

An Ambivalent Relationship: Israel and the UN, 1945-1949

Louise Fischer¹

The relationship between Israel and the UN is a complex one. From the beginning Israel has appreciated the role played by the UN in the establishment of the State; on the other hand she has felt that the UN did not do enough to ensure her security. In this paper I will relate to the early years of the organization, when these attitudes were being formed. In our publications these issues are reflected in the documents of the Foreign Ministry and its predecessor, the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, and of course in documents from the UN archives. I shall also be quoting some unpublished documents by the Israeli foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, a selection of whose papers I am editing and hope to publish shortly. Sharett was identified with the UN more than any other Israeli political figure at that time, and the ups and downs of his career reflect Israel's relations with the UN and the international community. They also throw light on the question which was recently explored in a lecture by my colleague Dr Yehoshua Freundlich, why Israel did not develop "an orientation based on the UN"². This was a formula used by the Israeli leadership in the early 1950s: when pressed to define their position between East and West, they would say that Israel supported the UN. In fact, for various reasons, Israel gradually moved into the Western camp. But the weaknesses of the UN itself, when dealing with the "Palestine question", also played a part in this process.

¹ Editor, Israel State Archives

² Yehoshua Freundlich, unpublished lecture, "Moshe Sharett and the UN", (in Hebrew), 2004.

In February 1947 the UN was called upon to determine the future of Palestine. This territory, with its some 650,000 Jewish inhabitants and 1,200,000 Arabs, was still held under British Mandate. The Jews were determined to create a state of their own for themselves and the persecuted Jews of the world. The Arabs were equally determined to prevent them, and the question was what the UN could do to prevent a violent conflict with possible Great Power involvement.

When the UN was founded in 1945, Israel, which was not yet a state, was not invited to the San Francisco conference. The Jewish Agency found it difficult to gain a hearing, despite the fact that Jewish units had fought on the side of the Allies in the Second World War. Five Arab states were among the participants. An unofficial representative of the Agency, Eliahu Epstein (Elath), wrote of the advantage enjoyed by the Arabs, while the Jews were still in the position of beggars, seen "either as nuisances or conspirators".³

Hanging around in the corridors of international institutions was not a new experience for the spokesmen of the Jewish Agency, an elected body representing the Zionist movement. The right of the Jews to immigrate to Palestine and to establish a Jewish National Home had been recognized by the League of Nations and included in the terms of the Mandate. However, the Jews themselves were not represented at the League. In September 1937 Moshe Shertok, who later adopted the Hebrew name of Sharett, was attending a session in Geneva. He was forced to find seating in the press gallery. He wrote bitterly to a colleague of the need for direct representation: "Apart from the dire political necessity, it was morally humiliating for the representative of 17 million Jews to sit there dumb and outside the Pale".⁴ This inferior position was a forceful reminder of the need of the Jews for a state, and of the paradox that until they had one, few would listen to them.

³ Political Documents of the Jewish Agency (PDJA), Vol I, May 1945-December 1946, Jerusalem 1996, report by Eliahu Epstein, 30th May 1945, pp. 14-17.

⁴ Central Zionist Archives (CZA), S25/1513, Moshe Shertok (Sharett) to Bernard (Dov) Joseph, 23rd September 1937.

At San Francisco the Arab states proposed to grant independence to all territories under trusteeship. In view of the Arab majority in Palestine, this proposal would have ensured the setting up of an Arab state. Although no specific territories were discussed at the conference, an article in the UN Charter was accepted protecting existing rights under the Mandate. However this meant little as long as the British continued with the restrictive policy they had adopted in 1939, which largely prevented the immigration of Jewish Holocaust survivors to Palestine.

