Israel and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman
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Edited by
Michael J. Devine
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ISRAEL and the LEGACY of HARRY S. TRUMAN

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Preface

The region of the Middle East known as the Holy Land has vexed the leaders of nations for centuries. At the close of World War II, the new United States president, Harry S. Truman, found himself facing volatile and complex international situations left in the war’s aftermath. The rising tensions with the Soviet Union, the new challenges posed by the development of nuclear weapons, the colossal civil war in China, the threatened collapse of Western European economies, and the tide of national liberation sweeping across Africa and Southeast Asia all confronted President Truman during a period that he would later characterize in the title of the second volume of his memoirs, *Years of Trial and Hope*.

Among the crises Truman confronted in the postwar years was the question of Palestine, which was controlled by Britain under a United Nations mandate due to expire in 1948. For many generations Palestine had been primarily an Arab land, but Jews, motivated by religious fervor and a desire for a homeland, had settled there in ever-increasing numbers during the first half of the twentieth century. After the Holocaust, many thousands of the survivors wanted to immigrate to Palestine as well. As tensions between the Arabs and Jews rose, Palestine was on the verge of civil war by early 1948.

Escalating violence between Jews and Palestinian Arabs, the decision of the British to abandon Palestine when their United Nations mandate expired, increasing Soviet interest in the Middle East, and the ever-present American concern for ready access to vast Middle Eastern oil fields located in neighboring Arab countries all contributed to placing the question of a Jewish state at the forefront of Truman’s foreign policy agenda. Moreover, as 1948 was an election year, domestic politics had to be taken into consideration. Significant numbers of Jewish voters in key states, particularly New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, could be decisive in a close presidential election where every electoral vote would be precious, and Jewish American voters appeared nearly unanimous in their support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. While several leading Republicans, among them
potential presidential candidates, had expressed public support for a Jewish state in Palestine, Truman’s advisors were divided on the issue. The president’s key foreign policy and defense policy advisors, including Secretary of State George C. Marshall and Defense Secretary James Forrestal, adamantly opposed the recognition of a Jewish state and the likely disruption of relations with Arab nations. The president faced a critical decision that he knew would exacerbate criticism of his administration and anger many of his closest advisors.

Truman recognized the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, at almost the instant its existence was announced, because he believed that his decision was fair. Reflecting on his decision a decade and a half later, Truman recalled, “What I was trying to do was find a homeland for the Jews and still be just with the Arabs.” He also believed that the existence of Israel would lead to eventual peace and prosperity in the Middle East.

Despite pleas from many in the pro-Israeli lobby, Truman provided only de facto recognition, insisting that elections must be held in Israel before de jure recognition could be provided, and he refused to lift the United States arms embargo affecting Israel. Furthermore, he would not recognize the ambitious borders the new state had claimed. “There was a lot of Jewish people against me because they wanted the whole of Palestine,” Truman stated. At the same time that Truman recognized the new State of Israel, he made it clear that he was fully prepared to recognize a Palestinian state, and he expected to do so as soon as an identifiable government came forward. However, the warfare that erupted on May 15 between Israel and its neighbors, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, and the resulting flow of Palestinian refugees prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state during Truman’s presidency.

Truman was fully aware that the immigration of Jews to Palestine and the recognition of Israel would upset the Arab world, and he took steps to mitigate the damage. In July of 1946, he wrote to King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, stating, “I am sincere in my belief that the admission to Palestine of 100,000 Jewish refugees this year would neither prejudice the rights and privileges of the Arabs now in Palestine nor constitute a change in the basic situation.” Again, six months later, Truman sought to reassure the Saudi leader by stating that “in supporting the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine” the objective of the United States was to preserve “the fundamental rights of both the Arab and Jewish population of Palestine,” and to create conditions in which “Palestine Arabs and Jews alike shall prosper and shall lead lives free of any
kind of political or economic oppression." Following the establishment of the State of Israel and the immediate outbreak of war, Truman sought to reconcile Arabs and Jews by urging Israeli leaders to repatriate Palestinians displaced during the months of savage fighting. Truman’s pleas went nowhere. Israel did not respond to Truman’s argument that allowing just a fraction of the Arab refugees to return to their homes would allow him “to continue his strong and warm support for Israel and the efforts being made by its government to establish its new political and economic structure on a firm basis.”

In October of 1948, Truman ordered American armed forces to provide food, clothing, and medicine to Palestinian refugees. He also offered United States support for one half of the costs of a United Nations allocation of $32 million for Palestinian refugees. However, the Truman administration demonstrated little support for the work of the United Nations Trusteeship Council as it labored unsuccessfully over the final disposition of Jerusalem, and the ancient city remained divided. When de jure recognition was finally extended to the State of Israel on January 31, 1949, Truman, in a significant and symbolic gesture, announced the recognition of Transjordan on the same date. However, by this time the Truman administration was preoccupied with rising Cold War tensions in Western Europe and Asia, and it would be left to future U.S. presidents to continue the pursuit of an elusive peace in the Middle East.

