

## **Palestine/Israel: the Eastern Front in the Cold War in the Mediterranean**

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The above is a call to reconsider the role of Israel in the Eastern Front in the Cold War in the Mediterranean in the light of the evidence offered by the U.S. Defense Department's evaluation of Israel/Palestine in 1948.

In the years immediately following World War II, Washington regarded the Eastern Mediterranean as a double mirror, reflecting its Levantine politics with the mix of related defense and commercial interests on one side, and the protection of its Eastern Arab oil interests, on the other. After May 1948, Israel was to play a role in both dimensions of US Mediterranean policy which, in practice, constituted an inseparable whole.

While the impact of the U.S. President's recognition of Israel in May 1948 has long been the object of critical examination, the same cannot be said of the Defense Department's position in the aftermath of Israel's independence. Again, far more familiar are the views of Secretary of Defense, James Forrestal who—among others in the State as well as Defense Departments and CIA, prior to May 1948, were openly apprehensive of developments that risked endangering US oil and commercial interests in the Arab world. On the other hand, prior to May 1948, it was assumed that the numerical superiority of the surrounding Arab states would nullify the prospects of a Jewish victory. This changed with the Jewish forces' acquisition of illegal arms from Czechoslovakia such that from mid-May 1948, the IDF

emerged in a superior position with respect to men and arms inspite of Arab reinforcements.

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The results radically altered the social and political landscape of Palestine and the Middle East, as well as the outlook and calculations of the U.S. State and Defense Departments. Less than a year after Israel 的 declaration of independence on May 15, 1948, US officials came to appreciate Israel 的 military potential initiating a relationship that would reach iconic levels after 1967. But it was nearly twenty years earlier, in the aftermath of the struggle over Palestine in 1948, that the US Defense Department recognized the potential of such developments in terms of US interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

Such recognition had other consequences, however, no less ignored in conventional accounts of U.S. postwar policy. The Defense Department 的 reevaluation of Israeli potential occurred in the same period in which US Consular officials in Palestine/ Israel and US diplomats in Lebanon were sending the State Department evidence of Jewish atrocities and expulsions of Palestinians, as in Deir Yassin, Haifa and Jaffa, while State Department and National Security Council officials in Washington moved within increasingly narrow margins to accommodate Israeli 的 territorial expansion while seeking accommodation on this and the question of Palestinian refugees.

It was Thomas C. Wasson, US Consul General in Jerusalem who was assassinated on May 23, who on April 13, 1948, sent Secretary of State Marshall a confidential report on what had transpired in the village of Deir Yassin, a Palestinian village lying west of Jerusalem where 殿 ttrackers killed 250 persons of whom half, by their own admission to American

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1 Avi Shlaim, 的 srael and the Arab Coalition in 1948,in Avi Shlaim and Eugene L Rogan, eds., The War for Palestine, 2001, pp.80.

\* The documentation included in this essay is drawn from my forthcoming study, 泥 ying to Forget: The Foundations of US Foreign Policy in the Middle East , Oil, Palestine/Israel, 1945-1949,to be published by Columbia University Press.

correspondents, were women and children. Attack carried out in connection battle now still in progress between Arabs and Jews on roads leading to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv. <sup>2</sup>After this, Wasson reported, changes of a cease fire and truce would be remote. On April 24, Marshall received a cable concerning alarming developments in Haifa, whose oil refinery had been the scene of past struggles, and was now in the hands of Jewish forces. <sup>3</sup> On June 23, the US Consul in Haifa, Aubrey Lippincott reported to Marshall that he had learned of the screening procedures to which Arabs resident in Haifa were being subjected by Jewish authorities. 鄭rabs who return Haifa are considered illegals. These also required take oath allegiance Jewish state. Result is remaining Arabs determined leave. <sup>4</sup> It was only in April 1949 that the US Minister to Lebanon, Lowell C Pinkerton, submitted the documents that he had received from the Executive Committee of the Jaffa and District Inhabitants Council who represented Jaffa, Ramley and Lydda and the Arab villages that formed part of the district. Pinkerton 痾 report consisted of the documentation relevant to the expulsion of Palestinians from the above areas.