During 1946 the Zionist movement was engaged in a bitter struggle with the British government, demanding control of immigration and establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. From time to time UN trusteeship was proposed as an alternative. In fact as a Mandatory power Britain was obliged to have the Mandate renewed by the UN, and the Soviets had given notice of their intention to bring up the subject. Debate was postponed at Britain's request but it was clear that British rule could continue only if the UN decided on a trusteeship regime or if a move was made towards another solution. The unofficial Zionist representative Nahum Goldmann regarded trusteeship as unrealistic. The trend of the UN was towards independence. If even Palestine's less developed neighbour, Transjordan, had received independence, it would be difficult to justify trusteeship for Palestine. Furthermore, the USSR was likely to object to a British or American role.⁵

By February 1947 Britain had despaired of finding a solution in Palestine and the British Foreign Secretary Bevin announced that his government had decided to transfer the problem to the UN. The secretary-general, Trygve Lie, proposed sending a commission of enquiry to Palestine. A Special Session of the General Assembly was called to appoint the commission. Bevin may have hoped that the UN would fail to find a solution and return the Mandate to Britain, free of her obligations to the Jews. Sharett noted that by transferring the debate to the

⁵PDJA I, Nahum Goldmann to Moshe Shertok, 20th February 1946, pp.279-283.

UN, Britain had forced the US, which had criticized her policy, to take a stand⁶. The US would either have to share in responsibility for the solution or return the problem to Britain. But even if Britain still aspired to continue her rule in Palestine she lacked the necessary determination and resources to do so.

In those early days of the UN great hopes were placed in the organization for the creation of a new world order. As a result of the Holocaust many nations felt a particular responsibility to help the Jews achieve a state of their own. However the situation was complicated by rising Great Power rivalry. The USSR had an interest in dislodging Britain from her colonial holdings in the Middle East. The US, on the other hand, was concerned about the oil supply to Europe. Despite President Truman's support for Jewish immigration to Palestine and the influence of the pro-Zionist lobby, the State Department was anxious to keep Arab friendship. Thus the US opposed Lie's proposal for a Palestine commission including the Great Powers in order to keep the Soviets out.

The majority of the UN at that time consisted of smaller states which were not committed to one of the blocs. At the Special Session which met at the end of April 1947 it was decided to send a Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to examine the problem, made up of representatives of these states. The Arab states tried unsuccessfully to have Palestine discussed at the session itself. Anticipating this, the Jewish Agency demanded the right to attend the Session and take part in discussions. After pressure from public opinion, the Jewish Agency was allowed to appear before the Political Committee of the UN, together with the Palestinian Arab representatives.

11 countries were chosen to join the UNSCOP committee from Europe, Latin America, the British Commonwealth and Asia. Iran and India were seen as representatives of

⁶Moshe Shertok, Report on the Special Session of the General Assembly, Mapai (Israel Labour Party) Secretariat, 11th June 1946, Mapai Archive, 24/47.

the Arabs' interests⁷. The Arab demand that the primary aim of the committee be the independence of Palestine was rejected. The committee was directed to visit Palestine and any other country the members might choose, allowing them to go to the DP camps in Europe.

Sharett's strategy during the Session, particularly in approaching new nations like India, was to emphasize that Zionism was the national liberation movement of the Jews. He rejected Arab attempts to portray it as a tool of Western colonialism and argued that a Jewish state surrounded by Arabs would be forced to seek good relations with them and to preserve the rights of its Arab minority⁸.

At the close of the session the Soviet representative, Andrei Gromyko, made a speech reversing traditional Soviet opposition to Zionism and expressing sympathy for the Jewish people's aspiration to a state. He added that Palestine should be independent and that the USSR preferred a single-state solution. If Arabs and Jews could not reach agreement it would however support partition⁹. This policy did not reflect a definite decision to support partition, which was reached only in September 1947, but rather Soviet attempts to increase her involvement in the Middle East¹⁰.

The change in the Soviet stand and the fact that the UN had recognized the Jewish Agency's right to appear were encouraging signs for the Agency. Abba Eban, later Israel's representative at the UN, concluded that, despite earlier pessimistic views, "UNO has an independent personality which cannot easily be suppressed at the dictates of a single great power."¹¹ The Zionists, who had earlier viewed the UN as a judicial tribunal, realized that it was more of a political body tending towards compromise and practical solutions. They

⁷PDJA Vol. II, January – November 1947, introduction, pp. xvi-xxii.