Most of the presentations published in this volume were first delivered at a symposium entitled “Harry S. Truman and the Recognition of Israel,” which took place in Key West, Florida, in May 2005. The third in a series of Truman Legacy symposia, the 2005 program sought to examine Truman’s decision to recognize Israel in the politically charged atmosphere of 1948. Scholars, former government officials, and diplomats were invited to look at Truman’s actions from various perspectives and analyze how the president’s personal beliefs and policies, and his relationships with members of the Jewish American community influenced his decisions.

The Truman Legacy Symposium in May 2005 was produced through a partnership of the Harry S. Truman Library Institute for National and International Affairs, the White House Studies Program of Florida Atlantic University, and the Truman Little White House. Dr. Robert Watson, now with Lynn University, and many staff at the Truman Little White House labored long hours to assure the success of the symposium, and it was a delight to work with them on this endeavor. The Tennessee Williams Theatre at Florida Keys Community College proved to be a superb location for the
symposium. Support for the symposium was provided by Historic Tours of America, Monroe County Tourist Development Council, and the Lifelong Learning and Holocaust and Judaic Studies programs at Florida Atlantic University. The John D. Evans Foundation, Betty Zinman Foundation, and Larkin Family Charitable Trust all assisted in funding the program.

Special expressions of gratitude go to Ed Swift, Chris Belland, Piper Smith, and Monica Munoz of Historic Tours of America. Michael McPherson, Rebecca Tomlinson, and Lydia Estenoz of Florida Keys Community College assisted in logistics, as did Richard Yon of University of Florida, Scott Roley of the Truman Presidential Library, and Kathy Knotts of the Truman Library Institute. A special thank-you is also extended to Clifton Truman Daniel for his participation in the symposium.

We are especially appreciative of the labor provided by Bonnie Neeleman of the Truman Presidential Library, who typed and retyped numerous drafts and revisions of the manuscript for this book. Two additional Truman Presidential Library staffers provided valuable expertise. Dr. Ray Geselbracht offered excellent advice and editing assistance, as well as preparing the chronology presented in this volume. Dr. Randy Sowell, who was responsible for the bibliography, also edited the final draft of the manuscript.

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January 2008

Notes

1Screen Gems Collection, MP2002–344, Audio Visual Collection, Truman Library.
The $64 Question

John B. Judis

When he assumed the presidency in April 1945, Harry Truman inherited a war that was still raging in the Pacific, the stirrings of conflict with the Soviet Union over Eastern Europe, and an electorate weary of wartime austerity. But what sometimes befuddled him most was what was happening in British-controlled Palestine. During a meeting later that year with Truman’s chiefs of mission in the Near East, Minister to Lebanon and Syria George Wadsworth, speaking on behalf of his colleagues, asked the president “what the American policy [was] toward political Zionism.” “That is the $64 dollar question,” Truman replied. According to the minutes of the meeting, Truman lamented that “this question was causing him and [Secretary of States James] Byrnes more trouble than almost any other question which is facing the United States.”

History has shown that Truman and Byrnes had good reason to be troubled. Of all the great questions that America faced after World War II, that of how to resolve the conflict between the Jews and Arabs of Palestine—and later the Israelis and the Palestinians—has proven to be the most unanswerable. Sixty years later, the conflict continues to rage, and the United States is no closer to answering Truman’s $64 question of what the United States should do about it.

Why has this conflict proven to be so intractable? Current commentators locate the source of the difficulty in what has happened since the Truman years. Some blame the Arabs and the Palestinians for their “extremist and shortsighted leadership which consistently rejected all compromise solutions.” Others, pointing to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, charge that the Israelis are “victims” who became “victimizers.” And still others blame the continuing
Although these different explanations are the subject of a sometimes fierce debate, there is truth in each one of them. The Palestinians have repeatedly rejected offers for compromise—only to accept them later after they were no longer being offered. That happened, notably, in 1947, 1979, and 2000. The Israelis, for their part, have been oblivious, if not hostile, to Palestinian nationalism and after the Six-Day War took control of, and began building settlements on, what remained of Arab Palestine. And American administrations have periodically either downplayed Arab threats to Israel—for instance, on the eve of the Six-Day War—or ignored or even encouraged Israeli attempts to create a “greater Israel.”

But part of the reason that the conflict is intractable is what happened before and during the Truman years. By the time Truman decided to recognize Israel in May 1948, much of the groundwork for the subsequent rocket attacks, intifadas, assassinations, bulldozed villages, all-out wars, and illegal settlements had already been laid. The failure of Palestinian leadership was already evident during the revolt against the British in the 1930s, and Israel’s territorial ambitions, which seemed to surface suddenly after the Six-Day War in 1967, go back to Zionist visions of the early 1900s. As for American policy, the equivocation and indecision and the reluctance to use American power to achieve peace between the two parties became fully evident during the Truman years.

