WHY THE 1947 UN PARTITION RESOLUTION MUST BE CELEBRATED

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As compared with the festivities surrounding the Balfour Declaration centenary, little attention has been paid to the 70th anniversary of the UN vote. This is a missed opportunity.

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This is a response to *Who Saved Israel in 1947?*, originally published in *Mosaic* in November 2017

Earlier this month, the governments of Britain and Israel marked the centenary of the Balfour Declaration with much fanfare. From London to Jerusalem, prime ministers, parliamentarians, and protesters weighed in. The world's major media outlets ran extended analyses, while historians (myself included) enjoyed their fleeting few minutes of fame.

In comparison, notice of this week's 70th anniversary of the 1947 UN partition resolution, the first international legitimation of a Jewish state—and the subject of my essay, "Who Saved Israel in 1947?"—will be subdued. Why?

Israelis prepare a 2011 ceremony reconstructing the celebrations that took place on November 29, 1947 following passage of the UN partition plan for Palestine, which led to the creation of the state of Israel. MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP/Getty Images.

A centenary is certainly a rarer thing, and the Balfour Declaration makes for dramatic telling. But the vote over the partition resolution had plenty of drama, too, and some of us, or our parents or grandparents, still remember the suspense that attended it and the elation that followed.

The Israeli novelist Amos Oz is one of them. In an autobiographical passage, he recalled that night in Jerusalem as his father stroked his head in his darkened bedroom:

> "From the moment we have our own state [said Oz's father], you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew and because Jews are so-and-sos. Not that. Never again. From tonight that's finished here. Forever." I reached out sleepily to touch his face, just below his high forehead, and all of a sudden instead of his glasses my fingers met tears. Never in my life, before or after that night, not even when my mother died, did I see my father cry. And in fact I didn't see him cry that night, either. Only my left hand saw.

For those of us who are too young to remember the tears or the dancing in the streets, something of the excitement of the vote is easily retrievable. The balloting at the United Nations occurred in the presence of cameras, and anyone can see it spring to life on YouTube, along with the joyous

celebrations that ensued. By contrast, the ecstasy prompted by the Balfour Declaration seems remote. Some 100,000 reportedly turned out in the streets of Odessa, but not even one photograph attests to it.

So why, one asks again, did the Balfour Declaration centenary resonate, while the partition-vote anniversary doesn't?

First, the subsequent 70 years have been marked by repeated assaults on Israel's legitimacy, launched from within that very same United Nations. This reached an obscene climax in 1975, when the General Assembly passed a resolution defining Zionism "as a form of racism and racial discrimination." And while the General Assembly revoked that resolution in 1991, UN bodies continue to defame Israel through hateful resolutions.

As Benny Morris speculates in his insightful response to my essay, "were the same vote held today, the 193 General Assembly members would likely vote, overwhelmingly, against Jewish statehood."

Even at the time, however, Israel's founders also knew that a General Assembly vote wasn't a firm anchor. Israel's declaration of independence in May 1948 did invoke the partition resolution, but added a telling assertion: "This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their state is irrevocable." Why irrevocable? Because the founders knew perfectly well that a future vote at the United Nations might revoke it. The resolution reflected the political interests of UN member states at a moment in time. Those interests were bound to shift, and very quickly they did—away from Israel.

So it's no surprise that, among Israel and its supporters, ambivalence now attaches to the 1947 UN vote. Yes, Britain had earlier betrayed the Balfour Declaration, just as the UN would betray the partition resolution. But Britain now has a prime minister, Theresa May, who has answered Palestinian and other calls for a "Balfour apology" with a resounding "absolutely not": "We are proud of our pioneering role in the creation of the state of Israel."

Of the states that voted for partition, by contrast, only the United States is prone to issuing comparable reassurances. Vice-President Mike Pence no doubt will express similar pride in the celebration scheduled to take place in New York this week, but that's ironic: Abba Eban, who led the Zionist effort at the UN in 1947, wrote that, after the vote, "I was disturbed by the weakness of American support," which had been "more lukewarm than the Soviet."

The second cause for reticence is the notion, echoed by Benny Morris in his response, that the partition resolution wasn't all that important anyway, so why bother? By 1947, the Jews in Palestine were 600,000-strong and unstoppable. Even with a resolution, Israel wound up fighting a war of independence, and it certainly would have fought one had the UN vote been deadlocked. It's a war Israel would have won. "In all likelihood," Morris concludes, "the state would have arisen, in 1948 or a year or two later, whatever the UN had decided or failed to decide in November 1947."