⁸ CZA, report by Moshe Shertok of a conversation with the Indian ambassador, Asaf Ali; Moshe Shertok in the Political Committee of the General Assembly, 12th May 1947, At the Gate of the Nations, (in Hebrew), Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1958, pp. 63-72.

⁹ PDJA, Vol . II, Editorial note, p.368.

¹⁰ Yehoshua Freundlich, "Moshe Sharett and the UN".

¹¹ PDJA, report by Aubrey (Abba) Eban, 14th May 1947, p.362.

decided to co-operate with UNSCOP and to make every effort to obtain a favourable report. The Palestine Arabs, on the other hand, boycotted the committee. The British officials remained aloof and gave technical assistance only. Despite Zionist attempts to persuade the US to exert its influence in their favour, the Americans preferred to remain neutral, in order to prevent Russian involvement. As a result a vacuum was formed which allowed the smaller states to play an active role¹². The members of the committee, mostly ex-civil servants or judges, knew little of the dispute. But they were courageous and independent-minded and were determined to "grasp the nettle" and to find a clear-cut solution.¹³

UNSCOP visited Palestine from mid-June to mid-July 1947 and heard Zionist and Government witnesses. In Lebanon they met representatives of the Arab states who demanded an Arab state in all of Palestine, offering the Jews religious and cultural autonomy. The more moderate King Abdullah of Transjordan did not mention his plans to annexe the Arab areas of Palestine. At the end of July UNSCOP met survivors and their representatives in the DP camps. The committee was deeply impressed by their determination to reach Palestine and by the struggle of the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, against British rule. While terrorist acts by dissident Jewish organizations led to harsh British retaliation, the official Jewish organizations concentrated on illegal settlement and immigration, culminating in the arrival of the immigrant ship "Exodus". The Chairman of the Committee and some of its members were present in Haifa to see Jewish immigrants forcibly transferred by British soldiers to ships for deportation back to Europe. UNSCOP concluded that British rule in Palestine had broken down and that the Mandate must go. Publicly the Zionists also demanded all of Palestine, but they made it clear that they would accept a Jewish state in an adequate area of the country if it was offered.

¹² Yehoshua Freundlich, *From Destruction to Resurrection, Zionist Policy from the End of the Second World War to the Establishment of the State of Israel* (in Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1994, pp.96-97.

¹³ Freundlich, *Destruction*, pp.100-101.

During the drafting of the committee report in Geneva, two sections emerged. The majority, comprising seven members, eventually recommended partition into two states, together with an economic union; the minority (India, Iran and Yugoslavia) recommended a federal state with sovereignty in practice in the hands of the Arabs; the Australian representative abstained. The Jewish state would include 62% of the country, including the southern desert area, the Negev, Eastern Galilee and the coastal plain. The Arab state would include most of the hill district, Western Galilee and Gaza. Jerusalem, despite its Jewish majority, was to come under UN trusteeship. The assistant secretary of the committee, Ralph Bunche of the USA, who had helped to draft the trusteeship provisions of the UN Charter, played a central role. His close contacts with the Zionists helped to ensure that the final partition plan would be acceptable to them; however it is said that in fact he drafted both reports!¹⁴

The Zionists welcomed the majority report, and David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency, noted with satisfaction that it recognized the Jews' rights and called it the "beginning of redemption."¹⁵

At the September General Assembly, East-West tension was increasing. Trygve Lie transferred consideration of the report to an Ad Hoc committee headed by the Australian Foreign Minister, Herbert Evatt. The head of the British delegation announced that his government would carry out the recommendations of UNSCOP only if both parties accepted them, and would not impose a solution. The committee also discussed the borders of the Jewish state, particularly the Negev which the British wanted awarded to the Arabs for strategic reasons. Thanks to Soviet opposition this was prevented. The Zionists, headed by Sharett, mounted an extensive political campaign. Sharett assured supporters, worried by

¹⁴W.R. Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951*. Quoted in Shabtai Rosenne, *Bunche at Rhodes: Diplomatic Negotiator*, in *Extracts from an International Law Miscellany*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht 1993, p.714.

