

# U.S. Policy and the Palestinian Refugees

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On 18 April 1948, Jewish forces launched an attack on Tiberias on the edge of the Sea of Galilee and in response the town's estimated 5,300 Palestinian residents fled in fear.<sup>1</sup> Thus began in earnest "the Palestinian refugee problem." It was these refugees, numbering 700,000 to 800,000 men, women, and children, whose plight was to be so dramatically manifested in the violent uprisings sweeping Israel's occupied territories forty years later. It was also these refugees who became the focus of the first major confrontation between the new state of Israel and its sponsor, the United States.

For more than a year, between 1948 and 1949, Israel, an emergent country of less than a million people, and powerful America actively struggled over the future of the refugees. The United States believed substantial numbers of them should be repatriated to their homes, which had been taken over by Israel; Israel disclaimed any responsibility and adamantly refused the return of the refugees. In the end, Israel prevailed with a vivid demonstration of its influence in American politics. Today it is reaping the harvest of that "victory."

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## *The Beginnings of the Refugee Problem*

The enormity of the refugee problem caught much of the world by surprise, in part because it developed so quickly in the spring of 1948. Chaos and confusion had followed the United Nations' decision the previous November to partition Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. A few, mainly wealthy and middle class Palestinians began to leave the country in December, an unrecognized harbinger of the mass uprooting that followed. By the end of March, an estimated 75,000 had left and the Arab Higher Committee was concerned enough that it announced forceful measures to halt the exodus.<sup>2</sup>

Though the United States had supported partition as a solution to the Palestinian-Jewish dispute, it had no intention of providing troops to enforce it. Yet the Palestinians refused to surrender their land and the United Nations was powerless to force them. The British, who had administered the country since just before the end of World War I, had washed their hands of the matter and were unilaterally ending their Mandate on 14 May 1948.

The two antagonistic communities were left facing each other, suspicious and apprehensive. Terrorists were operating on both sides, as were, increasingly, organized military units, though in these the Palestinians lagged significantly behind the Jews. Civilians were caught in the middle.

In April, the Jews launched Plan Dalet.† The aim of the plan was to secure transportation routes and Jewish settlements, which in practice meant the leveling or permanent occupation of Palestinian towns and villages adjacent to these roads and Jewish settlements.<sup>3</sup> The Jews quickly demonstrated their superiority in both training and weaponry over the ragtag, disorganized Palestinian militias. Each new Jewish conquest fed the tide of refugees. Haifa fell on 22 April and Safad, on 12 May.

Up to this time, the major cities attacked by the Jews had been included as part of the Jewish state envisioned by the UN partition plan of 1947. But then the Jewish forces began taking over cities and towns designated as part of the Arab state: Jaffa, an all-Palestinian city of 70,000, fell on 13 May.

Thus, when Israel came into being on 15 May, it was already well on its way to expanding its territory borders into that set aside for the Arab state. In response, contingents from five Arab armies rushed to protect the remaining Palestinian area and to stem the flow of refugees into their

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† (See Special Feature, above—Ed.)

countries. But for the most part they were no match for the superior Israeli forces, neither in manpower, training, nor arms.<sup>4</sup>

In most areas, the Palestinians were actively forced to flee or deliberately panic-stricken into fleeing with reminders of the 9 April 1948 Dayr Yasin massacre. After the capture of Lydda and Ramlah on 11–12 July, for instance, all men of military age were herded into camps, all forms of transport were commandeered, and the remaining residents were ordered to leave within a half-hour. Reported Glubb Pasha, the British commander of Transjordan's Arab Legion:

Perhaps thirty thousand people or more, almost entirely women and children, snatched up what they could and fled from their homes across the open fields. . . . It was a blazing day in July in the coastal plains—the temperature about a hundred degrees in the shade. It was ten miles across open hilly country, much of it ploughed, part of it stony fallow covered with thorn bushes, to the nearest Arab village of Beit Sira.<sup>5</sup>

Yitzhaq Rabin was the local commander in charge of the Lydda-Ramleh expulsion and he candidly wrote about it in his memoirs, although the passage was censored by Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Rabin concluded on military grounds that it was “essential to drive the inhabitants out.” That way, Jordan's Arab Legion would be forced to care for them, “thereby shouldering logistic difficulties which would burden its fighting capacity, making things easier for us.” He added:

The population of Lod [then called Lydda] did not leave willingly. There was no way of avoiding the use of force and warning shots in order to make the inhabitants march the 10–15 miles to the point where they met up with the Legion. The inhabitants of Ramle watched, and learned the lesson: their leaders agreed to be evacuated voluntarily, on condition that the evacuation was carried out by vehicles.

