

65 Years Since the Vote

Sixty-five years ago this month, the United Nations General Assembly approved Resolution 181, which called for the partition of the British-ruled Palestine Mandate into a Jewish state and an Arab state. The historic resolution—passed on November 29, 1947 by a 33-13 vote with 10 abstentions and one absent—paved the way for Israel’s independence a few months later.

The partition plan was based on a report submitted by the U.N. Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP), established in May 1947 to work out a solution regarding the disputed territory that would be acceptable to both Jews and Arabs. Visiting the region, members of the commission concluded that the conflicting national aspirations of the two peoples could not be reconciled. A majority of delegates thus recommended the establishment of two separate states, Jewish and Arab, to be joined by economic union, with Jerusalem an internationalized enclave.

The partition plan was far from ideal from the Jewish community’s point of view. The boundaries put forward in the plan were based solely on demographics, and did not take into account security concerns. The proposed Jewish state did not include Jerusalem, leaving more than 100,000 Jews in the city isolated from their country and circumscribed by the Arab state. And though the Jews were allotted more land, the majority of that land was in the Negev desert.

Nevertheless, the Jewish community welcomed the partition plan. In the months preceding the fateful vote at the United Nations, members of the community from Palestine and around the world mobilized to lobby in favor of the plan. Most importantly, they won sympathy for their cause in the United States—including the White House and Congress—garnering support which ultimately proved crucial for success at the U.N.

Hearing of the U.N. vote backing a Jewish state, joyous crowds filled the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Jewish Agency, which was the recognized representative of the Jewish community, praised and accepted the U.N. resolution, as mainstream Zionist leaders emphasized their commitment to working towards a peaceful coexistence with the region’s other inhabitants.

The Arab leaders, however, rejected UNSCOP’s recommendations and the subsequent partition resolution, denying any Jewish claim to the land. They refused to establish an Arab state in the area since this would imply recognition of a Jewish state in the remaining part of Palestine.

Due to Arab opposition, the partition plan could not be fully implemented. On May 14, 1948, the day before the British Mandate over Palestine was to end, the Jewish leadership approved a proclamation declaring the establishment of a Jewish state. Within hours, five Arab countries invaded the new state, launching what became Israel’s War of Independence. Six and a half decades later, we remember the joy that marked the vote establishing a Jewish state, even as we lament the Arab intransigence that has born so much conflict.