¹⁵ PDJA II, David Ben-Gurion to Paula Ben-Gurion, 2nd September 1947, p.619.

Arab threats to resist partition, that the Jewish defence forces were able to ensure the security of the Yishuv. The Canadian representative, Lester Pearson, helped to draw up a compromise plan for the implementation of partition and evacuation of the British forces¹⁶.

In his speech before the Ad Hoc committee Shertok rebutted the argument of the Arab states and their supporters that the UN Charter gave the Arab population self-determination and was an insuperable barrier to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. He emphasized that the Jews were willing to adjust their right of self-determination to that of others, but not to give it up. "We regard it as inconceivable that the justice and equality which the Charter enshrines should be destined for all mankind save the Jewish people."¹⁷

After the partition resolution had been passed in the Ad Hoc committee, the General Assembly voted on 29th November 1947 with a two-thirds majority for the establishment of the Jewish state. The USSR, the US and France voted for the resolution: Britain abstained.¹⁸

The Palestine issue was regarded as a test case for the ability of the UN to solve complicated international problems. Many feared that its fate would be that of the League of Nations: paralysis and failure. Shertok noted that this factor brought some states which had been hesitant, such as France, to support the partition plan. During the debates it became clear that the alternative to partition was no solution at all, and they did not want to be accused of responsibility for this situation¹⁹.

At the General Assembly Shertok and Epstein, who were Russian born, worked closely with the Soviet delegation. After much vacillation, at the end of October 1947 the USA had abandoned its neutral stance and exerted its influence in favour of partition. This extraordinary co-operation between the two Powers meant that the UN was successful in outlining a solution to the dispute, at least from the Jewish point of view. The partition

¹⁶ PDJA II, introduction; Freundlich, *From Destruction*, pp. 130-166.

¹⁷ CZA, S25/7993, Statement of Moshe Shertok before the Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestine Question.

¹⁸ PDJA II, introduction.

¹⁹ CZA, Z5/2375, Meeting with Non-Zionist Organizations, 26th October 1947.

resolution was regarded by Sharett as a major contribution to the legitimacy and security of Israel. However the UN did not become a central factor in the political thought and practice of Israel. Sharett's view was not shared by David Ben-Gurion, who became the first Prime Minister of Israel. Ben-Gurion, who also served as Minister of Defence and led the country during the 1948 war, was more impressed by the failure of the UN to ensure the implementation of the partition resolution than by its achievements. His negative attitude towards the UN continues to influence the Israeli public and its policy makers to this day.

The Arab states refused to accept the partition resolution and prepared to prevent by force the establishment of the Jewish state. Violent clashes with the Palestine Arabs had already begun. Britain, while officially remaining neutral, turned a blind eye to the infiltration of Arab volunteer fighters and arms. She refused to co-operate in the transfer of powers to the Jewish and Arab authorities, but announced that she would withdraw her forces on 15th May 1948.

The main factor preventing the UN from playing any significant role at this point was its failure to send an international force to enforce the resolution. The possibility of setting up a force had come up during the Assembly and in February 1948 Trygve Lie began to take soundings. However the Americans were determined not to take part, motivated by the fear that the Soviets would then demand a role. The vacuum created by the inaction of the Great Powers may have helped UNSCOP, but it also prevented the creation of an effective force. Another committee of small powers, the UN Palestine Commission, was set up to supervise the execution of the partition resolution. This committee remained in New York due to British obstruction. In March an advance party reached Jerusalem, already under siege, but was virtually ignored by the British²⁰.