What Rabin left unsaid was that at least 250 civilians were killed and many more wounded during the expulsion from Lydda.<sup>7</sup>

As early as 7 August, the special UN Mediator in Palestine, Count Folke Bernadotte, estimated there were 300,000 to 400,000 Palestinian refugees whose condition “without food, clothing and shelter was appalling.” In reporting Bernadotte's remarks, Jefferson Patterson, the U.S. *chargé d'affaires* in Cairo, said Bernadotte had observed that the basic problem was whether the refugees would eventually be allowed by Israel to return to their homes. “In this connection,” Patterson added, “Bernadotte said PGI [Provisional Government of Israel] was ‘showing signs of swell-head.’ Shertok [Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett] . . . had indicated politically

PGI could not admit Arab refugees as they would constitute fifth column. Economically PGI had no room for Arabs since their space was needed for Jewish immigrants. . . . In regard to property Arab refugees, he [Bernadotte] said apparently most had been seized for use by Jews. He had seen Haganah organizing and supervising removal contents Arab houses in Ramle which he understood was being distributed among newly arrived Jewish immigrants."<sup>8</sup>

By 19 August, the State Department reported to President Truman that there were 330,000 refugees.

They are destitute of any belongings, are without adequate shelter, medical supplies, sanitation, and food. Their average daily ration, made up exclusively of bread, is only 600 calories. Once the rainy season commences and winter sets in, tragedy on the largest scale will be inevitable unless relief is forthcoming. Thus far the Provisional Government of Israel has refused to admit the Arab refugees to their former homes, which have in some cases been destroyed by fighting and in others preempted by Jewish immigrants.<sup>9</sup>

Israel, however, insisted the refugees were not Israel's responsibility, that their number was far less than maintained by the United States and other countries, and refused to take any action to help them. Its official position was:

The Government of Israel must disclaim any responsibility for the creation of this problem. The charge that these Arabs were forcibly driven out by Israel authorities is wholly false; on the contrary, everything possible was done to prevent an exodus which was a direct result of the folly of the Arab states in organizing and launching a war of aggression against Israel.<sup>10</sup>

In order to try to pressure Israel, on 16 October the UN General Assembly passed a resolution recognizing:

The right of the Arab refugees to return to their homes in Jewish-controlled territory at the earliest possible date; and the right of adequate compensation for the property of those choosing not to return and for property which has been lost as a result of pillage or confiscation or of destruction not resulting from military necessity. . . .<sup>11</sup>

The latter part of the sentence referring to losses not resulting from combat was a reference to the widespread looting and destruction wreaked by Jewish troops on Palestinian property. After the fall of Jaffa on 13 May, two days before the establishment of Israel, Jon Kimche, former editor of the *Jewish Observer and Middle East Review*, the official organ of the Zionist Federation of Britain, reported:

For the first time in the still undeclared war a Jewish force commenced to loot in wholesale fashion. At first the young Irgunists pillaged only dresses, blouses and ornaments for their girl friends. But this discrimination was soon abandoned. Everything that was movable was carried from Jaffa—furniture, carpets, pictures, crockery and pottery, jewelry and cutlery. The occupied parts of Jaffa were stripped, and yet another traditional military characteristic raised its ugly head. What could not be taken away was smashed. Windows, pianos, fittings and lamps went in an orgy of destruction.<sup>12</sup>

Such indiscriminate plundering caused even Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, the passionate prophet of conquest, to confide to his diary that he was “bitterly surprised” by the “mass robbery in which all parts of the population participated.”<sup>13</sup>

The despoliation was not confined to soldiers. “Individuals, groups and communities, men, women and children, all fell on the spoils,” according to an Israeli writer. “Doors, windows, lintels, bricks, roof-tiles, floor-tiles, junk and machine parts” were stolen.<sup>14</sup> An Israeli official reported: “The inspectors found most of the [Arab] houses broken into, and rarely was there any furniture left. Clothes, household effects, jewelry, bedding—other than mattresses—never reached the warehouses of the Custodial authority.”<sup>15</sup>

