

PolicyWatch #1655 : Special Forum Report

The Origins of the U.S.-Israeli Relationship: Truman and the Jewish State

Featuring Allis Radosh and Ronald Radosh
May 5, 2010

*On April 30, 2010, Allis Radosh and Ronald Radosh, winners of the 2009 [Washington Institute Book Prize](#) for *A Safe Haven: Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*, addressed a special Policy Forum at the Institute. Mrs. Radosh, a former program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities, has taught at Sarah Lawrence College and the City University of New York. Mr. Radosh is professor emeritus of history at the City University of New York and an adjunct senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. During the forum, they discussed the origins of the U.S.-Israeli relationship and the evolution of the Truman administration's policy toward the idea of a Jewish state. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

Allis Radosh

When Harry Truman became president in April 1945, he had not thought deeply about the exact form a Jewish national home in historic Palestine would or should take. Following his landmark decision to recognize the state of Israel in May 1948, he would suggest that his support for such a development had been unwavering, and that his decisions had come easily. Yet the record shows otherwise. Between Truman's first days as president and Israel's formation, his approach to the idea of a Jewish state evolved significantly, at times seeming to change in response to the last person with whom he met. Although he ultimately made the historic decision, a Jewish state had never been, in his mind, a foregone conclusion.

The simplistic view of Truman as a conscious hero of the Jewish people -- as someone inherently impelled to do what was morally right -- is easily drawn from Truman's personal and political background. His Baptist upbringing and knowledge of the Bible gave him a sense of appropriateness regarding the Jews' deep roots in the land of Palestine and their desire to return. As a senator, he joined many of his colleagues in protesting the 1939 British "White Paper" restricting Jewish immigration and land sales in Palestine, later joining a Christian Zionist organization called the American Christian Palestine Committee. He was also deeply affected by Adolf Hitler's rise to power and his war against the Jews. Yet the situation that he inherited in Palestine was deeply ambiguous, and while he publicly claimed to support a Jewish "national home," his statements and actions betrayed a growing uncertainty in this regard.

The struggle over Truman's policies toward Palestine began just six days after he became president, when Secretary of State Edward Stettinius cautioned him not to make any public statements on the subject until he was fully briefed. Two days later, an American Zionist delegation headed by Rabbi Stephen Wise met with the president, who confided his unwavering support for establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

When Truman returned from the Potsdam Conference in August 1945, however, his resoluteness seemed to have faded. More reserved in his outlook, he preferred to focus on Jewish immigration to Palestine rather than the more problematic issue of the region's long-term future. This focus intensified after he received a report on the terrible conditions that Jewish survivors were enduring in European "Displaced Persons" camps -- relieving the refugees' misery became a more pressing and achievable goal.

Truman's growing uncertainty about statehood was also evident in his remarks to Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann in December 1945. He told Weizmann that instead of talking about a Jewish state, he should seek a Palestinian state based on a pluralistic model like the United States, where Jews, Muslims, and Christians would all live together in peace. In April 1946, Truman endorsed the recommendations of the Anglo-American Committee, which supported Jewish immigration but opposed the idea either of a Jewish- or Palestinian-dominated state. When this plan and two subsequent ones failed, Truman accepted reality and embraced partition of Palestine as the only solution. When the UN voted on partition in November 1947, he pulled out all the stops to ensure it received enough votes to pass, heavily lobbying numerous delegates.

Remarkably, however, Truman was still conflicted over what to do about Palestine just three months before the British mandate was to expire in May 1948. While the State Department told him that a Jewish state might be contrary to international law, Truman's friend Oscar Ewing seemed to convince him otherwise. An attorney, Ewing emphasized the sovereignty that the Allies had given to the Jews over land taken from the Ottoman Empire after World War I -- in his view, these rights had as much validity as the sovereignty granted to Arab countries. On May 14, 1948, the Jews of Palestine declared the state of Israel, and Truman recognized the new country within minutes of the announcement. The issue of Jewish statehood had finally been laid to rest in his mind.

Ronald Radosh

In the period leading up to May 1948, the Truman administration witnessed a tense and fiercely fought internal battle over the president's policy on Palestine. Two broad groups vied for the president's ear. On the one hand were experts at the State Department, career professionals sympathetic to the cause of Arabism and fundamentally opposed to creating a Jewish state; on the other were Truman's close advisors in the White House, many of whom were Jewish and had gradually come to believe in the necessity of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Before the late 1947 UN partition vote, Truman received a long memorandum from two distinguished State Department officials arguing that disputed Palestine should be placed under exclusive Arab control. The first author was Loy Henderson, head of the Near East Division and an outspoken Arabist. The second was George Kennan, the so-called father of America's containment strategy toward the Soviet Union. They based their case against partition on perceived principles of U.S. global strategy and national security.

Specifically, they argued that America's primary goals in the Middle East were twofold: securing access to Saudi Arabia's oil reserves and maintaining U.S. military bases. In their view, the creation of a Jewish state would imperil these goals, spurring the rise and predominance of extremist Arabs. This in turn would help the Soviet Union gain a foothold in the region, sowing dissension and resulting in the partition of Iraq, Turkey, and Greece into Western and Soviet spheres -- a kind of Middle East domino theory. Finally, they argued -- quite bizarrely -- that the existence of a Jewish state would spread anti-Semitism in the United States, leading Americans to view American Jews as an alien political factor.

Truman's other advisors -- particularly White House special counsel and self-pronounced Christian-Zionist Clark Clifford -- countered such analysis. After the Henderson-Kennan memorandum, and while Truman was still vacillating over partition, Clifford wrote the president a long memorandum in March 1948 describing the State Department's arguments as "completely fallacious" and arguing that the Arabs must be forced to accept partition. He went on to say that partition was stated U.S. policy, and that if Washington backtracked, America would be treated with contempt. There must be no "shilly-shallying appeasement of the Arabs," he concluded.

This internal battle reached a showdown on May 12, 1948, when Truman convened a meeting of his top advisors in the Oval Office. The State Department, represented by Secretary of State George Marshall, presented its case against the establishment of a Jewish state. General Marshall's opposition was entirely military: he believed the Jews could never defeat invading Arab armies. Clifford's presentation on behalf of a Jewish state dismayed and infuriated Marshall, leading some to suspect that the secretary would publicly

disavow the president when he decided to support statehood. But Marshall gave his assurance that he would support Truman and keep his dissent private.

Although the president's close advisors ultimately prevailed, it was difficult for Truman, an "accidental" president committed to carrying out his predecessor's policies, to ignore the State Department's warnings and carve out his own policy on Palestine. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, however, had not left him with any guidelines on the issue. After his decision, Truman would maintain that he had made the morally and politically correct choice, and that he had done so in the context of maintaining America's true national security.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cole Bunzel.

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