What-if questions are unanswerable, but I'm inclined to agree with Morris. Still, Abba Eban once gave a less confident answer:

> If the United Nations debate had ended in deadlock, . . . the strongest probability is that the country would have continued to live under international tutelage, with a joint American-British administration. And if the United Nations had asserted its sovereignty by proclaiming a UN trusteeship, it is unlikely that even President Truman and the Soviet Union would have extended recognition to a Jewish state established in revolt against an international jurisdiction. . . . I cannot construct any scenario for 1947-1948 in which a Jewish state, recognized by the major powers, could have emerged if there had not been Zionist victories at UNSCOP [the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine] and in the UN General Assembly.

If not, then what? Who knows? I'm reminded of a passage by Christopher Sykes, the British author of an influential work on Israel, who once asked what might have happened had there been no David Ben-Gurion. "Israel would probably have come into being nonetheless," he answered, "but it is hard to believe that the state would have been founded in so swift and firm a way, without far more of distress and ambiguity."

Absent a UN resolution or Ben-Gurion, the trauma of Israel's birth would have been exacerbated. Better to have had both. But for those who wish to emphasize Israel's birth as the result only of battlefield grit and sacrifice, there is a logical prejudice against celebrating the UN vote as a watershed.

Third, the other half of the UN resolution poses a problem for some Israelis and supporters of Israel: it recommended the establishment of an Arab state as well as a Jewish one. Indeed, in 1988, the Palestine National Council, while citing the partition resolution as precipitating a "historical injustice," added that "it is this resolution that still provides those conditions of international legitimacy that ensure the right of the Palestinian Arab people to sovereignty." It was a *partition* plan, and for Zionist opponents of partition today, it's nothing to celebrate. (The 1917 Balfour Declaration is much less complicated: it didn't even mention Arabs, and merely insisted that the "national home" of the Jewish people not prejudice "the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities.")

But even Israelis eager for partition might be less than eager to celebrate. This is because the partition plan came with a map—a division that would have left all of Jerusalem under international control, surrounded on all sides by the proposed Arab state. (It also would have cut the Jewish state into three chunks, linked at two points.) From the outset, the leaders of the yishuv bristled at the proposed borders, and especially at the exclusion of Jerusalem.

And so, beginning in the spring of 1948, when the Arabs went to war to throttle Israel, Israel seized the opportunity to occupy a good part of the territory allotted to the Arab state, and to push through a corridor to the besieged Jews in western Jerusalem. To justify its conquests, Israel insisted that the Arabs, by going to war, had nullified the partition plan—and its map. In 1949, Ben-Gurion declared the resolution "null and void," bereft of "any moral force." In 1956, he said: "[Just as] we cannot bring back all our dead sons and daughters who died in that war of independence, [so] that resolution cannot be brought back."

In this view, Israel didn't arise from the UN resolution, but emerged upon its death. Why then celebrate a dead letter—strangled at birth by the Arabs, and then buried by Israel?

For these three reasons (and perhaps others), relatively little attention, especially as compared with the festivities surrounding the Balfour centenary, is being paid to the 70th anniversary of the UN vote. This seems to me a missed opportunity.

Most obviously, the Balfour Declaration spoke only of a "national home" for the Jews, which the British later interpreted to be less than a state. Because of that vagueness, millions of Jews in Europe for whom the declaration was originally intended were prevented from immigrating there and did not survive the Holocaust. The 1947 UN resolution, by contrast, explicitly recommended a Jewish state, and at a moment when the yishuv had the strength to leverage international recognition to maximum advantage.

But there is another compelling reason to emphasize the 1947 resolution, and to do so time and again. That reason: the Arabs rejected it. And because they did, preferring war, they cannot escape their share of responsibility for the war's consequences: their "catastrophe," or *nakba*.

Evasion of responsibility explains why the Palestinians, in telling the saga of their "dispossession," stress the Balfour Declaration and downplay the partition resolution. By claiming that the die was cast against them as early as 1917, their own mistakes in 1947 and 1948 are made to seem inconsequential.

This elision is facilitated by the fact that the Balfour Declaration is an easy target. There *was* something presumptuous in the way Britain made promises over Palestine in 1917. Yes, the Balfour Declaration had the backing of the major Allied powers, as I showed in an [essay](#) earlier this year in *Mosaic*. The Balfour Declaration could not have been more legitimate—by the standards of its time. But these are not the standards of our time.

The 1947 resolution, however, does meet today's standards. Prior to the vote, the General Assembly empowered UNSCOP, comprising representatives of eleven uninvolved member-states, to investigate the situation and make recommendations to the General Assembly. This is now standard procedure in the handling of conflicts, and it was here that the Palestinian Arabs made their first mistake—one that their apologists, to this day, seek to cover up.