Indiscriminate slaughters also were committed. When Israeli forces entered the Galileean village of Safsaf they ordered the remaining of the original 910 residents to gather together. Reported a female eyewitness: “As we lined up, a few Jewish soldiers ordered four girls to accompany them to carry water for the soldiers. Instead, they took them to our empty houses and raped them. About seventy of our men were blindfolded and shot to death, one after the other, in front of us.”<sup>16</sup> A number of other such documented incidents aimed at making the Palestinians flee occurred. At the Galilee village of ‘Ayn Zaytun, one man was crucified on a tree and thirty-seven youths were taken hostage, never to be heard of again.<sup>17</sup> In the south, at the village of al-Dawaymah near Hebron, Israeli soldiers massacred eighty to one hundred villagers—men, women, and children. An Israeli eyewitness reported: “The children they killed by breaking their heads with sticks. There was not a house without dead. . . . One soldier boasted that he had raped a woman and then shot her.” At least two old women were locked in a house before it was blown up.<sup>18</sup> The villagers surviving such gruesome experiences—with the massacre of Dayr Yasin still fresh in mind—soon joined the exodus of fleeing Palestinians.

### *The Refugee Controversy*

Despite the call by the General Assembly for Israel to accept the return of the refugees, the new Jewish state continued adamantly to refuse, despite

the approach of winter. On 17 October the U.S. representative in Israel, John J. McDonald, reported urgently and directly to President Truman:

Arab refugee tragedy is rapidly reaching catastrophic proportions and should be treated as a disaster. Present and prospective relief and resettlement resources are utterly inadequate. . . . Of approximately 400,000 refugees, approaching winter with cold heavy rains will, it is estimated, kill more than 100,000 old men, women, and children who are shelterless and have little or no food.

In case his report be dismissed as being too emotional, McDonald felt compelled to add: "(All adjectives used above are realistically descriptive and are written out of fifteen years of personal contact with refugee problems.)"<sup>19</sup>

A major part of the problem was that no country, especially the United States, was anxious to help the refugees and thereby assume a degree of responsibility for their uncertain future. The attitude of most nations was that Israel should allow the refugees to return to their homes or compensate for the loss of their property. This Israel firmly refused, continuing to maintain that the bereft Palestinians were the victims of a war that the Arabs had started.

Yet the refugees represented such an urgent humanitarian challenge to the world community that the tragedy had to be addressed immediately. In the eyes of many Arabs, America, by its strong support of the partition plan, had assumed as much responsibility for the refugees' flight as Israel itself. Reported Mark F. Ethridge, the U.S. delegate on the Palestine Conciliation Commission which was meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland, to mediate peace treaties: "Since we gave Israel birth we are blamed for her belligerence and her arrogance and for the cold-bloodedness of her attitude toward refugees. . . . What I can see is an abortion of justice and humanity to which I do not want to be midwife. . . ."<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, the Truman administration strongly resisted accepting responsibility. Its policy was to urge both the Arab states and Israel to assume direct charge for the refugees. But a survey of various U.S. embassies and legations in the region showed clearly that there was little hope the Arab countries, even if they had felt responsible for the tragedy, could afford to support the refugees.

The Cairo embassy reported that if the 250,000 refugees held in the Gaza Strip were driven into Egypt the "result would be almost catastrophic for Egypt financially." The embassy in Amman reported that the presence of 80,000 refugees in Jordan and 302,000 in occupied Arab Palestine were a serious drain on "almost nonexistent resources" and that "money, jobs,

and other opportunities [were] scarce." The 90,000 Palestinians in Lebanon were an "unbearable burden" on that government because of unemployment and the "sensitive balance that exists between Christians and Moslems." Syria had 90,000 to 100,000 refugees, but the government had "practically abandoned its relief expenditures as unupportable budgetary drain."<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, despite their meager resources, as the State Department reported, "the great brunt of relief expenditures has been borne, perforce, by the Arab States." During the last nine months of 1948, the report noted, the Arab states had donated \$11 million to refugee aid. "This sum," added the report, "in light of the very slender budgets of most of these Governments, is relatively enormous." (At the time, Transjordan's total government budget was only \$5 million.<sup>22</sup>) The State Department report noted that "the total direct relief offered . . . by the Israeli Government to date consists of 500 cases of oranges."<sup>23</sup>

Beyond their financial inability to support the refugees, the Arab states feared the political instability a large infusion of restless, homeless people might cause. One State Department official noted the refugees would constitute a "core of agitation" in any nation that accepted them.<sup>24</sup> Another report cautioned that the continuing presence of the refugees would not only undermine the economies of the Arab states but "may well provide the motivation for the overthrow of certain of the Arab Governments."<sup>25</sup>

In desperation, the United Nations finally acted on 19 November 1948 by approving a temporary refugee relief program, of which the United States agreed to pay half the \$32 million budget.<sup>26</sup> But still it was clear that the program was only an emergency measure taken to prevent immediate disaster. It in no way tackled the basic problem, which was bound to persist until the refugees were either allowed repatriation by Israel or resettlement by the Arab nations. On 11 December the General Assembly passed another resolution again urging that "the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid" to others. Israel maintained an enigmatic silence.

