was anxious to secure the Arab portion of Palestine and was entertaining the possibility of making a deal with the Jews, was reluctant to arm the Palestinians and the Mufti. In early December 1948, he proposed to the Arab League members that they finance a Transjordanian conquest of Palestine. Distrusted due to his pro-British stance and continuing attempts to promote the Greater Syria scheme -- which he had been actively pursuing through the fall of 1947 -- Abdullah's proposal was rejected. The Egyptians, the Mufti, and the Syrians pressed to arm the Palestinians. their views prevailed and the Arab League set quotas for the arms each member was to send to the Palestinians.(8) It was further decided to recruit and train volunteers to fight alongside the Palestinians. These volunteers would comprise

the Arab Liberation Army. Still at this point, according to a British report,

it was generally agreed that the open use of Arab armies against the Jews, even after the termination of the Mandate, was not practicable  
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at present.(9)

In Palestine, forces of the Mufti began to attack the communication lines between the Jewish settlements. On January 15th, they launched their first large scale attack on the Etzion block of settlements in the Hebron hills.(10) The Mufti's plans were clear. As reported to the American Consul General in Jerusalem by Emile Ghory of the Arab Higher Executive, an Arab administration for all Palestine would be set up the day the Mandate ended. Ghory believed

...Abdullah, regardless of private thoughts, must accept Palestine Arab administration although admits possibility various parts of Palestine may be annexed to bordering states. The line is that it is unimportant who takes over Palestine provided Palestine remains Arab. Preference is for unified Palestinian state.(11)

The arming, training and infiltration of Arab irregulars into Palestine had begun in January 1948. Under the direction of the Syrian Fawzi al-Qawugji, this rather motley "Arab Liberation Army" would eventually field some 7,000 troops(12) badly organized, undisciplined, and poorly supplied.

Get information on what the Jews were doing militarily.

At the same time, there were and had been for some months a number of behind-the-scenes negotiations between the Jews and various Arab parties

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aimed at halting the slide towards full-scale war. Tellingly enough, the negotiations were initiated and undertaken by the interested parties themselves. Eventually one possibility opened by the negotiations between the Jews and Abdullah would be an important element of British and American, and thereby United Nations, thinking on a solution. But the United Nations itself played no part whatsoever in instigating or assisting in these attempts to avoid war.

Just prior to the passage of the United Nations partition resolution, Golda Myerson (later meir), Ezra Danin and Eliahu Sassoon met with Abdullah to see if they could arrive at an understanding. Abdullah proposed an independent Hebrew republic under a Transjordanian monarchy. The military, economy and legislature would be divided equally between Jew and Arab in the united state. Myerson said the discussion would have to await the outcome of the partition resolution. It was at this meeting that Abdullah asked Myerson's opinion of a Transjordanian takeover of the Arab part of Palestine. The understanding was reached that this would pose no problem for the Jews as long as Abdullah did not interfere with the Jewish state or foster confrontation. Abdullah, in turn, agreed not to let Arab armies pass through his kingdom. He promised only to cooperate with other Arab armies if the invasion was centered in his country and the armies were under his jurisdiction.(14) (We could add information here from Simcha's book on why the Jews were willing to make such a deal with Abdullah.)

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The inability of either side to firm and clarify its understanding would effect the abilities of both parties to conclude

a lasting peace.

The roots of the conflict were not only in two peoples competing over a single territory, but two peoples who spoke with different cultural baggage that made them prone to misunderstand one another. A community of faith and fate bred on "survival in hostile human and natural surroundings", understandably super-sensitive to the need for security, confronted a culture rooted in its natural setting and prone to exaggerations and indirection.(15)

Abdullah was not the only one to court the Jews to outflank his Arab rivals. By one account, on November 27, 1947, the Mufti, of all people, sent a message to the Jewish Agency requesting an urgent meeting in Lebanon to discuss the situation in Palestine.(16) He would speak for himself -- without the participation of any other country -- and indicated a willingness to compromise. The Jewish Agency Executive rejected the overture. It said it would negotiate with any Arab except the Mufti.(17)

There were other attempts at negotiations and compromise, but they proved fruitless. Kaoukji, commander of the Arab Liberation Army and an old enemy of the Mufti's, held secret talks with Yoshua Palmon in late March of 1948. Kaoukji wanted to be the military commander of a federal state with internal autonomy for Jews in Palestine. The commander of the Arab Liberation Army promised that the army would not attack Jews if it could have one battlefield success to save face. Palmon could not and did not agree to this proposal.(18)

Another approach was made by the Arab moderates centred in Haifa. They sent Rashid Haj Ibrahim to Cairo and Damascus to win Arab League support for moderation and efforts to arrive at an amicable settlement with the Jews on the basis of the partition plan. The Mufti was present at the meeting and crushed the idea. One of the results,

however, was the Ibrahim was replaced as Arab military commander in Haifa by a more extremist Syrian.(19)

The negotiations demonstrated that the Israelis really had no one with whom to negotiate. Each Arab party had to insist on unacceptable preconditions to protect its backside from the accusations of extremists in the Arab camp. The prices for this would be paid by the Palestinian Arabs. As Glubb Pasha depicted the Arab approach:

There may be something admirable in this resolution to demand that which is right, regardless of the cost. But the effect on the fate of the Palestinian Arabs was utterly disastrous. Many opportunities for compromise were offered them and might, if accepted, have saved them. But they were utterly intransigent, and, as a result, they were destroyed.(20)]

The only hope of a negotiated agreement depended on the sell-out of Palestinian Arab self-determination through a deal with Abdullah. This

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possibility would survive as an undercurrent in British, American, Jewish and Jordanian thinking throughout the period right up to the end of the Mandate. But the other Arab leaders objections to Abdullah's plans would crush all hopes of their easy realization.

Given the inconclusive nature of the Arab-Jewish negotiations, the violence continued unabated. The British refused to become involved in the skirmishes between Jew and Arab, turning a blind eye to the large scale infiltration and activities of Arab irregulars in Palestine and the Jewish moves to strengthen their strategic positions. Both sides struggled to take over important assets as the British withdrew from them. The British commander in Palestine and Suez had wanted to drive the Arab Liberation Army out of Palestine. But the Minister for War in London had



rejected the idea, saying British troops should not get involved in any military encounter with Jews or Arabs unless either side was interfering with the British withdrawal.(21) The extent of Britain's "non-involvement" can be judged by the comments of the British Mayor of Jerusalem:

The statement that we are not only responsible for security, but that we are effectively preserving it, has been made so often recently in Westminster and Lake Success that truth-loving Britons in Palestine -- of whom there are more than a handful -- have become absolutely disgusted with the discrepancy between the claim and the facts.(22)

The United Nations influence was virtually nil. Its moral authority with the Arabs had been gambled away. Its legal authority was a chimera. Its administrative apparatus lived a ghostly life in Jerusalem. It had been unable to organize an international force, giving heart to the war mongers. The British insisted on "undivided authority" until the Mandate ended, while, in practice, authority was being divested to the Jews and the Arabs who were moving closer and closer to full scale war.