If you believe Columbia professor Rashid Khalidi, you'll take it as fact that Palestinian Arabs "were either not consulted, or were effectively ignored by the various international efforts that culminated in this resolution." The UN "expert" Richard Falk makes the same claim: UNSCOP "never consulted the wishes of the Palestinian people or the residents of historic Palestine." "For me," Falk has said, the "fundamental flaw with the partition proposals contained in Resolution 181 was the failure to consult the people resident in Palestine at the time."

This is false and deceptive. The Palestinian Arab leaders *boycotted* UNSCOP, which was eager to meet with them. There was no UNSCOP "failure to consult the people," there was a Palestinian failure to engage UNSCOP. Henry Cattan, a Jerusalem jurist and advocate for the Palestinian cause, thought this decision "unfortunate," since it allowed the Zionists to present their arguments "without contradiction from the Arab side." But he couldn't get it reversed:

> When UNSCOP came to Palestine for its inquiry, its [Muslim] Indian member came to my house and, speaking as a friend, asked me to suggest to the [Palestinian] Arab Higher Committee that it was unwise for it to boycott UNSCOP and its investigations. I transmitted his view to the Arab Higher Committee but without result. Its attitude was adamant: there was no need for any inquiry or investigation, since the only course was to end the Mandate and to proclaim [Arab] Palestine's independence.

Not only did the Arab Higher Committee then reject the majority report of UNSCOP, which recommended the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states; it also rejected the *minority* report, which recommended a federated, binational state. In the Arab view, the Jews had no right to anything—not a single immigrant, not a shred of self-government. Once the Mandate ended, the Arabs believed they could set the clock back to 1917. Their leaders and thinkers, lost in a fog of wishful thinking, had no way to gauge the strength of the yishuv, which had gathered near-sovereign force under their very noses.

Their second mistake compounded the first. The Arabs misread the significance of the partition vote. Partition was adopted by a two-thirds majority vote in the General Assembly—not by a secret agreement, not by a great-power proclamation, but by an open vote of sovereign states. This is a procedure we have come to regard as fundamental to international legitimacy.

No less important, the two rising superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, drove the "yes" vote forward. This, despite the fact that the Soviets had been hostile to Zionism and supportive of the Arabs all through the 1920s and 1930s. The sudden Soviet turnabout showed how strongly the wind was now blowing against the Arabs. The voting procedure, and the identity of the yes-sayers, meant that the partition resolution had far greater political weight than the Balfour Declaration. (It's also why the international two-state consensus forged by it has lasted to this day.)

Yet the Arabs rejected the partition vote exactly as they had rejected the Balfour Declaration—not a partial rejection, but a total one. Why? Because they thought that once the British left, they would defeat the Jews. An example of this thinking is the testimony of the late Palestinian academic Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, a native of Jaffa, who left a telling account of the mood there on the eve of the war:

The inhabitants of Jaffa in general believed—like most of their fellow Palestinians throughout the land—that the Palestinian was braver than the Jew and more capable of standing hardship. They thought that, as the country belonged to the Arabs, they were the ones who would defend their homeland with zeal and patriotism. . . . In short, there was a belief that the Jews were generally cowards.

This is why the Arabs refused to accept partition, or a federated state, or any plan that recognized any Jewish rights at all. Why concede anything to a motley mob of cowardly Jews? The people of Jaffa, Abu-Lughod went on to say, believed that "if they made ready a bit . . . then they were sure to emerge victorious."

Instead the Palestinians went down to an ignominious defeat, dragging the Arab states with them. Indeed, their conduct in the war conformed almost precisely to the conduct they had expected of the Jews, making them contemptible in their own eyes and in the eyes of other Arabs.

It took more than 60 years for a Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, to describe Palestinian and Arab rejection of partition as a "mistake" (in an interview in 2011). But this was far from a full accounting. The outer limit of permissible Palestinian introspection is demonstrated by Hussein Ibish, the most moderate of Arab-Americans:

It's virtually unimaginable that any national group could have demonstrated the foresight and determination to accept what necessarily seemed to them profoundly unjust, indefensible, and even, from their sincere point of view, actually rationally inexplicable. Palestinians obviously made a mistake, but, in all honesty, what community in its situation would ever have acted differently?

The answer to Ibish's question is simple. What community "would ever have acted differently?" The Zionist Jews who accepted partition, with all of its "indefensible" flaws, in 1947.

Which is why it is important to mark this 70th anniversary, and every anniversary to come. It isn't just a reminder of Israel's legitimacy; it's a reminder of Arab responsibility.