²⁰ Shabtai Rosenne, *The United Nations and Israel's War of Independence*, in *Extracts from An International Law Miscellany*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, 1993, pp. 642-653.

On 5th March the Security Council decided to hold consultations of its members on the violence in Palestine. These made it obvious that support for partition was waning, particularly in the US, due to Arab pressures and fears that the Jews could not withstand their attack. The State Department put forward trusteeship as an alternative, but Britain refused to act as trustee or to postpone its withdrawal. The main support for partition came from supporters of the UN idea, especially Dean Acheson, the US Assistant Secretary of State, and Trygve Lie. They were dismayed by the danger to the prestige and effectiveness of the UN if members were able to frustrate its decisions by the use of force.²¹

A serious problem for the Jewish forces was the lack of heavy arms or planes. The USA had imposed a boycott on sales to both sides. Sharet was unsuccessful in persuading the UN to allow the Jews to buy arms²². On 15th May 1948, following the Declaration of Independence by the Provisional Government of Israel, forces from Egypt, Syria, Trans-Jordan and Iraq invaded Palestine and penetrated deep into the Jewish state. Only the supply of arms by Czechoslovakia enabled the Jewish state to withstand the invasion. That same morning President Truman gave de facto recognition to the new state. Full recognition by the USSR quickly followed. A resolution was passed to appoint a UN Mediator to try to bring about a peaceful settlement.

Even if the UN had not succeeded in preventing war, it did play a part in management of the crisis and setting up machinery for a ceasefire. On 15th May the Israeli representative asked the Security Council to declare that conditions in Palestine constituted a threat to peace and to call on the Arab states to end their aggression. A resolution calling for a truce was passed by the Security Council, which came into effect on 11th June 1948. The Swedish diplomat Count Folke Bernadotte was appointed as a Mediator and an organization of Truce

²¹ Rosenne, *The UN*, pp.649-651; *Political and Diplomatic Documents (PDD)*, December 1947-May 1948, ISA, Jerusalem, 1979, introduction, xv-xxiii.

²²PDD, M. Shertok, Address at Meeting of the United Nations Palestine Commission, 15th January 1948, pp. 173-174.

Observers set up which exists to this day. In July the Arabs renewed the fighting. After Israel had taken control of areas assigned to the Arab state in Western Galilee and around Jerusalem, the Security Council imposed a second truce. Bernadotte pressed the Israeli government to agree to his plan for a settlement. Nevertheless the limitations of the UN's role as a peacemaker were becoming apparent. Bernadotte and his staff failed to implement some of the provisions of the ceasefire and were believed to favour the Arabs²³. It was rumoured that he was under British and American influence. He proposed the annexation of the Arab parts of Palestine to Transjordan, considered a British dependency, and the return of the Arab refugees who fled or were forced to leave their homes during the fighting. While Galilee should go to Israel, part of the Negev should be given to the Arab state. Reports spread that he also proposed the separation of Jerusalem from Israel.

Jerusalem had been cut off from the rest of the country during the war and religious and cultural institutions, including churches, were damaged in the fighting. Israel felt that the international community had hardly lifted a finger to help. The war left Jerusalem in effect partitioned between Israel and Transjordan, and Israel was determined not to relinquish control of her part of the city.

In September 1948 Bernadotte was assassinated by members of the Lehi (Stern Gang) terrorist group. Bernadotte was replaced by his assistant, Bunche. Britain and the US attempted to carry out the Bernadotte plan at the UN General Assembly of September 1948. The Israeli delegation demanded adherence to the 1947 partition resolution in order to prevent the detachment of the Negev from Israel. At the same time, in order to justify retaining Israel's conquests beyond the 1947 borders, they claimed that the resolution was no longer relevant to the situation on the ground. Their success was largely due to Israel's military strength (at this time she completed the expulsion of Egyptian forces from most of the Negev). As Sharett

²³ Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), Vol 1, introduction, pp.xiii-xxiv.

explained to the Cabinet at the end of October 1948, there was little enthusiasm at the UN to use military force to expel Israel from positions given to her by the 1947 resolution²⁴.