When the organized fighting finally ended in January 1949, Israel held about 8,000 square miles of Palestine, 77.4 percent of the land compared to the 56.47 percent apportioned it in the UN Partition Plan.<sup>27</sup> Israel's conquests included nearly four hundred Palestinian towns and villages with 50,000 homes, 10,000 shops, and 1,000 warehouses. In all, about a quarter of the buildings in the new state were originally the property of Palestin-

ians.<sup>28</sup> It was this property, of course, that had once belonged to the 726,000 refugees.

Despite their miseries, the refugees continued to believe that they would one day return to their homes. But it was an illusion. Their chances for return were inexorably diminishing with each passing day. By 22 February, if not before, it finally became glaringly obvious to American officials that more cynical aims were motivating Israel's rejection of responsibility for the refugees: Israel was well on its way to preempting any place for the Palestinians to return to.

Reported McDonald, the U.S. representative in Tel Aviv:

The unprecedentedly rapid influx of Jewish refugees during 1948 and the plan to admit a quarter of a million more in 1949 will, if carried out, fill all or almost all of the houses and business properties previously held by Arab refugees. . . . Hence there will be almost no residence or business property and only a limited number of farms to which the Arab refugees can hope to return.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, a State Department study observed that:

Israeli authorities have followed a systematic program of destroying Arab houses in such cities as Haifa and in village communities in order to rebuild modern habitations for the influx of Jewish immigrants from DP camps in Europe. There are, thus, in many instances, literally no houses for the refugees to return to. In other cases incoming Jewish immigrants have occupied Arab dwellings and will most certainly not relinquish them in favor of the refugees.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Israel desperately needed the Palestinians' homes because Jewish immigrants were pouring into the new country at the rate of 25,000 a month, a rate that had been maintained since Israel's birth.<sup>31</sup> Thus, by rejecting responsibility for the refugees and at the same time confiscating their property, Israel was solving its most pressing problem, housing for the new immigrants.

By the end of February the plight of the Palestinians was so distressing that the refugee problem itself had become the major impediment to any peace agreement. In the opinion of U.S. officials, when compared with that of the refugees, other areas of dispute between Jews and Arabs paled. The consul at Jerusalem, William C. Burdett, cabled the State Department that:

Immediate key to peace negotiations, if not to peace, is refugee problem. Arab League is not dead intellectually even if militarily ineffective. There was complete concert of approach to us with almost open request for imposed peace, for guarantees accompanying it and for beginning of solution of refugee problem as *sine qua non* of discussions of other questions.<sup>32</sup>

That same day, Mark Ethridge, the U.S. member of the Palestine Conciliation Commission, had told Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion that the "refugees were [the] main concern [of the] Arab States." He added that they constituted "such [a] human and psychological problem to them that if Israel could make advance gesture regarding refugees . . . general settlement would be greatly facilitated. . . . Ben-Gurion agreed but strongly stressed Israeli need for military security as well as peace."<sup>33</sup>

By 15 March, with the refugee problem continuing to fester dangerously into the indefinite future, the State Department at last produced a policy paper on the situation. The grim study reported that nearly all of the Palestinian population had "fled or was expelled" from areas occupied by Israel. Their number was now estimated at 725,000 and their distribution represented destabilizing threats: they already added 21 percent to the population of Transjordan, 10 percent to Lebanon and 3.5 percent to Syria. In addition, Egypt was keeping 225,000 penned in the Gaza Strip, frightened to allow them into Egypt proper, and Transjordan was faced with 230,000 others remaining in areas under Amman's military control in Palestine.<sup>34</sup>

In truth, the refugees were not the type of healthy and potentially productive workers that most nations seek. The State Department estimated that 15 percent were "aged, sick, and infirm. It would appear that the able-bodied men and women amount to a maximum of 25 percent of the total, or 180,000." The rest of the refugees, the majority, were "infants, children, pregnant women, and nursing mothers."<sup>35</sup>