Reports from Deir Yassin, Haifa and Jaffa and innumerable other Arab villages and towns are an integral part of the US record that has long been ignored in US accounts of Israel 痾 state formation. The same may be said of the landmark studies by contemporary Israeli scholars such as Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé, and the far less complete and far earlier account by Simha Flapan among others.

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<sup>2</sup> April 13, 1948, The Consul at Jerusalem (Wasson) to the Secretary of State, FRUS 1948, Vol. V, part 2, p.817.

<sup>3</sup> See Simha Flapan, The Birth of Israel, Pantheon Books, N.Y. 1987, p. 89; Major R.D. Wilson, 痾he Battle for Haifa, April 21-22, 1948, in Walid Khalidi, ed., From Haven to Conquest, Beirut, 1971, pp. 771-774; Walid Khalidi, 痾pecial Feature, The Fall of Haifa Revisited, Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. XXXVII, no.3, Spring 2008, pp.30-58

<sup>4</sup> June 23, 1948, The Consul at Haifa (Lippincott) to the Secretary of State, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, p. 1138.

It is the US material that is relevant to this essay since some of those who fully recognized the consequences of what they were reporting to Washington in 1948, were among those prepared to give opinion on the aftermath of the independence struggle. And one may assume that while those who reported such evidence were few, the implications of what they had found was known to the larger US diplomatic community, let alone those in Washington concerned with developments in Palestine.

Ten days before Britain's exit from Palestine, US officials in Palestine faced the Jewish Agency's rejection of a truce or indeed, a trusteeship arrangement to replace what the State Department and the White House conceded to be the failure of the partition plan. In evaluating the situation, Special Assistant to Dean Rusk, Robert McClintock, deliberated over the implications of these developments. It may well be, he speculated, that Washington would soon be confronted with a situation created by Jewish military forces, including the Haganah and the Stern gang and Irgun, in which it would have to determine whether Jewish armed attack on Arab communities in Palestine is legitimate or whether it constitutes such a threat to international peace and security as to call for coercive measures by the Security Council.<sup>5</sup> Washington would face what McClintock called an anomalous situation in which the Jews will be the actual aggressors against the Arabs. However, the Jews will claim that they are merely defending the boundaries of a state which were traced by the UN and approved, at least in principle, by two thirds of the UN membership."

Within two weeks of Israel's declaration of independence, the Policy Planning Staff agreed that we should begin immediately to develop a paper on Palestine and its overall policy implications, particularly with respect to the Middle East, for submission to the

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<sup>5</sup> May 4, 1948, Draft Memorandum by the Director of the Office of United Nations Affairs (Rusk) to the Under Secretary of State (Lovett), FRUS 1948, V, part 2, p.894. While this memo was drafted by McClintock, it appears that it was not sent.

Secretary [of State] and Mr Lovett and eventual clearance through the National Security Council, recently formed.<sup>6</sup> Mc Clintock was on the PPS staff, as was Philip Jessup, then Acting Representative of the U.S. at the UN.

As McClintock made clear, Washington not only recognized the Provisional Government of Israel, it would not move to challenge its sovereignty or undermine its control of territory beyond the UN 痂 designated boundaries, as in UN Res. 181.

Loy Henderson of the State Department reinforced the same position, making it clear that any territorial changes which the US might recommend to Israel would have to have Israeli approval.

In late June 1948 McClintock reviewed what had transpired since the UN Partition Resolution of 1947 and concluded that 痂 here will be no separate Arab State and no economic union as envisaged in the General Assembly resolution.<sup>7</sup> The situation facing the parties to the conflict, and the U.S., were new and McClintock was now prepared to consider the 粗 xchangeor 奏 ransferof populations, a reference to the organized expulsion of Palestinians.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of such a policy, according to McClintock, was the creation of an environment in which :the State of Israel would contain most of the Jews of Palestine and the Arabs would reside in purely Arab areas.<sup>9</sup>

Nearly two months after Israel 痂 emergence as an independent state, Philip Jessup, another PPS member, who was the Deputy U.S. Representative on the Security Council in

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6 June 2, 1948, Minutes of the Policy Planning Staff, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, p. 1088.

