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**Parallel and Intersecting Lines:  
US and Soviet Policy on the Partition of Palestine**

*“No other problem of our time is so deeply rooted in the past”  
- Peel Commission Report of 1937*

In order to gain support against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, the British promised Arab independence. Meanwhile, the British promised in the Balfour Declaration to support the establishment of a “national home” for the Jews. After the World War One, Britain and France divided the Middle East without interference, but following the Second World War, new superpowers approached the region. By 1945, the wartime alliance between Russia and the West had disappeared and the meetings at Potsdam and Yalta showed the tension and suspicion that would mark the next few decades. The British helped create the Arab League in 1945 to act as a bulwark against the southward Soviet expansion and to try and consolidate their own power against the French, a move that backfired in creating a framework for the unity of Arab opinion. Zionist leaders had looked for American and Soviet support throughout the war and by the end, both nations supported the creation of the new nation through partition for different reasons.

In the United States, the Biltmore Conference of 1942 officially established the Zionist movement as working directly towards the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and activated the Jewish community in the United States to begin lobbying the American government. At the time, the entire staff of the Middle East section at the state department numbered only fourteen. One desk officer in the department handled Palestine, along with Egypt

and Iraq. Throughout the 1940's, the state department advised both Presidents Roosevelt and Truman against the partition of Palestine, mindful of the commercial interests the US held in the Arab world that would only be negatively impacted if supported. Yet in the end, the US, rather President Truman, supported and even ensured the passage of the partition vote at the UN. The Soviet Union was always thought to be against partition and their change in policy was nothing less than a shock for most of the world. The differences in the path and factors leading to the decision to support partition in both countries are reflective of the differences between decision making in a dictatorship and a democracy. In the Soviet Union, decisions could be made independent of public wishes, for the long-term strength of the country without the need to worry about a reelection. In the United States, domestic concerns motivated most of the decisions made, and the information ignored, on Palestine. In an effort to shed light on a confusing set of factors on both sides that led the two leaders of the Cold War to agree on one of the defining moments of the twentieth century; I will first examine the possible factors for the Soviet support of the Partition of Palestine after which I will examine the specific factors that impacted US President Truman's decision on Partition.

Before the Second World War, the Soviet position on Zionism was clear. Marxist leaders had opposed the movement as “déclassé,” spiritually “strangers in their own country,” and “deserters” from the battlefield of class conflict.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1903, Vladimir Lenin wrote in the party's newspaper *Iskara* (the spark) that the very idea of a Jewish nationality was “manifestly reactionary” and “in conflict with the interests of the Jewish proletariat.” A 1931 Arabic publication from the Communist Party in Palestine stated:

Zionism is the expression of the exploiting and great power oppressive strivings of the Jewish bourgeoisie, which makes use of the persecution of the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Kramer, 6

national minorities in Eastern Europe for the purpose of imperialistic policy to insure its domination.<sup>2</sup>

The Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact strongly influenced the Soviet position towards the Zionists. After June 1941, while the pro-German position was reversed, the Soviet attitude towards the Zionists remained mostly unchanged during the war when the USSR avoided most public political statements on Zionism.<sup>3</sup> A 1946 Soviet publication stated that Zionists did not want independence for Palestine but instead, a perpetuation of the foreign mandate. According to the article, Arab leaders in the Holy Land were progressive even though there were some “reactionary, feudalist” elements that could be found among them.<sup>4</sup> The Communist Party of Palestine had been founded in 1919 and was strictly advised to “support the nationalist freedom of the Arab population against the British-Zionist occupation.”<sup>5</sup> After the 1929 Riots, the Palestine party appointed an Arab majority to its Central Committee, and from that point on continued to represent official Soviet policy in support of the Arab population. After the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, the Palestinian Party was permitted to split into two groups, Arab and Jewish. This allowance most likely came from the Russian desire to publicly recognize Jewish efforts following the news of Nazi atrocities, and the Soviet government's concern over the Arab attraction to Germany.<sup>6</sup>

In the early months of 1947, Soviet propaganda against Zionism began to slow. The Soviet Union moved to a policy of neutrality against the “complex and unstable problem” and focused only on the British responsibility for the problem.<sup>7</sup> As late as January and February of 1947, Soviet literature still defined Zionists as “bourgeois lackeys of British imperialism,” but