Benny Morris, Michael Mandelbaum, and Harvey Klehr, my three respondents, have made many fascinating points with which I'm in full agreement, and I'm also grateful for the generosity of their praise. On two particular points, my perspective differs.

I thank [Michael Mandelbaum](#) for finding the shared thread of my two *Mosaic* essays. He's quite right: it's hard to think of another state established in the 20th century with as many international endorsements as Israel. And he is also right that the story of Zionism belongs to the greater saga of national self-determination.

The pseudo-scholarly project of shoving Zionism into the despised category of "settler colonialism" rips Zionism from its actual historical context, the better to defame it. Objectively, however, Zionism wasn't colonialism (or socialism, for that matter), but a Jewish adaptation of 19th-century European nationalism. The Zionists were up to the same thing as other fresh converts to nationalism on Europe's borderlands, and later in all of Asia and Africa.

Any doubts about Zionism's nationalist DNA were put to rest in 1905, when the Zionist Congress rejected a proposal for a Jewish homeland in East Africa. Zionists didn't seek a place to exploit economically, or even a refuge for endangered Jews. They wanted back their native land, upon which the Jews once had lived as an independent nation—a land which, unlike Africa, could nurture the Jewish people back to nationhood.

But there is a caveat here. Zionism came late to the era of self-determination (and only a step ahead of the Arabs), and it didn't neatly fit its template. The reason: in 1917, the vast majority of the Jews who, it was hoped, would populate the Jewish polity resided, on average, 1,500 miles away from their ancestral land. They lived not in the Ottoman empire but in the Russian one, and very few of them had immediate plans to leave it for their "national home" in Palestine, then populated overwhelmingly by "native" Arabs.

Even Arthur James Balfour, the signatory of the Balfour Declaration, recognized that the Jewish case posed an awkward question. Critics of Zionism, he noted in 1920, argued that "if you apply that principle [of self-determination] logically and honestly, it is to the majority of the existing population of Palestine [i.e., the Arabs] that the future destinies of Palestine should be committed." Balfour even admitted that this argument had the merit of "technical ingenuity."

But he then dismissed it—since, to his mind, "the case of the Jews is absolutely exceptional, and must be treated by exceptional methods."

> The case of Jewry . . . falls outside all the ordinary rules and maxims, cannot be contained in a formula or explained in a sentence. The deep, underlying principle of self-determination really points to a Zionist policy, however little in its strict technical interpretation it may seem to favor it.

Arthur Koestler, for his part, did have a formula: he called it the "freak" aspect of Jewry. It was "unprecedented that a race should lose its country, and hence its physical nationhood, and yet preserve its identity through two millenniums"—and then, suddenly, awaken to "national consciousness and produce a modern political movement, like green shoots breaking from a petrified forest." Everything that followed was "freakish," including the Balfour Declaration ("dangerously outside the cautious routine of diplomacy"), and the gestation of Israel ("conceived on paper, blueprinted in the Mandate, hatched out in the diplomatic laboratory"). Only in its last phase did Israel conform to general precedent—born, like all nations, in violence ("the decisive factor").

It is precisely because Israel ill-conforms to the "technical interpretation" of self-determination, and was "hatched out in the diplomatic laboratory," that its legitimacy is subject to constant attacks in the diplomatic arena. Add to this the fact that for many of today's 193 member-states of the UN, Israel will always be in overdraft as long as there is no Palestinian state, however failed that state might prove to be. So a great deal is stacked against Israel, even before anti-Semitism is added to the ledger.

Is this "normal"? Koestler explained that "freak phenomena are merely the extreme extensions of normality." If so, then Israel is "normal," but it exists (indeed, even thrives) on the edge of the ledge.

Like Mandelbaum, I too hope that, in time, Israel will enjoy the same measure of legitimacy that accrues to all successful nations. To no small extent, it already does. But there is still a distance to cover. Hence the need to mark, if not celebrate, such occasions as the Balfour centenary and the anniversary of the partition vote.

Or does Israel's legitimacy perhaps rest not on the two millennia of Jewish perseverance, but on the sudden calamity of Holocaust? Benny Morris argues that the Holocaust, more than any other factor, explains why the General Assembly voted in favor of partition and a Jewish state. He believes that the resolution was a collective act of reparation inspired by the horrific images from the extermination camps, liberated by the Allies only a few years earlier.