What follows is necessarily a cursory survey of a century of conflict, but it is intended as a historical backdrop to the essays in this collection, which detail the special role that the Truman administration played in Israel’s founding. Understanding what went before Truman’s years in office puts into relief the obstacles that he faced in answering his $64 question. And looking at what happened afterwards shows the extent to which the difficulties he encountered have persisted into the present century.

A Historic Debate

In 1896, Austrian playwright and journalist Theodor Herzl published *The Jewish State*. Like many middle-class European Jews, Herzl, who grew up in Budapest and Vienna, had believed that Jews would eventually either be assimilated into European society or convert to Christianity, but the pogroms in Russia of the early 1880s, his own encounter with anti-Semitism at the University of Vienna,
and finally the Dreyfus Affair in France convinced him that European Jews were destined to remain a persecuted minority. Herzl realized that while Jews might see themselves as voluntary members of a religious group, they were in fact treated by Europeans as an alien people or nation. Herzl concluded that they could only escape persecution by acknowledging their existence as a national group and founding a state of their own in which they were the dominant majority. Herzl suggested either Palestine or Argentina; he organized the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 and members of the new movement decided on Palestine.

There were two factions in this movement: the one, political Zionism, led by Herzl and later Chaim Weizmann, sought to secure a Jewish state diplomatically through the sponsorship of an imperial power; the other, cultural Zionism, led by the Eastern European Lovers of Zion, sought to encourage immigration to Palestine and advocated the creation of a new Hebrew-speaking Jewish culture. On the eve of World War I, about 60,000 Jews lived amidst about 750,000 Arabs in Palestine. About half of those Jews were recent immigrants inspired by cultural Zionism. But in 1917, the two factions were united when Weizmann, promoting a Jewish state as an “Asiatic Belgium” that would be a buffer between imperial Britain and the Arab Middle East, secured the support of the British cabinet for the establishment after the war of a “national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.”

The cabinet’s declaration, issued in the form of a letter from British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, contained two important ambiguities and one significant omission that would become the basis of conflict among Jews, Arabs, and the British. First, the Balfour Declaration deliberately referred to a “national home” rather than a “state,” out of deference to Britain’s Arab allies in the region; and secondly, while Zionists themselves already envisioned a Jewish state of Palestine, the declaration talked of a home in Palestine. At the same time, the declaration omitted any specific reference to the national rights of the Arabs already living in Palestine. Instead, it merely pledged to respect the “civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.”

In other words, the British commitment to a Jewish Palestine was not unequivocal—and British equivocation after 1939 would lead to a clash between the Jews and the British. By the same token, the British simply did not recognize Palestine’s Arabs as a people worthy of self-determination. That was reflected in Balfour’s view that “Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in
present needs, in future hopes, [and is] of far greater import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land." That attitude would lead later to clashes between the Arabs and the British and between the Arabs and the Jews.

The thrust of the Balfour Declaration was later included in the 1921 League of Nations mandate, which created Palestine alongside Transjordan and put Britain in charge of it. Jews were represented in Palestine by a protogovernmental body, the Jewish Agency. With British encouragement and through the efforts of the Jewish Agency, Jewish immigration began to pick up during the 1920s and to accelerate in the 1930s, as Hitler gained power in Germany. By 1941, there would be almost 500,000 Jews in Palestine, making up 30 percent of the population.

By contrast, the Arabs of Palestine possessed under the mandate no formal representation nor status as a colonized people. That stirred deep resentments among the Arabs. The lack of any organized political representation—such as the Iraqis or Jordanians or Egyptians enjoyed under British rule—deprived Palestine’s Arabs of the institutions on the basis of which they could have constructed a national leadership. As historian Rashid Khalidi has argued, many of the failures in Palestinian leadership—from the grand mufti of the 1930s to Yasir Arafat of the 1990s—go back to the experience of Palestine’s Arabs under British rule.

ROOTS OF UNREST

In the nineteenth century, what had historically been Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. The first stirrings of Palestinian nationalism occurred in response to the Young Turk rebellion of 1908, but they were largely directed at creating a greater Syria that would include Palestine. After the British carved out Palestine, and Jewish immigration began in earnest—buoyed by the Balfour Declaration and the League mandate—the Arabs of Palestine began to identify themselves as “Palestinians” and to advocate an independent state of their own in Palestine.

The first clashes between Jews and Arabs and between Arabs and the British also began at this time. There were serious Arab riots in 1920 and 1921. After a lull, Arab riots, demonstrations, and terrorist attacks resumed in 1929. In 1936, a full-scale armed rebellion broke out that lasted for three years.

The initial riots and demonstrations were largely spontaneous. There was no leadership at the time that could negotiate with the
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