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<sup>2</sup> Kramer, 7

<sup>3</sup> Kramer, 9

<sup>4</sup> Donovan, 21

<sup>5</sup> Krammer, 8

<sup>6</sup> Krammer, 8

<sup>7</sup> Krammer, 15

only three months later the transformation of policy was so complete that statements linked the birth of Israel with the history of the Jewish past there and the recent Holocaust.<sup>8</sup>

The Soviet Union had both long and short-term interests for supporting partition<sup>9</sup>. In the short term, was the removal of the British from Palestine. In the long term, partition would begin to remove the British from the Middle East entirely, leaving the region open for Soviet advancement. Of course, this long-term goal required that Arabs be appeased in some way or at least not ignored. At this point, the Soviet Union knew that the Arabs were decidedly more pro-British than the anti-British Yishuv and so acted accordingly.

Soviet Representative to the UN, Andrei Gromyko's speech to the special session held on May 14, 1947 was a skillful combination of both the nation's long and short-term goals. Gromyko spoke about the British failures that had led to the deterioration of the situation in Palestine to its current point. He spoke emotionally about the plight of the Jews and posed several solutions, of which he most strongly advocated a bi-national Jewish-Arab state. In the middle of support for the bi-national idea, Gromyko uttered one sentence that if there was no possible alternative given the situation, then partition must be considered. Gromyko's speech could be interpreted as supporting the Jewish position while still giving the appearance of impartiality.<sup>10</sup>

By the time of the General Assembly partition vote, partition was the most feasible option for the Soviet Union. Moscow could ensure some participation in the British withdrawal by having the Security Council involved and even while supporting partitions, Soviet spokesmen were conciliatory towards Arab representatives, arguing that partition was actually in the best

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<sup>8</sup> Krammer, 31

<sup>9</sup> Golan

<sup>10</sup> Golan, 37

interests of both people.<sup>11</sup>

Arnold Krammer, points to a possible Soviet attraction to the potential for a friendly and sympathetic government in Israel. Kramer writes that the Soviet Union “entered the United Nations in May and December of 1947 with a number of personal assurances from relatively important individuals who might have risen to prominent position in the future government...the Soviets had certainly not received any similar assurances from members of the Arab world”<sup>12</sup> The Soviets might have been influenced by individuals like Dr. Moshe Sneh, later to be the founder of the Mapam party and the Jewish Agency’s liaison to Europe to encourage support for the partition plan. He viewed the Jewish struggle against the British as “part of a struggle against Western imperialism” and told officials that he believed “the young Jewish state could gain more by orienting itself toward the Soviet Union than it had achieved by attachment to London and Washington.”<sup>13</sup> The Marxist-Zionist Hashomer Hatzair movement representative, Mordechai Oren also gave his assurances. In a meeting a few weeks before Gromyko’s pivotal May 1947 speech, a member of the Russian delegation confided in Natan Peled, of Mapam, “We shall not only support the Jewish [immigration] but [also]...self determination.”<sup>14</sup> Gromyko himself told them, “If you succeed in holding a bit more, there will soon be a change in both military and political fields...”<sup>15</sup> The Palestinian Jews in attendance then brought up the subject of obtaining military supplies from Eastern Europe, to which Gromyko answered: “I think that some steps have already been made in that direction. In any case, I shall talk to the Czech delegate.”<sup>16</sup>

Beyond these personal assurances, control of the Jewish Agency rested in the Mapai

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<sup>11</sup> Golan, 37

<sup>12</sup> Krammer, 34

<sup>13</sup> Krammer, 35

<sup>14</sup> Krammer, 37

<sup>15</sup> Krammer, 37

<sup>16</sup> Krammer, 37

party – a mix of the Workers of Zion organization and the Young Workers party.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, a huge number of Palestinian Jews (possibly up to 85%) were of Eastern European origin which combined with the political leanings of the leadership undoubtedly sparked the hope in Moscow that Israel might be a future satellite.<sup>18</sup> Finally, in 1943, a Soviet diplomat remarked to the Jewish delegation:

Back in the twenties, we could not but consider Zionism as an agent of British imperialism. And we were bound to treat you accordingly. Now, however, the whole situation has changed. Not only do Britain and Zionism seem to be at a constant variance, but outlook, too, has undergone a serious evolution. Should Soviet Russia be interested in the future in the Middle East, it would be obvious that the advanced and progressive Jews of Palestine hold out much more promise for us than the backward Arabs controlled by feudal cliques of kings and effendis.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the heavy reliance of the Israelis on the American Jewish community did not escape the Soviets, and as evidenced by Gromyko's skillful speech, the Soviets also knew how to play both sides of the table.