7 June 23, 1948, Memorandum by Mr Robert McClintock, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, p.1135.

8 See June 19, 1948, The Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Douglas) to the Secretary of State, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, p. 1124.

9 June 23, 1948, Memorandum by Mr Robert McClintock, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, p.1135.

the summer of 1948, was, as in the case of McClintock, reconsidering earlier UN resolutions and their references to an Arab state and finding it obsolete. It was time to think about Abdullah and the prospects of Transjordan.

More generally, Jessup concluded that "if fairly treated, [Israel] could become a force operating to our advantage and to advantage of Arab countries."<sup>10</sup> The importance of such a development in Jessup's view becomes clear as one considers his perception of the place of Palestine in the context of US Middle East policy.

From the strategic viewpoint we assume that Palestine, together with the neighboring countries is a major factor presumably in any future major conflict this region would be of vital importance to US as a potential base area and with respect to our lines of communication. Presumably also the oil resources of the area are considered vital. It is our feeling that this last point may not perhaps have been dealt adequately and frankly enough in official and public discussion of the Palestine question.

From the economic viewpoint it is probable that with the exception of oil our trade and other economic relations with Palestine and the other Near East countries are not directly of any substantial importance. Indirectly, however, the economic stability and developing prosperity of Palestine and the Middle East area under peaceful conditions could make a very substantial contribution to the economic recovery of the world generally and thus contribute to the economic welfare of the U.S. With respect to oil, we recognize that the oil supply from the area is of great importance in the European recovery program. *Were it not for this factor, however, and the strategic importance of oil we should probably not allow the economic importance of this commodity to condition our judgment substantially with regard to Palestine.* [italics mine]<sup>11</sup>

Was it the acknowledged importance of this commodity that permitted Jessup to convey Israel's denial of responsibility for Palestinian refugees to the Secretary of State at the end of July without contesting its claims? The Director of the Office of UN Affairs at the time, Dean Rusk, along with the UN Mediator, Count Bernadotte, were among those who did contest such a position, albeit without effect.

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<sup>10</sup> July 1, 1948, The Acting United States Representative at the United Nations (Jessup) to the Secretary of State, FRUS, 1948, V, part 2, p.1183.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.1181.

Defense Department officials concluded by 1949 that Israel was the second state after Turkey in terms of its military capacity and potential in US strategic planning for the region. Indeed, on March 7, 1949, a Memorandum by the Chief of Staff of the US Air Force to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 填.S. Strategic Interests in Israel, concluded as follows:

The power balance in the Near and Middle East has been radically altered. At the time the state of Israel was forming, numerous indications pointed to its extremely short life in the face of Arab League opposition. However, Israel has now been recognized by the United States and the United Kingdom, is likely soon to become a member of the United Nations, and has demonstrated by force of arms its right to be considered the military power next after Turkey in the Near and Middle East.<sup>12</sup>

According to the above source, 殿 s a result of its support to Israel, the United States might now gain strategic advantages from the new political situation. In that light, the Air Force Chief of Staff called for a study of 填 S strategic objectives touching Israel, in addition to recommending that military training and assistance be considered and that above all, Soviet influence in Israel be blocked.

And indeed, several weeks later, on March 24, there was some discussion on precisely this possibility involving Israeli and Arab officers to be trained in the U.S. Support for such an option was based on the signing of armistice agreements between Israel, Egypt, Lebanon and the anticipated signing with Transjordan, which was interpreted as the end of hostilities. That Israel was interested in such a move was regarded as a sign of its pro-western orientation, a matter of some concern to Washington given the persistent fear that the USSR had made inroads into Israel with its recognition of the state, in addition to the influx of 驚 igr 駭 from Eastern Europe.