At about the same time, the Israeli Foreign Ministry had made a secret study of the refugees and coolly concluded: "The most adaptable and best survivors would manage by a process of natural selection, and the others will waste away. Some will die but most will turn into human debris and social outcasts and probably join the poorest classes in the Arab countries."<sup>36</sup> It was apparently after this study that Ben-Gurion nonetheless secretly decreed that "they may not return." Publicly, Ben-Gurion said: "Peace is vital—but not at any price."<sup>37</sup>

Still, the Israelis continued in their sphinx-like silence in public and in their confidential communications with the United States about their ultimate intentions toward the refugees. Although Israel publicly disclaimed any responsibility, its officials kept their American counterparts off balance by broadly hinting that some day at least some of the refugees might be allowed to return. Thus American officials anxiously held out hope that Israel eventually could be persuaded to accept the repatriation of at least a quarter million refugees. But Israel maintained its official position, which

was no return at all, secret. Ethridge complained as late as mid-March that "six weeks of effort to get the Israeli Government to commit itself on the refugee problem have resulted in not one single statement of position."<sup>38</sup> Again he warned: "Failure of Jews to do so [settle the refugee problem] has prejudiced whole cause of peaceful settlement in this part of world."<sup>39</sup>

By 13 April, a year after the start of the exodus of refugees, Ethridge was completely disillusioned with the Israelis. He had a heated meeting with Prime Minister Ben-Gurion over the refugee issue, and in his report to the State Department wrote: "It is obvious that Israel has not changed position on refugee problem whatever. . . . Israel does not intend to take back one refugee more than she is forced to take and she does not intend to compensate any directly if she can avoid it." Ethridge reported that Israel continued to insist that the number of refugees was exaggerated and that it:

refuses to accept any responsibility whatever for creation of refugee problem. I flatly told Ben Gurion . . . that I could not for moment accept that statement in face of Jaffa, Deir Yassin, Haifa and all reports that come to us from refugee organizations that new refugees are being created every day by repression and terrorism such as now being reported from Haifa. I have repeatedly pointed out political weakness and brutality of their position on refugees but it has made little impression.<sup>40</sup>

By this time, even President Truman's patience with the Israelis was running out. He cabled Ethridge on 29 April: "I am rather disgusted with the manner in which the Jews are approaching the refugee problem. I told the President of Israel in the presence of his Ambassador just exactly what I thought about it. It may have some effect, I hope so."<sup>41</sup> It did not.

Ben-Gurion's attitude toward the refugees remained unrelentingly antagonistic despite the staggering proportions of their misery. Disappointment and then outrage against Israel grew among American officials as the months passed and Israel refused to make any compromises with the Arabs on the refugees or on other major issues. At the time, in the winter and spring of 1949, talks to achieve armistices officially to end the war were proceeding at Rhodes simultaneously with the peace talks going on in Lausanne. Even in the Rhodes talks American diplomats felt that Israel's position was uncompromising and too ambitious.

One American official complained to Washington that the three armistice agreements that had been achieved between February and April had been:

acquiesced in by Arab states under varying degrees of force or threat of force on part of Israel. Arabs realized were defeated militarily, felt could count on no

action by UN or great powers to curb further aggression by Israel and thus must sign armistice on any terms. Use of blackmail particularly flagrant in case of Transjordan negotiations which UN official characterized as marked by "utter perfidy on one side and utter stupidity on other." Inevitable result has been storing up turbulent reservoir resentment against Israel, UN, and U.S. . . . Israeli actions including two offensives in Negev, attack in Galilee, seizure southern Negev, incursion into Syria and liberal use of big stick in armistice talks hardly support her claim to be "peace-loving state."<sup>42</sup>

Similar bitter messages from other U.S. envoys increased, all of them complaining about Israel's intransigence. The representative in Syria, James H. Keeley, cabled that:

unless Israel can be brought to understand that it cannot have all of its cake (partition boundaries) and gravy as well (areas captured in violation of truce, Jerusalem, and resettlement Arab refugees elsewhere) it may find that it has won Palestine war but lost peace. It should be evident that Israel's continued insistence upon her pound of flesh and more is driving Arab states slowly (and perhaps surely) to gird their loins (politically and economically if not yet militarily) for long-range struggle that profiting by mistakes of past could make Israel's task far harder than might be case if far seeing Israeli statesmanship were to grasp opportunities of moment to reach negotiated settlement on reasonable terms.<sup>43</sup>

This growing chorus of criticisms of Israel had the effect of causing Truman, the most pro-Israel of presidents prior to Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, to send to Tel Aviv on 28 May 1949 the stiffest message since Israel's creation. The message warned that the United States was:

seriously disturbed by the attitude of Israel with respect to a territorial settlement in Palestine and to the question of Palestinian refugees. . . . The U.S. Govt. is gravely concerned lest Israel now endanger the possibility of arriving at a solution of the Palestine problem in such a way as to contribute to the establishment of sound and friendly relations between Israel and its neighbors.