On that same line, was the chance that the Soviets saw of causing friction between the US and Great Britain. The Soviet Union also realized that the United States could be made to become the first target of (the sure to come) Arab nationalist anger.<sup>20</sup> By cloaking their sentiments, the USSR managed to achieve being mostly forgotten or unclear after partition had passed.<sup>21</sup> The *Washington Evening Star* wrote on December 3<sup>rd</sup>: "Russia needs neither strategic airbases nor oil from the Arab countries. If she has alienated the Arabs from the United States, she can rejoice in a permanent strategic victory."<sup>22</sup>

Both Poland and Czechoslovakia expressed great support for Jewish aspirations before

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<sup>17</sup> Krammer, 48

<sup>18</sup> Krammer, 48

<sup>19</sup> Krammer, 50

<sup>20</sup> Krammer, 41

<sup>21</sup> Krammer, 41

<sup>22</sup> Krammer, 42

the USSR. Poland especially stressed the “full support” for Jewish immigration to their homeland – including Polish Jews. The satellite’s strong support stemmed from the fact that the homeless Jews who had made the Palestine question such an important issue were mostly citizens of these nations and had recently returned to rebuild their lives, but now increasingly wished to emigrate.<sup>23</sup> The satellite governments worried that the enforcement of strict assimilation measures on the Jews would invoke recent memories of anti-Semitism.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, anti-Semitism was still visibly present and helped to provide rallying points for the anti-government opposition. The satellite governments may have seen this as an opportunity to rid themselves of their Jews, embarrassing evidence of Nazi crimes and their own countrymen’s collaboration as well as potential troublemakers.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, partition allowed that should the UN send in peacekeepers, the Soviet Union would be able to infiltrate easily. While not the most obvious or easy factor, the possibility for this opportunity must have been considered at some point in Soviet deliberations and would not have been considered lightly. Opponents of America’s pro-partition stance feared Communist infiltration from the 3,000,000 Jews within the Soviet bloc that they felt Russia could easily influence.<sup>26</sup> Later, the failure of the Communist Party in the state’s elections fully disproved this fear.

Over the summer months between the last eventful special session and the beginning of regular meetings, the Soviet Union worked to alleviate any Arab misgivings as a result of Gromyko’s speech by focusing attention on the British mishandling of the region and

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<sup>23</sup> Krammer, 51

<sup>24</sup> Krammer, 51

<sup>25</sup> Krammer, 51

<sup>26</sup> Krammer, 44

proclaiming again that their first choice was a bi-national state.<sup>27</sup> Jewish response was mostly a joyous, but cautious reaction. Arab reaction can be summarized the May 16 editorial of *Ad-Difa*, stating that: “We were not surprised at the attitude of Britain...but what did cause astonishment was the statement...by which...the Russian delegate sold the principles of his country and the United Nations at a cheap price.”<sup>28</sup>

The Russian position was clarified once more in Gromyko’s November 26, 1947 speech making reference to the Jewish war victims, the Jewish historical tie to the land, and Arab hostility to partition.<sup>29</sup> Gromyko’s speech was a strategic marvel, placing among the message of the European Jews “legitimate historic demands to Palestine” a message that “Arab states will...on more than one occasion...be looking towards Moscow and expecting the USSR to help them...cast of the last vestiges of foreign dependence”.<sup>30</sup> Soviet diplomats also approached Arab representatives privately and assured that that “the Arabs will soon find out that the Soviet Union is their friend.”<sup>31</sup> The Soviet propaganda machine constantly repeated that the partition plan was an “effort to rectify the British damage” and condemned the Arab League for “deliberately distorting” Russia’s support of partition.<sup>32</sup>

*“I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious of the success of Zionism...I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs in my constituents”*  
- President Harry Truman

1943 was a crucial year for US policy on Palestine. For the first time, a definite policy line was created when it became clear that Zionist and Arab activity would no longer allow the

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<sup>27</sup> Krammer, 19

<sup>28</sup> Krammer, 18

<sup>29</sup> Krammer, 20-21

<sup>30</sup> Krammer, 21

<sup>31</sup> Krammer, 21

<sup>32</sup> Krammer, 22

government to simply issue general statements based on the North Atlantic Charter or UN principles.<sup>33</sup> The policy was articulated in a reply from President Roosevelt to a letter from Ibn Saud, expressing concern over the future of Palestine. President Roosevelt wrote on May 26, 1943: “It is the view of the government of the United States that no decision altering the basic situation of Palestine should be reached without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews” and the formula of “full consultation” was born.<sup>34</sup> Evan Wilson, former member of the Near East desk remarked, “Like so many other aspects of our Palestine policy, our formula was not acceptable to either Jews or Arabs.”<sup>35</sup>