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<sup>12</sup> March 7, 1949, Memorandum by the Chief of Staff, US Air Force to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on US Strategic Interest in Israel, in Records of the JCS, Part 2, 1948-1953 [sect B], the Middle East, p.181. Film A 368 [B] Reel 2.

In any case, the recommendation with respect to military training was to send officer student training missions from Israel and the Arab states, in reasonable numbers, consistent with the ability of the various services to handle such missions.”<sup>13</sup> It should be emphasized that the US military had made it clear earlier that it would oppose the participation of US troops in UN peacekeeping force in Palestine, on the grounds that a considerable number of American troops might become bogged down in Palestine.<sup>14</sup>

This in no way precluded Washington from providing Israel with US technical assistance for the training of the US military, as discussed in April 1949, that is just over a year after Israel creation.<sup>15</sup> The Chief of Naval Operations considered the possibility of providing such assistance but delayed it until the risk of ensuing conflict had sufficiently abated so as not to implicate the US in the fighting. But above all, at the end of April 1949, the American CINCELM (Commander in Chief of US Naval Forces, East Atlantic and Mediterranean) pressed the JCS to allot the highest priority to ensuring Israel friendship.<sup>16</sup> The concern was that Israel hinder the construction of forward airfields on her territory, and the free movement of forces and equipment along their planned lines of communication.<sup>17</sup>

The May 16, 1949 report issued by the Secretary of Defense, the study of United States Strategic Objectives in Israel, contained no references to Washington's critical response to Israel's position on the Palestine refugee problem. It acknowledged that the new State of Israel has close ties with the United States because of our large and influential Jewish

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<sup>13</sup> March 24, 1949, Memorandum by the Secretary of State, Conversation with the President, FRUS, 1949, VI, p.864.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, Op. Cit., p. 199.

<sup>15</sup> 27 April 1949, Memorandum by the Chief of Naval Operations to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on United States Strategic Interest in Israel. JCS 1684/30, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> Michael J Cohen, Op.Cit., p. 204.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.205.



minority”<sup>18</sup> What concerned the US military was Israel’s orientation in the light of its location. The May 16 study opened with the statement: “Israel is surrounded by her defeated foes who are still unfriendly.”<sup>19</sup> It recommended that “differences between the new Israeli state and the neighboring Arab states should be reconciled at least to the extent that Israel and the Arab states would act in concert to oppose Soviet aggression.”<sup>20</sup> Reviewing the strategic value of Israel’s location, the report proceeded to appraise its overall potential in the defense of US interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

First, there was the question of location.

The direct land routes (road and rail) between Turkey and the Cairo-Suez area pass through Israeli territory. In addition, the main land routes from the Caspian area of the USSR and from Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia to Egypt and the Levant pass through or near Israel’s territory, as do the pipelines from the Middle East oil areas to the Mediterranean. Israel controls the land approaches to the Cairo-Suez area from the east, the border between Israel and Egypt being about one hundred and fifty miles east of the Suez Canal.<sup>21</sup>

Second, there was the question of bases. Although the US military did not envision Israel as the location of a major base, there was reported to be a high grade if limited “system of well-developed airfields and air bases. In our hands, these air installations would be most useful in the interdiction of the lines of communication from the USSR to the Middle East oil resources with medium and short-range aircraft.”<sup>22</sup>

Third was the importance of Israel’s indigenous military forces, which have had some battle experience, and which, as the Joint Chiefs contemplated, could be important to “either the Western Democracies or the USSR in any contest for control of the Eastern

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<sup>18</sup> May 16, 1949, Study of United States Strategic Objectives in Israel included in Memorandum by the Secretary of Defense (Johnson) to the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (Souers). FRUS 1949, VI, p. 1011.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., idem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.1012.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.1010.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., idem.