The Govt. of Israel should entertain no doubt whatever that the U.S. Govt. relies upon it to take responsible and positive action concerning Palestine refugees and that, far from supporting excessive Israeli claims to further territory within Palestine, the U.S. Govt. believes that it is necessary for Israel to offer territorial compensation for territory which it expects to acquire beyond the boundaries [of the UN Partition plan].

If Israel continued to ignore the advice of the United Nations and the United States, the message sternly warned, "the U.S. Govt. will regretfully

be forced to the conclusion that a revision of its attitude toward Israel has become unavoidable."<sup>44</sup>

Israel's response came a fortnight later. It was indirect but nonetheless rude. Israel's delegate at the Palestine Conciliation Commission in Lausanne openly distributed a news story in the *Palestine Post* saying, in the paraphrase of Ethridge, that "nothing has happened to alter the attitude of the Israeli Government in the slightest."<sup>45</sup> Israel's official response had a similar tone. It was delivered to the State Department on 8 June, asserting disingenuously that Truman's note must have been "based on a misunderstanding" of Israel's true position and therefore, by implication, not a serious matter.<sup>46</sup>

The State Department was not accustomed to a display of such arrogance by a supposedly friendly state, and U.S. officials at the time no doubt thought it a simple enough matter to influence a third world country numbering less than a million people. Thus, in retaliation, the State Department sought to pressure Israel by threatening to withhold \$49 million of unallocated funds from a \$100 million Export-Import Bank loan to Israel. The funds were to be withheld if Israel did not take back 200,000 refugees. George C. McGhee, the newly appointed U.S. coordinator on Palestine Refugee Matters, was chosen to deliver the message to the Israeli ambassador in Washington.<sup>47</sup> According to McGhee's account:

I asked the ambassador [Eliahu Elath] to lunch with me at the Metropolitan Club and put our decision to him in the most tactful and objective way I could. . . . The ambassador looked me straight in the eye and said, in essence, that I wouldn't get by with this move, that he would stop it. . . . Within an hour of my return to my office I received a message from the White House that the President wished to dissociate himself from any withholding of the Ex-Im Bank loan. I knew of the President's sympathy for Israel, but I had never before realized how swiftly the supporters of Israel could act if challenged.<sup>48</sup>

In the end, Elath was right. Israel received its money without changing its policies.<sup>49</sup> From Israel, Ambassador McDonald observed: "The [next] American note abandoned completely the stern tone of its predecessor. . . . More and more, Washington ceased to lay down the law to Tel Aviv."<sup>50</sup>

It was a fateful capitulation by Truman for it signalled to Israel that it could literally do what it wanted without undue worry about American protestations. After this debacle, the Truman administration apparently made no further effort to exert overt pressure to bring Israel in line with U.S. policy.

The message quickly made its way down to the bureaucracy: America's supporters of Israel could be counted on to thwart any U.S. policy that they considered inimical to Israel. As Undersecretary of State James E. Webb remarked to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, no one should "overestimate U.S. influence with Israel. Past record suggests Israel has had more influence with U.S. than has U.S. with Israel."<sup>51</sup>

In Israel, officials made no attempt to hide their pleasure at the power they wielded through the Jewish community in America. "Israel is convinced of its ability to 'induce' the United States to abandon its present insistence on repatriation of refugees and territorial changes," reported the consul in Jerusalem. "From experience in the past, officials state confidently 'you will change your mind,' and the press cites instances of the effectiveness of organized Jewish propaganda in the U.S." He sagaciously urged Washington either to put strong pressure on Israel to become conciliatory or to "admit that the U.S. and UN are unable or unwilling to take the required measures and therefore that U.S. policy on boundaries and refugees cannot be carried out."<sup>52</sup>

But this Harry Truman refused to do. In the face of Israel's lobbying power and Truman's political weakness, the administration dithered, refusing to face the issue head-on. Instead, it ineffectually continued to express, but not press, its moderating views to Israel. But Israel, suffused with its short-term victories and its long-term ambitions, refused to listen to Washington. Israel persisted in this rejection despite the fact that all the contiguous Arab states at one time or another during the year had expressed what U.S. officials took to be sincere wishes to find a solution.<sup>53</sup>

