Harry S. Truman, the State of Israel, and the
QUEST for PEACE
in the MIDDLE EAST

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When it opened its doors in 1968, the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace enjoyed the personal authorization and endorsement of former United States president Harry S. Truman. The Institute supports major studies on the history, politics, culture, and social development of the non-Western world, with particular emphasis on the Middle East. Much of the work is interdisciplinary because of the varied interests of the Institute’s fellows.

In its capacity as an institute for the advancement of peace, the Truman Research Institute initiates joint projects in both the international and local spheres, to parallel major international political activities in conflict resolution and in the struggle to uphold the principles of human rights, as defined by the UN Charter. Hence, apart from being active in academic forums, many of the Institute’s members are involved in grassroots organizations.

The Truman Institute also plays an instrumental role in bringing together people from all sorts of academic and professional backgrounds, including politicians, diplomats, and journalists, to exchange ideas. This includes in-residence visiting fellows from abroad, thus reflecting the Institute’s multidisciplinary and multiregional emphases. Several conferences, workshops, and symposia are organized each year. Worldwide contacts are maintained with universities, institutes, and individuals in the different fields of research. Many of the conferences, like the one held on 29 May 2008 to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Institute’s founding, are today open to the public, thus serving to further enrich discussions and keep the work of the Truman Research Institute immediately accessible.

I wholeheartedly thank the Mandel Foundation and Ms. Barbara Mandel, our vice chairperson, for their generous support of the 2008 conference. Its program is an appropriate endeavor to help celebrate a very happy birthday to the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace.
Introduction

Michael J. Devine

In 1978, a conference on Hebrew University’s campus in Jerusalem explored the relationship between the United States and Israel on the occasion of Israel’s thirtieth anniversary. Dr. Allen Weinstein and Professor Moshe Ma’oz, participants in that event and the coeditors of the conference proceedings, stated in their preface:

An anniversary can become either meaningful or ephemeral, depending on the amount and quality of the reflection which it inspires. This fact affects anniversary conferences such as the one which gave rise to this book. Fortunately, the occasion that brought scholars and public figures from the United States and Israel to Jerusalem in May 1978, namely a conference commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the State of Israel, proved to be an event which provoked an intense measure of the most thoughtful commentary from all who participated.¹

Now, thirty years after the historic 1978 conference, we are again gathered on the campus of Hebrew University to continue our exploration of the events surrounding the creation of the State of Israel and President Harry S. Truman’s critical role in extending de facto recognition to the new state within minutes of its announced status. In 2008, we have the benefit of a vastly richer archival record, in collections held at the Truman Library and the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, DC, as well as materials recently made available in Russia (records of the Soviet Union), Western Europe, and Israel. Thus, our program today can explore the diplomacy surrounding the establishment of Israel in greater depth and in a wider international context than was the case in 1978.

Israel’s history can be seen everywhere in the National Archives and Records Administration. The history of Israel has been so intertwined with that of the
United States during the last sixty years that the National Archives now contains
millions of documents, photographs, films, sound recordings, and from recent
years, electronic records relating to Israel. Much of the archival record available
today relating to Israel’s early years was still classified in 1978.

The Truman Library, a unit of the National Archives, maintains holdings
relating to Israel that amount to tens of thousands of pages, and virtually everything
from Truman’s administration is available to researchers. Truman’s papers alone
contain about 10,000 pages, including perhaps the most famous single piece
of paper in the Truman Library’s holdings—Truman’s signed press statement
announcing the United States’ recognition of Israel at 6:11 p.m. Washington (DC)
time, 14 May 1948.

Besides President Truman’s own papers, the Truman Library has important
documentation relating to Israel in the papers of Secretary of State Dean Acheson,
the papers of Truman’s assistant for minority affairs David K. Niles, the papers of
his close friend Eddie Jacobson, and many others. Personally, I find the candid
interview with George Elsey, once a young White House aide, to be particularly
moving. It was recorded in 1998 and shows a sharp and still fiercely loyal assistant
speaking candidly. A document from Truman’s papers that people always find
moving is a note from Truman to Niles, dated about 12 May 1947. He is frustrated
by all the politics swarming around the question of what to do with Palestine.
“We could have settled this Palestine thing if U.S. politics had been kept out of it,”
he moans. Then he says, “I surely wish God Almighty would give the Children
of Israel an Isaiah, the Christians a St. Paul and the Sons of Ishmael a peep at the
golden rule.”

