

Chapter 10 - The Role of the Outside Powers in the Move to War

As indicated in the previous chapter, events on the ground had overtaken discussions in Lake Success as the determinant of the future. Private negotiations between Arabs and Jews had not been conclusive, the Arabs were edging towards the most extreme eventuality -- full scale war. The major outside players were ineffective in halting the slide to war. Britain believed fighting was inevitable, and to a degree, would be beneficial. Despite its policy of withdrawal, it was giving some important support to the Arabs, including arms provisions, and, most important, not discouraging them from launching a war.

The Americans were not supporting either side; but (at least in the early months of 1948) there was some concern on the part of the Arabs that any overt military moves on their part would swing the US behind sending Security Council forces. Their concerns were soon assuaged: to the consternation of many, the Americans launched a new approach in the United Nations that effectively stymied any efforts in the few months remaining to bring about partition according to plan. They called a new Special Session to reconsider partition, initially with the aim of having the General Assembly opt for a UN trusteeship in Palestine. The American about-face encouraged the Arabs to continue in their resistance to partition and prompted the Jews to push for statehood do or die. American withdrawal of support for partition gave war the final push, if a _____ push was needed.

As detailed in the previous chapter, the British were doing nothing to maintain law and order in Palestine. They could have directed their troops to intervene in Arab-Jewish fighting, but they chose instead to keep their troops at a safe distance to minimize British casualties. They could have acted to prevent (or limit) arms reaching the parties

to the conflict, but they did so on a selective basis. They blockaded the Palestine coast to keep Jewish immigrants and arms out and refused to accept the Palestine Commission's (?? -- the PC's or the GA's??) recommendation that the Jews be allowed to form their own militia.(1) While they were fairly effective in limiting the Jews capacity to fight, they did nothing to interfere with the arms build-up on the Arab side. Instead of embargoing arms to the Arabs, they continued to supply the Arabs until early June, when the Security Council called for a one-month truce.(2)

Since the United States had begun an embargo of arms to the Middle East in December, the combined effect of British and American policies was to permit arms to flow to the Arabs while choking off supplies to the Jews.(3) The American arms embargo to the region meant that the Jews most powerful supporter was not allowing the Jews the means to defend partition.

The most Britain would do was agree to attempt to "moderate" the view of the Arabs. It did not even do this wholeheartedly. When the Arab League had met in Aley, Lebanon in October of 1947 to coordinate Arab opposition to partition, Brigadier Clayton attended the meeting. His presence lent an aura of at least tacit British approval for violent opposition to partition.

Further, there were at least 30 British officers and four or five enlisted men seconded to the Transjordanian Arab Legion. Other British soldiers of fortune (Glubb Pasha being the most prominent one) were with the Arab Legion as independent agents. The seconded officers were not called back nor British support for the Arab Legion cut off until the Arab Legion entered Jerusalem at the outbreak of full scale war. In other words, British officers

participated in planning the invasion of Palestine that followed the termination of the Mandate and actually joined the invasion.(5)

The British were inclined to just let the Arabs and Jews fight it out. Beeley's view was that some fighting was necessary since it would convince both the Arabs and the Jews that compromise was necessary.

It is my personal view that there can be no stabilization of the political situation in Palestine without a period of fighting.(6)

For most of the period prior to the British withdrawal, the assessment of the British was that the fighting would be of brief duration, and the results would favor the Arabs. According to information gathered by Cohen from talks with Arabs closely associated with the Arab Higher Committee,

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The Arab Higher Committee, led by the former Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini, and the rulers of the Arab states, were seduced by the assurances of British experts that there was no possibility that the Jewish irregular forces, lacking heavy military equipment, could hold out against the regular armies for longer than two weeks at most. Even two weeks struck some "experts" as an exaggerated estimate.(7)

Others shared this early assessment. As explained in a Council on Foreign Relations summary of the year's events:

The expectation was widespread that the Arab armies, unless outside powers intervened, could deal heavy

and perhaps mortal blows to the young Jewish state.(8)

In fact, on the eve on the outbreak of the war, Nokrashi Pasha, the Egyptian Prime Minister, who had been most reluctant to go to war, echoed the now obsolete British experts' view that the war would last no more than two weeks before Zionism was defeated,(9) whether to raise his own morale or provide an objective rationale against his own _____ is not known.

Another element of British thinking was the hope that Abdullah and the Jews would be able to arrive at an understanding that would either preclude or limit the fighting. Britain itself would benefit from such a concorde in that it would give Britain continuing access for military purposes to the parts of Palestine absorbed by Transjordan.

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Indeed, it was only in late April that the Arabs became convinced that the British really were leaving Palestine.(10) Even then, the Arabs continued to believe that the United Kingdom was really supporting them, if not actually using them to fight a war on behalf of Britain.(11)

British policy, then, did nothing to "moderate" the Arab tilt to invasion and war. Britain refused to accept or to help enforce partition. Britain had another territorial goal in mind, and this was well understood by the Arabs - whether they agreed or not. At any rate, they all understood that Britain would not interfere with and probably wanted their obstruction of partition. The lop-sided policy of keeping arms from the Jews while continuing to arm the Arabs, coupled with on-going British involvement in the Arab Legion and encouraging British assessments of Arab might quite understandably was read by the Arabs as support for their cause. Nevertheless, the Arabs continued to complain in public about inadequate British support and that Britain wasn't doing enough to keep arms from the

Jews.

The policies of the United States likewise did little to discourage the Arabs. The United States did try to reassure the Arabs that the Jews had no expansionist plans and that the United States would oppose any such designs.(12)

(add a little detail here - who did the US contact, how often, etc.) The Americans also tried to use economic inducements to keep the Arabs from invading, for example, by putting the carrot of the Tigris-Euphrates development scheme before Iraq.(13) (explain this) But neither of these addressed the core issue of Arab opposition to partition

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and neither was terribly convincing.

The main question for the Arabs was how far would the Americans go in supporting partition? While there were clear indications that the United States would not sanction Security Council action, there remained some Arab nervousness about the question for at least the early part of 1948. The United States had clearly stated its interpretation that the Security Council could not use force to enforce the partition resolution, but there still remained the possibility of the Security Council using force to quell an international threat to peace. Early in the General Assembly's consideration of partition, Johnson, the chief U.S. delegate, had said that

...the threat or use of force in opposition to a United Nations decision could not be tolerated, even if it were necessary to mobilize and use a volunteer United Nations constabulary.(14)

Thus in March, Azzam Pasha sent a circular to the Arab states warning them not to make statements or commit acts that might be viewed as threats to international peace.(15)

The lingering fear that the United States might resort to Security Council involvement would soon be dispelled and this one important barrier to an Arab invasion would fall.