Reported Mark Ethridge of the Conciliation Commission: "If there is to be any assessment of blame for stalemate at Lausanne, Israel must accept primary responsibility. . . . Her attitude toward refugees is morally reprehensible and politically short-sighted. . . . Her position as conqueror demanding more does not make for peace. . . . There was never a time in the life of the commission when a generous and far-sighted attitude on the part of the Jews would not have unlocked peace."<sup>54</sup>

Instead, Israel completely ignored America's advice and went about ruthlessly imposing its rule in its expanded frontiers, tightening its grip on Jerusalem, and relentlessly propagandizing its claim that the suffering refugees were not its responsibility. But not all Israelis were blind to the tragedy unfolding before them. As then Minister of Agriculture Aharon Cizling warned his colleagues: "We still do not properly appreciate what kind of enemy we are now nurturing outside the borders of our state. Our enemies, the Arab states, are a mere nothing compared with those hundreds

of thousands of Arabs who will be moved by hatred and hopelessness and infinite hostility to wage war on us, regardless of any agreement that might be reached."<sup>55</sup>

But David Ben-Gurion and his hardline followers either did not understand or were too delirious and deluded by their conquests to heed this prophetic advice. In so doing, they sowed the seeds of the Palestinian uprising that forty years later came as a surprise to Israel, if not to the American officials on the scene who had impotently watched the tragedy unfold from its beginning.



1. Nafez Nazzal, *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee 1948* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978), 28. There were about 6,000 Jews living in Tiberias at the time.
2. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 30 and 60.
3. Morris, *Birth of Palestinian Refugee Problem*, 62.
4. Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 195-6; he quotes three studies of manpower and notes that three credit Israel with more men under arms. The estimates ranged from 21,500 to 23,500 for Arab troops and from 25,000 (a pro-Israeli source) to 65,000 (a British source) for Jewish forces.
5. John Bagot Glubb, *A Soldier with the Arabs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), 162, and Tom Segev, *1949* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 27.
6. The censored passage was later published by the *New York Times* on 23 October 1979 and in a book by Rabin's English translator, Peretz Kidron. See Kidron, "Truth Whereby Nations Live," in Edward Said & Christopher Hitchens (eds.), *Blaming the Victims* (London: Verso, 1988).
7. Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, 206.
8. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1948*, Vol. V, *The Near East, South Asia and Africa*; Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1976, "The Chargé in Egypt (Patterson) to the Secretary of State," 7 August 1948, 11 AM, 1295. Hereafter referred to as FRUS 1948.
9. FRUS 1948, "Memorandum by the Department of State to President Truman," Drafted 19 August 1948, 1324.
10. FRUS 1948, "The Acting United States Representative of the United Nations (Jessup) to the Secretary of State," 27 July 1948, 1248.
11. FRUS 1948, "The Secretary of State to the Acting Secretary of State," 16 October 1948, 1483.
12. Jon Kimche, "Deir Yasin and Jaffa," pp. 775-8, in Walid Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987).
13. Segev, *1949*, 69.
14. *Ibid.*, 70.
15. *Ibid.*, 71.
16. Nazzal, *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee 1948*, 95; see Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, 230.
17. Segev, *1949*, 107.
18. Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, 222.