Nevertheless the session ended with a diplomatic defeat. The Israeli leadership opposed the return of the Palestinian refugees after the war. They were reluctant to increase the Arab minority and believed that the refugees would soon be integrated in the Arab states. However resolution 194 was adopted calling on Israel to allow refugees who wanted to return to do so. Israel postponed her response to this demand to future peace negotiations. The resolution also reaffirmed the internationalization of Jerusalem and set up a Conciliation Commission to advance a peace settlement²⁵.

The UN played an important part in the negotiation of the armistice agreements which ended the war. Israel had already sought admission to the UN, but the ceasefire left her without recognized borders. Few states outside the Eastern bloc had accorded her full recognition. Bunche was able to exploit her need for international recognition and foreign aid to induce her to make concessions. During the first six months of 1949 Israel signed armistice agreements with Egypt, Transjordan, Lebanon and Syria. While the agreement with Transjordan was achieved in direct negotiations, Bunche, with a combination of bullying, charm and drafting skill, played an important part in the compromises which led to the other agreements²⁶. The demarcation lines were worked out in military subcommittees. Decried as long and unworkable, these borders have shown their relevance in recent months.

In January 1949 Sharett discussed Israel's relations with the UN in a speech at a party forum. Israel would not automatically obey every demand of the UN, but she should not lay herself open to the accusation of open defiance of its authority. He emphasized that the UN was not an abstract concept, with a separate existence apart from the member states. Nevertheless international public opinion exists and regards the UN, with all its weaknesses,

²⁴M. Shertok, Cabinet Minutes, 26th October 1948.

²⁵ DFPI, Vol 2, introduction, pp. xi-xiv.

²⁶ Rosenne, Bunche at Rhodes, pp. 713-719.

as "the last resort which may succeed in preventing the outbreak of a new world catastrophe..." Any state which endangers world peace is seen with great suspicion, and Israel must do her best not to alienate the UN. But if her vital interests are involved, and she is sure that her case is justified, condemnation by the UN may be unavoidable. Even then, Sharett did not see the UN as the determining factor in making Israeli policy²⁷.

In May 1949 Israel was admitted to the United Nations. After her first official application for membership was unsuccessful, the application was renewed with the signing of the armistice with Egypt. On 11th May 1949 Sharett took his seat as the Israeli delegate at the General Assembly, the fulfillment of a personal and national dream. On his return to Israel Sharett emphasized the responsibilities as well as the benefits of UN membership. Many of those who had supported Israel did so from a desire to right a historic wrong. They would hold Israel to high moral standards and expect her to act as a force for peace and progress and not only to follow her own interests.²⁸

In the coming years Cold War tensions and the refusal of the Arab states to make peace with Israel led relations with the UN to sour. The "Middle East dispute" was rarely absent from the agenda. Hopes that the Conciliation Council and the Lausanne Conference would transform the Armistice Agreements into a comprehensive peace settlement did not materialize. The Agreements did not resolve fundamental issues, and contained many compromises and deliberate ambiguities. The UN Mixed Armistice Commissions set up to deal with border incidents were ineffective. Israel believed that they were hostile and that the Security Council took Arab violations of the border lightly. From 1953 on the Soviet Union began to support the Arab states and repeatedly used the veto against Israel in the Security Council. The perception that the UN could not be relied on to defend Israel's security was one of the factors leading to the decline in influence of the Foreign Ministry. In 1956 Sharett

²⁷ M. Shertok, Speech to the Mapai Council, 12th January 1949.

²⁸ M. Sharett, Cabinet Minutes, 24th May 1949.

himself was ousted from the position of Foreign Minister and the military and security establishment took the lead in determining policy, a process clearly reflected in our documents. Nevertheless Israel as a small state dependent on larger Powers could not turn her back on the world and the UN continued to play an important role in her affairs.