His argument is elegantly expressed, but it's still speculative. It can't be proved or disproved. Certainly Zionist diplomats at the time didn't think that such sentiments stirred their foreign counterparts. Abba Eban, drawing on the Soviet instance, offered this generalization:

> The fact that Soviet support of our cause was based on self-interest rather than on benevolence was a positive factor in my eyes. My experience has told me that all nations determine their policies in the light of self-interest and then explain their policies in terms of self-sacrificial altruistic morality. Even the Soviet Union feels a need to idealize its self-interest by reference to liberal, Enlightenment values. Its objectives in 1947 were pragmatic, concrete, tactical, and strategic, but its justifications were formulated in terms of self-determination and equal national rights.

Morris also adduces the French vote in favor of partition as having been particularly determined by sympathy for the Jews. But Moshe Sharett, Israel's foreign-minister-in-waiting in 1947, thought otherwise:

> The approach of the French was cold and skeptical. . . . It was a very sober attitude, without enthusiasm, without the moral overtone displayed by other governments for whom the problem was politically less complicated and vexing. . . . Just as the French can be emotional and sentimental, they can also be cold and rational—and so they were in this case. . . . [France's UN ambassador Alexandre] Parodi wanted to be fair toward us, but a chill emanated from him: a chill we felt in our direct meetings with the French delegation, and in our meetings with all the great powers.

The French vote, third in importance to the American and Soviet, is worth a full study in its own right, and it looms large in two important books on the first decade of Franco-Israel relations, one (in Hebrew) by Benjamin Pinkus and another (in French and Hebrew) by Tsilla Hershco. The record compiled by them confirms Sharett's impressions, and adds still more complications.

Thus, the French at various times gave refuge to Haj Amin al-Husseini, mufti of Jerusalem and Nazi collaborator; allowed the *Exodus* to sail from Marseilles with its cargo of Jewish survivors; and supplied the arms sent to the Irgun on the *Altalena*. But if one factor rose above all others in French calculations, it was a desire to administer a kick to Britain, which had kicked France out of Syria and Lebanon in May and June 1945. In October of that year, de Gaulle told a French Zionist: "The Jews in Palestine are the only ones capable of chasing the British out of the Middle East."

The Israeli historian Meir Zamir, who has documented the "secret war" that ensued between Britain and France, has concluded that "in the period 1945-1948, the most effective French weapon against Britain in the Middle East was its support for the struggle of the Zionist movement." If so, the French rationale more or less paralleled the Soviet one.

Still, France had other mitigating interests. That's why the French government held off until the last minute before deciding in favor of partition, and even tried to delay the vote. France finally voted "yes" mainly to fall in line with the Soviet-American consensus (this, according to the editors of the official *Documents diplomatiques français*).

Where does Holocaust-driven sympathy for the Jews figure in all of this? All one can say is that Zionist leaders didn't rely on it, and all of France's moves can be explained without it. Of course, 33 countries voted "yes," so the French case says nothing about the rest. But it would seem to confirm Eban's observation: states secretly make decisions based on interests, and openly rationalize them by invoking morality.

I learned much from Harvey Klehr's [interesting account](#) of how the Soviet position impacted the Palestine and (more particularly) the American Communist parties. I have nothing to add, but I do want to contribute a footnote to the story of support by Jewish Communists for a Jewish state.

Stalin's decision found one of them, Maxime Rodinson, in Beirut. He had joined the French Communist party in 1937, and he stayed in it until 1958. Rodinson became an important scholar of Islam and, after 1967, a famous critic of Israel. Most notably, he was one of the first to try to cram Israel into the "settler-colonialism" matrix.

But in 1947 and 1948, he supported the creation of Israel—because Stalin did.

> All of us Communists at that time had been conditioned to throw in our lot, without understanding, with everything Stalin decided, because it could only be in the higher interests of the World Revolution. . . . I was faithful to the Communist line [on support for Israel], but regarded it as a gesture that was necessary for the moment.

Rodinson eventually departed the party (though not before defending Stalin over the infamous 1953 "Doctors' Plot"), and ended up writing ideological tomes against Israel. (Its creation, he said,

was "a historical mistake.") But these condemnations had little lasting effect. In contrast, the support given by him and his "comrades" for Israel's creation in 1947 rendered a crucial service to Zionism—not just "for the moment," but for 70 years, and counting.

In October 1947, Chaim Weizmann put his finger on the most salient truth at the United Nations: "The main point is the positive attitude both of America and of Russia, and it is almost tantamount to a miracle that these two countries should have agreed on our problem."

"Freakish" or "miraculous," Soviet support for the birth of Israel was a crucial link in the chain of events that produced the Jewish state. And there is circumstantial evidence that it was a forced miracle: the result of tireless work by the founders of Israel. Perhaps by the 80th anniversary in 2027, or the centenary in 2047, we'll know for certain. In the meantime, let us give provisional credit where provisional credit is due.