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Mideast Peace under Arabs' Control

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Abstract (Summary)

Douglas J. Feith discusses the history of the division of Palestine that created Israel and Jordan, and the failure of the UN's partition plan for Palestine. Feith says Arab diplomatic inflexibility has given strength to Israel's claims for retention of territories it acquired in 1967.

Full Text (826 words)

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On this date 44 years ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 181, the Partition Plan for Palestine. The plan's failure affects the thinking of the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict to this day.

Resolution 181 proposed dividing between Jews and Arabs the land then remaining under the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine. Twenty-five years before, Britain -- which was made trustee under the Mandate in 1920 -- converted the eastern three-quarters of Palestine into the Emirate of Transjordan. That land, defined by the Mandate as "the territories lying between the Jordan {River} and the eastern boundary of Palestine," Britain gave to its client, the grandfather of the present King Hussein of Jordan, under the supervision of the British High Commissioner for Palestine. Britain granted independence to the eastern part of Mandate Palestine (now Jordan) in 1946.

Resolution 181 recommended terminating the Palestine Mandate for the western part of Palestine through establishment there of a Jewish state and an Arab state, joined by an economic union, and internationalization of Jerusalem.

The Arab state would have included not only what Resolution 181 referred to as "the Gaza District" and "the hill country of Samaria and Judea," but also such other territories as the western Galilee. The plan's Jewish state would have been much smaller than the Israel that emerged from the 1948-49 Independence War. The Palestinian Jewish authorities, despite fears that the recommended boundaries would not be secure, consented to the plan anyway, stating their hope that the compromise would produce peace.

Every Arab state in the U.N. voted against Resolution 181. A few days later, the Arab League, deploring "the injustice of Zionism," resolved to oppose partition. A few months after that, in May 1948, upon the British administration's final departure from Palestine, six Arab armies invaded with the avowed purpose of destroying the newly declared state of Israel.

A secret 1949 State Department memorandum observed that during U.N. consideration of the 1947 partition plan "there was unanimous agreement among the Arabs states . . . as well as the {Palestinian} Arab Higher Committee that Palestine should become a unitary Arab state. . . . Their opposition to the Partition of Palestine was based on historical, legal, ethnic and other grounds. . . . The policy of the Arab Governments regarding a Palestine settlement was frequently characterized by a stubborn unwillingness to yield on points which might have created a more suitable solution from the Arab point of view {than} the situation which developed after their unwillingness to yield."

Over the years, this phenomenon recurred. When Israel defeated the 1948 invasion, Arab diplomats protested Israel's retention of territories beyond the lines of the rejected 1947 Partition Plan. When Israel defeated the Arab armies in 1967, Arab diplomats protested Israel's retention of territories beyond the 1949 Armistice Lines, which at the Arab

side's insistence had never become legal borders.

Israel now, looking back on numerous wars and terrorist attacks against it since the 1947 plan, knows that its enemies find themselves checked (at least for the time being) militarily. And Arab diplomatic inflexibility has given Israel time to enhance through Jewish settlement its claims for retention of strategically valuable territories it acquired in the 1967 war. Such exasperating realities have compelled Israel's opponents to adopt new tactics.

And so, 44 years after Resolution 181, the Arabs have decided to embrace the slogan "land for peace." The Israeli government is skeptical. If Arab leaders actually intend peace, they undoubtedly feel frustrated by Israeli wariness, but this is an obstacle that a true Arab peacemaker can overcome with a declaration like this:

"Our efforts to destroy Israel have been catastrophic for both the Jewish and the Arab peoples. We now abandon them forever. We no longer challenge the Jews' right to a state in Palestine, even though we too can make claims to the land.

"Because demands for land from Israel at present, in light of the conflict's history, cast doubt on our good faith and will be taken as a device to dismantle Israel in stages, we shall defer the issue of territory, but we agree to make peace immediately. But, after a reasonable period, perhaps one generation, we must negotiate together to fix reasonable, permanent borders. We shall then put forward the land claims that we today reserve."

Can an Arab leader make such a declaration and still preserve his or her life and authority? If so, diplomacy has promise. The current "land for peace" slogan, on the other hand, holds out no promise, for it creates unrealistic expectations among Arabs and well-grounded suspicion among Israelis. It is a throwback to the 1947 partition plan, which decades of hostility and war have swept off the negotiating table. If Israel's Arab neighbors want peace, they know the words to get it. --- Mr. Feith served as deputy assistant secretary of defense and as a Middle East specialist on the National Security Council during the Reagan administration.

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