The National Archives in Washington, DC, counts its documents relating to
Israel in millions. Among many other materials about Israel, it has the records of
the State Department’s Office of the Country Director for Israel and Arab-Israel
Affairs, as well as those of the Foreign Service consulate in Jerusalem, and those of
the offices that dealt with Jewish refugees and the use of the waters of the Jordan
River. One can add to this the files in the records of the International Cooperation
Administration that relate to U.S. aid to Israel, and the records relating to Israel
in the Army Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, Intelligence. The National
Archives holds the records of the Congress too, and those contain essential Israel-
related materials. I am mentioning only a few listings among hundreds of Israel-
related series in the holdings of the National Archives.

In addition to these significant holdings, the National Archives’ participated
in the Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records Interagency
Working Group, which identified, declassified, and opened to the public over eight
million pages in National Archives holdings relating to war crimes. Furthermore, the National Archives took the initiative about ten years ago to identify and describe about twenty million pages of documents in its holdings relating to Holocaust-era assets, including the notorious “Nazi gold.”

Every presidential library holds important collections relating to Israel. Modern presidents have taken much of the responsibility for developing foreign and defense policy into the White House. Therefore, the records of the National Security Council, most of which are transferred to presidential libraries when the presidents leave office, contain extremely important documentation regarding Israel. It takes time to declassify and open these documents. About six years ago, for example, the National Archives opened two important series of National Security Council files from President Nixon’s papers. One included the background materials that Henry Kissinger used when he was engaged in his “shuttle diplomacy” between Egypt and Israel, and Syria and Israel. Another series included the extensive files of Middle East expert Harold Saunders relating to his work on the United Nations–sponsored peace negotiations between the 1967 and 1973 wars.

Beyond record keeping, the presidential libraries serve as educational resources and produce a wide range of educational activities for schools and extensive public programs. The presidential libraries develop exhibits, provide guided tours, conduct teacher workshops, host public forums on national and international issues, and sponsor academic conferences. Each presidential library also maintains an extensive website, making archival materials, exhibits, school activities, and public programs available to millions of users worldwide. In addition, presidential libraries form partnerships with sister institutions: universities, research centers, and archives throughout the United States and abroad. The Truman Library’s partnership with the Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace is an outstanding example of such a relationship.

This conference is intended to build upon the foundation for scholarly inquiry set thirty years ago at this beautiful facility. While the archival materials now available worldwide enable us to understand the events of sixty years ago with greater clarity, and provide a better understanding of the international complexities that surrounded Israel’s establishment as a new state, we cannot begin to imagine what the next three decades may reveal. Therefore, let us plan today to advance our scholarly analysis even further by agreeing that we must gather here again thirty years from today.

In arranging this academic endeavor, every effort was made to bring into the program a wide international participation. It is regrettable, therefore, that in spite of concerted efforts, speakers from Palestinian institutions were unable to attend.
Their cancellation at the last minute denied the program an important perspective that would have been appreciated.

The conference at Hebrew University at which the papers comprising this volume were presented was facilitated by the staff of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace. In particular, Naama Shpeter and Jill Twersky played key roles in the planning and implementation of the program. Professor Steven Kaplan assisted the publication process enthusiastically following his appointment as the Institute director in the spring of 2009. The president of the Hebrew University, Professor Manachem Magidor, provided vital administrative support for the conference participants. The Mandel Foundation and Robert Beren, both located in Florida, provided the financial resources for the program, and Marvin Szneler, executive director of Jewish Community Relations Bureau/American Jewish Committee (JCRB/AJC) assisted with the complex logistical issues involved in putting together an international program. Dr. Ray Geselbracht and Dr. Randy Sowell of the Truman Library staff were sources of great assistance and solid advice throughout this endeavor. Finally, a publication project requires word processing and editorial skills, and my efforts were superbly assisted by Bonnie Neelman, assistant to the director of the Truman Library, and by Barbara Smith-Mandell, the expert copy editor at the Truman State University Press.

Notes
3. Harry S. Truman Papers, President’s Secretary’s Files, Subject Files, Foreign Affairs, Palestine, 1945–1947, Harry S. Truman Library.
4. There are now twelve libraries in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) system, and the George W. Bush Library will become the thirteenth when it opens on the Southern Methodist University campus in Dallas, Texas, in a few years.
5. For an overview of the presidential libraries and their mission, see “Presidential Libraries: Programs, Policies and the Public Interest.”

Works Cited
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