The State Departments disagreements with the White House on Palestine policy began early. In 1943, following the Biltmore Conference, Alexander Kirk, US Ambassador in Cairo reported that the activities of American Zionists were threatening to undermine the “long-standing heritage of good will towards the United States in this area” and also reported that King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud had asked him to convey his concerns.<sup>36</sup> The following year, the first call the new Ambassador to Saudi Arabia made with Emir Faisal began and ended with discussion of Palestine.<sup>37</sup> A state department official warned from Cairo: “a very bloody conflict is in the making” which would “inflame not simply Palestine but in varying degrees all of the Moslem world from Casablanca to Calcutta.”<sup>38</sup> He noted the “ever present Arab fear of American support for political Zionism” and asserted that he Arabs were uncompromisingly against” the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, which in his view, could only be achieved by

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<sup>33</sup> Wilson, 30

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, 34

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, 35

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, 32-33

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, 33

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, 33

force.<sup>39</sup>

All of these recommendations made it to the President's desk, yet he remained impervious to their recommendations. In fact, President Roosevelt believed that after the war he would be able to bring about a settlement between Arabs and Jews though the power of his personality and once remarked that all the tension boiled down to poverty and that "when I get through being President and this damn war is over, I think Eleanor and I will go out to the Near East and see if we can put over an operation like the Tennessee Valley system that will really make something out of that country."<sup>40</sup>

In the summer of 1944, for the first time both the Republican and Democratic conventions adopted party platforms expressing support for Zionism. A state department memo dated July 26<sup>th</sup> describes the poor affect that these developments were having on Arab opinion in that it could "seriously prejudice the governments ability to protect American interests, including ...oil interest in Saudi Arabia" and urged that the leaders of both parties refrain from making further statements on a similar line.<sup>41</sup> Both candidates ignored the memo.

Roosevelt alternatively made promises to Ibn Saud that "he would do nothing to help the Jews against the Arabs, and then turned around and in a November 1944 letter pledged his personal support for a Jewish state.<sup>42</sup> Roosevelt constantly misunderstood and underestimated the complexity of the problem and left no real, permanent policy for his successor, President Truman, who took over the power of the presidency when Roosevelt died in office.

The state department recommendation at this time was that Palestine be considered an international territory with Great Britain as the primary trustee and that the Arab and Jewish

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<sup>39</sup> Wilson, 33

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, 54

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, 44-45

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, 51

communities should form autonomous local governments with a board of trustees representing the three major religions. With small adjustments, this solution was offered virtually until the moment of the partition vote. This plan failed to take into account the counterbalance of the state department and the Zionist lobby in the United States. Zionist activity began building up after the Biltmore Conference and was steadily growing in strength as it became clear from the American Jewish Conference that the vast majority of the American Jewish community supported the objectives of the Biltmore Plan.<sup>43</sup> American Jews, while being a clear minority, were concentrated in a small number of vital cities and states. Membership in Zionist organizations stood at 50,000 in 1938, but by 1942 the numbers were up to 150,00.<sup>44</sup>

The Committee of the Jewish American Conference launched an intense campaign to win public opinion. The PR war set out with several goals; to appeal first to humanitarian instincts by evoking the holocaust victims, to engage those religious Christians who believed that the return of Jews to Zion was prophesy fulfilled, and to win over those who saw the Jews in Palestine as a progressive and democratic island in the Middle East.<sup>45</sup>

More concrete pressure on Truman began with the July 2, 1946 letter from a majority of both houses of Congress calling upon the President to use his influence with the Government of Great Britain to allow for unrestricted immigration to Palestine and to establish a Jewish commonwealth.<sup>46</sup> Newspaper cartoons began to show Truman and state department officials barring homeless Jewish refugees from Palestine as public opinion on Palestine grew stronger and emotions grew stronger along with the Zionist's successful ad campaign. At the last minute, the State department was able to convince the senate to shelve the resolution, a moment which

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<sup>43</sup> Wilson, 31

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, 17

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, 31

<sup>46</sup> Freedman, 23

has been described as “one of the last occasions in which the department could be said to have played the decisive role in our Palestine policy.”<sup>47</sup>