Mediterranean-Middle East area.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, in the face of a Soviet attempt to secure or neutralize the oil facilities of the Middle East and to operate against the Cairo-Suez base area, Israel’s position and its forces would be critical. Should Israel ally herself with the Western Democracies in the event of war with the USSR, full advantage could be taken of defensive positions in that country and of Israel’s forces for the defense of the Cairo-Suez area and for land operations to defend or to recapture the Middle East oil facilities.<sup>24</sup>

Such considerations were based on the axiom that the security of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East is of critical importance to the future security of the United States, which, in turn, assumed the stability of the Middle East, including assurance that the peoples of this area will not turn to the USSR and against the United States, is a vital element in United States security.”<sup>25</sup>

But, as suggested earlier, Truman himself, as well as State Department and NSC officials were aware of the urgency of resolving territorial questions as well as the Palestinian refugee problem, both of which were aggravated by Israel’s expansion beyond the lines of the 1947 UN Partition Plan. In June, the US delegate on the Palestine Conciliation Commission (PCC), Mark Etheridge, who was to resign from the PCC, was sharply critical of Israel’s rejection of the right of Palestinian refugees to return, and what he regarded as its failure to define the bases of co-existence of Palestinian Arabs and Jews in Israel. Some within the Israeli Foreign Ministry, such as Elias Sasson, was no less critical of his government’s conception of its relations with Arab states.<sup>26</sup> Sasson did not make policy in Israel, neither did Etheridge influence policy in Washington.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., idem.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., idem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.1012.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Avi Shlaim, Collusion Across the Jordan, Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1988, p. 474.

In July 1949, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and African Affairs, George McGhee sought to persuade Israel of the urgency of recognizing the principle of territorial compensation for areas held by Israel outside the 1947 Palestine Partition lines and the repatriation of a substantial number of Palestine refugees without reference to territorial acquisition,<sup>27</sup> in order to avert a change in US policy- or more accurately, a change in US attitude toward Israel.

In the fall of 1949, the National Security Council issued a report (NSC 47/7), in which it expressed concern with the risk of non-solution of the Palestinian refugee problem. But in this instance the NSC did not focus exclusively on Israeli responsibility, it included Arab states as accepting the resettlement of Palestinian refugees within their own borders. The risk, as far as the NSC was concerned, was the same, that is it was the potential radicalization of the Arab world.

But all such risks aside, the NSC was well aware of the comparative advantages that Israel possessed, including with respect to its military establishment. Consider the following assessment that appeared in the same NSC report:

Israel's military establishment, although small, is a relatively modern and effective fighting machine which has proved itself adequate to resist the poorly equipped, ill-trained and badly led armies of the Arab League states in the course of recent hostilities and to occupy considerable territory beyond that awarded under the partition plan. It can be expected that the future effectiveness of the Israeli Army will increase with the implementation of current plans for training and reorganization.<sup>28</sup>

In the light of the above, it is hardly surprising that in the same period, Admiral Richard Connolly, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Naval forces in the Eastern Atlantic and

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27 July 19, 1949, Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and African Affairs (McGhee) to the Secretary of State, FRUS 1949, VI, p. 1236.

28 Oct. 17, 1949, NSC, FRUS 1949, Op. Cit., p.1434.

Mediterranean, envisioned the possibilities of coordinating strategic planning with Turkey, Egypt and Israel.<sup>29</sup>

It was in May 1950 that Truman met with the head of the American Jewish Committee, Jacob Blaustein, who was also in charge of the oil company, Amoco. While Blaustein discussed oil imports with the President, he also informed him that he had contacted Defense Secretary, Louis Johnson, 谁 hat under the existing circumstances you are willing (as he knows) for arms for defense purposes to go to Israel from this country, and that Secretary Acheson agrees with this.<sup>30</sup>

The visit of Jacob Blaustein is not the critical factor here. It is a reflection, however, of changes that deserve far greater recognition than they have received.

The conclusion implicit in the posture of the US Defense and State Departments after May 1948 is what calls for reflection. Its cause was unmistakable, namely, Israel 谁 military victory; its consequences no less so, as they stemmed from the regional shift in the regional balance of power that was, in turn, directly relevant to US policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

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<sup>29</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power. National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1992, p. 287.

<sup>30</sup> May 10, 1950, Jacob Blaustein to Truman, Personal, Harry S. Truman Library, Papers of Harry S. Truman, President 谁 Secretary 谁 File.