19. FRUS 1948, "The Special Representative of the United States in Israel (McDonald) to President Truman," 17 October 1948, 4 PM, 1486.
20. FRUS 1949, "The Minister in Lebanon (Pinkerton) to the Secretary of State" (from Ethridge), 28 March 1949, 878.
21. FRUS 1949, *Editorial Note*, 688.
22. FRUS 1949, "Palestine Refugee Problem," Annex I, 22 April 1949, 938.
23. FRUS 1949, "Policy Paper Prepared in the Department of State," 15 March 1949, 835.
24. FRUS 1949, "The Consul at Jerusalem (Burdett) to the Secretary of State," 28 February 1949, 11 AM, 780.
25. FRUS 1949, "Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs (Satterthwaite) to the Secretary of State," 1 March 1949, 782. By 29 December, the State Department had finally taken as careful count of the refugees as possible at the time and concluded there were many more than earlier supposed—645,000 to 765,000. See FRUS 1948, "The Acting Secretary of State to Certain Diplomatic and Consular Offices," 29 December 1948, 8:15 AM, 1696. In the opinion of demographer Janet L. Abu-Lughod, who had studied the problem carefully, the higher figure was closer to the reality. She estimated the number at 770,000 to 780,000; see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The Demographic Transformation of Palestine," 161, in Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Transformation of Palestine* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971). The United Nations' count was 726,000, which is the number I have used since it is within the range of most estimates; see UN A/6797, "Report of the special Representative's Mission to the Occupied Territories, 15 Sept. 1967."
26. FRUS 1948, "The Acting Secretary of State to the United States Delegation at Paris," 6 December 1948, 1648.
27. Epp, *Whose Land is Palestine?*, 195; Sachar, *A History of Israel*, 350. For details of Israel's plans for occupying Palestinian territory, see Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest*, lxxv–lxxxiii and 755–61. For an excellent study of Jewish land ownership, see Ruedy in Abu-Lughod, *Transformation of Palestine*, 119–38.
28. Don Peretz, "The Arab Refugee Dilemma," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1954. Also see Nyrop (ed.), *Israel: a Country Study*, 52; David Shipler, *Between Arab and Jew* (New York: Times Book, 1986), 32–6; and Segev, 1949, 69–71.
29. FRUS 1949, "The Special Representative of the United States in Israel (McDonald) to the Secretary of State," 22 February 1949, 762.
30. FRUS 1949, "Policy Paper Prepared in the Department of State," 15 March 1949, 837.
31. FRUS 1949, "Report by the National Security Council on United States Policy Toward Israel and the Arab States," 17 October 1949, 1431.
32. FRUS 1949, "The Consul at Jerusalem (Burdett) to the Secretary of State," 28 February 1949, 10 AM, 777.
33. FRUS 1949, "The Consul at Jerusalem (Burdett) to the Secretary of State," 28 February 1949, 9 AM, 775.
34. FRUS 1949, "Policy Paper Prepared in the Department of State," 15 March 1949, 829.
35. *Ibid.*, 829.
36. Segev, 1949, 30.
37. *Ibid.*, 6, 30.
38. FRUS 1949, 806. Footnote, #3.
39. FRUS 1949, "The Minister in Lebanon (Pinkerton) to the Secretary of State" (from Ethridge), 28 March 1949, 876.
40. FRUS 1949, "Mr. Mark F. Ethridge to the Secretary of State," 13 April 1949, 1 PM, 914.
41. FRUS 1949, "The President to Mr. Mark F. Ethridge, at Jerusalem," 29 April 1949, 957.
42. FRUS 1949, "The Consul at Jerusalem (Burdett) to the Secretary of State," 20 April 1949, 4 PM, 928–30.
43. FRUS 1949, "The Minister in Syria (Keeley) to the Secretary of State," 19 May 1949, 10 AM, 1032.
44. FRUS 1949, "The Acting Secretary of State to the Embassy in Israel," 28 May 1949, 11 AM, 1072–4.
45. FRUS 1949, "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, by the Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs

- (Satterthwaite)," 8 June 1949, 1094.
46. *FRUS 1949*, "The Government of Israel to the Government of the United States," 8 June 1949, 1102.
  47. *FRUS 1949*, "Memorandum by William J. McWilliams, Assistant to the Director of the Executive Secretariat," 26 August 1949, 1332; also see 1375, 1389, and 1455.
  48. George McGhee. *Envoy to the Middle East: Adventures in Diplomacy* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983).
  49. *FRUS 1949*, "The Secretary of State to the United States delegation at Lausanne," 15 September 1949, 8 PM, 1388-9.
  50. James McDonald, *My Mission to Israel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950), 184.
  51. *FRUS 1949*, "The Acting Secretary of State to the Secretary of State, at Paris," 12 June 1949, 10 PM, 1127.
  52. *FRUS 1949*, "The Consul at Jerusalem (Burdett) to the Secretary of State," 6 July 1949, 1203-5.
  53. In their reports from the region, a number of State Department officials repeatedly referred to Israel's "voracious territorial appetite," "expansionist ambitions," its threats of force and to its "take it or leave it attitude." The consul in Jerusalem reported that "the favorable opportunity for settlement" generated at the time of the 24 February Israel-Egypt armistice agreement "has now passed." The turning point, he wrote, came when Israel imposed harsh terms on Transjordan for the 23 March armistice with that country. . . ." See *FRUS 1949*, "The Consul at Jerusalem (Burdett) to the Secretary of State," 6 July 1949, 1203-5.
  54. *FRUS 1949*, "From Ethridge, USDel at Lausanne Commenting Separately on Israel Note," 12 June 1949, 1 PM, 1124-5.
  55. Segev, 1949, 31n.