Truman appointed Earl Harrison to investigate the refugee camps, who then recommended that Palestine be opened as a haven for the oppressed Jews. On the basis of this report, President Truman’s made his first concrete statement as President on Palestine on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1945 when he called for the free settlement of Palestine by Jews “to the point consistent with civil peace.”<sup>48</sup> President Truman then appealed to British PM, Labor Leader Atlee, who was facing his own problems with threats from the Arab states that they would turn toward the Soviets if partition was put into effect.<sup>49</sup> The British needed good standing with America for the war rebuilding and so the Anglo-American Committee was established, both to buy the British some time and to involve the United States in the Middle East.<sup>50</sup>

By the summer of 1946, Truman was convinced that partition was the only option left. The November 1948 elections and especially the 1946 Congressional elections were looming and “Jewish ballots counted for more than Arab oil.”<sup>51</sup> “The administration will sell all seven Arab states if it is a question of retaining the support...of the Jews of New York alone” Bernard Baruch a prominent Democrat reportedly said.<sup>52</sup> The Chairman of the Democratic party, Hannegan told Truman that Dewey, the head of the Republican party and the heir apparent for the Republican presidential nomination would make a speech on Palestine on October 6 and that for political survival, Truman had to make one beforehand. On the eve of Yom Kippur of that year, Truman gave a speech wholeheartedly endorsing a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.

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<sup>47</sup> Wilson, 44

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, 24

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, 63

<sup>50</sup> Freedman, 24

<sup>51</sup> Little, 82

<sup>52</sup> Little, 82

State department records show a general and understandable feeling of frustration. Henderson, the director of the Near East section of the State Department said we have practically been forced by political pressure and sentiment in the US in the direction of a “viable Jewish state.”<sup>53</sup>

While it is clear that American electoral math played a large part in Wilson’s position, Douglas Little puts forward an interesting argument discussing US support for partition as also motivated out of a desire to prevent more violence. He cites August 7, 1946 when Nahum Goldmann, a director of the Jewish Agency told the State Department that the Zionists would never permit the Arabs to finish the job that the Nazis had started. Goldman explained that already, many Jews in Palestine were already taking up arms against the British Grady-Morrison proposal to federalize Palestine and that without partition, extremists would win out against the moderates.<sup>54</sup> This statement came only two weeks after the bombing of the King David Hotel by the Irgun and the idea of more Zionist terror was not an attractive one, especially when faced with the idea that those who would need to be killed or captured were holocaust survivors. As Goldmann noted, “Weizman and I will have to resign... You will have to help the English fight the Jews after Auschwitz...”<sup>55</sup> Truman wrote in his diary that day “my soul [sic] objective in the Palestine procedure has been to prevent bloodshed” and later gave his Yom Kippur eve speech.<sup>56</sup>

Another powerful factor was Harry Truman’s personal views and friendships. In his *Memoirs* he wrote, “The fate of the Jewish victims of Hitlerism was a matter of deep personal concern to me” and his views on the prophetic return of the Jews to Zion and the deep wrongs inflicted on them by Hitler were well known in Washington. His close friend and advisor Eddie

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<sup>53</sup> Wilson, 101

<sup>54</sup> Little, 87

<sup>55</sup> Little, 87

<sup>56</sup> Little, 87

Jacobson wrote to him in October of 1947: "Again I am appealing to you in behalf of my people. The future of one and one-half million Jews in Europe depends on what happens at the present...In all this world, there is only one place where they can go-and that is Palestine. You and I know only too well this is the only answer."<sup>57</sup>

When the vote finally came to the United Nations General Assembly, "by direct order of the white house every form of pressure, direct and indirect was brought to bear by American officials upon the countries outside the Moslem world that were known to be either uncertain or opposed to partition."<sup>58</sup> The partition resolution passed in the United Nations, primarily due to the joint efforts of the United States and the Soviet Union. President Truman sided with the Zionists, discounting the advice that he'd received from professionals, his own appointed officials. President Truman had never been democratically elected to the Presidency, he had received it from Roosevelt's death. His focus was on his reelection, a race made impossible to win without the support of the Zionist lobby. The Soviet Union had no constituents to appease, no tough race to win – their stance on partition was opposite from Truman's in that it was motivated almost entirely by long-term repercussions, even at the expense of ideology.

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<sup>57</sup> Louis

<sup>58</sup> Wilson, 126

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