

JEFFREY HERF

# Israel Is Antiracist, Anti-Colonialist, Anti-Fascist (and Was from the Start)



WHO CONTROLS the present controls the past. Who controls the past controls the future.”

The famous line, from George Orwell’s *1984*, could equally apply to the study of Middle Eastern history—and much other history—in academia today. Ideologically motivated professors have sought to impose a version of events on 1948, the year in which Israel was founded (and *1984* was mostly written), that doesn’t square with the facts. And they have done so with the purpose of trying to take control of the future by shaping a public understanding of Israel as a product of neocolonialist, American imperialism.

As I detail in my book *Israel's Moment*, nothing could be further from the truth. If we are serious about challenging the current anti-Israel narrative on college campuses, and in think tanks, newspaper editorial pages, and other agenda-setting institutions, we need to recall the modern, secular nature of the founding Zionist generation and correct the record.



What is the real truth of Israel's founding, particularly when it comes to the foreign actors who supported it?

Fundamentally, it is this: The Jewish state was the project of the anti-fascist, antiracist, anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist *Left*, including the Soviet Union. Decision-makers in the American and British foreign-policy establishment were almost overwhelmingly hostile to Israel's creation, with the important but qualified exception of President Harry Truman and second-rank advisers such as Clark Clifford. Had it been up to the British Foreign Office or the U.S. State and Defense Departments and the CIA—the usual malefactors of Western imperialism—the Jewish state would have been stillborn.

These facts now lie largely forgotten or concealed, not just by Israel's usual critics on the far-Left but also by many of its champions on the center-Left and center-Right, who overstate the extent of Truman's support and minimize the Soviet contribution. In fact, while the American foreign-policy bureaucracy was unable to persuade Truman to withhold support for the establishment of Israel, they were able to maintain his support for a “neutral” UN arms embargo from November 1947 through May 1948, which they expected would either prevent Israel from coming into being or destroy it in its infancy. Their neutral embargo wasn't neutral at all: The Jews had neither a state nor arms to defend it; the Arab states surrounding

it had both. As David Ben-Gurion told the first U.S. ambassador to Israel: The Jews would have been exterminated had they depended on the United States for their survival.

Why was the American bureaucracy so adamantly against the Zionist project in 1947? Contrary to current myth, opposition was never merely the view of the State Department's "Arabists." It was adopted by both Secretary of State George Marshall and George Kennan, both of whom viewed a Jewish state in Palestine as a threat to American and Western access to Arab oil and a boost to prospects for Soviet expansion in the Middle East. This was the year in which the United States, in close cooperation with Great Britain, was promoting a policy of containment of Communism in Europe and the Middle East. Soviet-bloc support for the Zionists deepened British and American suspicions that a Jewish state would serve the interests of Soviet expansion in the Middle East. As the State Department's "Palestine Files" of 1945 to 1949 demonstrate, U.S. and U.K. intelligence officials worried that a good number of European Jewish refugees who got to Palestine would become Communist agents.

Marshall appointed Kennan as the first director of the Policy Planning Staff in January 1947. Kennan is well-known as the author of important memos arguing for containment of Soviet expansionism. His role in forming the American position on a Jewish state is less well-known. In his "Report by the Policy Planning Staff on Position of the United States with Respect to Palestine" in January 1948, Kennan wrote that support for the UN Partition Plan would damage American interests in the region and constitute "a serious threat to the success of the Marshall Plan," because of threats to the flow of oil to Europe.

Furthermore, Kennan added, "the USSR stands to gain by the Partition Plan if it should be implemented by force," because of the opportunity thus afforded to the Russians to assist in "maintaining or-

der” in Palestine. Soviet forces in Palestine would provide Communist agents with an excellent base from which to extend their subversive activities and attempt to replace the Arab governments with “democratic peoples’ governments.” It was a defining text of the anti-Zionist consensus at the top of the U.S. national-security establishment.

What did the U.S. want instead? In March 1948, Warren Austin, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, urged the United Nations to replace the Partition Plan with a trusteeship proposal that would preclude a Jewish state in Palestine. An angry, undermined President Truman brought Palestine policy into the White House. But Truman was the exception in his own administration — an anti-Communist who believed that supporting the new State of Israel was compatible with containing the Soviet Union.

Marshall’s State Department could see that containing the Soviet Union required support from the non- and anti-Communist Left: the British Labour Party, French and Italian Socialists, West German Social Democrats. But what he and the British Foreign Office could or would not see was that the Zionists of Ben-Gurion’s generation overwhelmingly shared the political convictions of these Left-of-center leaders. They were not at all sympathetic to Soviet Communism. Clifford made this case: Israel would be an asset and an ally, not a liability or an opponent. But his argument went unheeded outside the White House.

On May 29, 1949, after the UN General Assembly voted to offer membership to Israel, Truman agreed to send a letter to Ben-Gurion drafted by the State Department. “Given [America’s] generous support to the creation of Israel,” it asserted, Israel should consider American criticisms of its policies on territorial issues and refugees, criticisms that could foster a reassessment of the U.S. policy toward Israel.” Ben-Gurion explained to James McDonald, Truman’s ambassador to Israel, that the only thing that made it possible for the Jews to fight

and win the War of Independence was circumventing extensive British, American, and ultimately UN efforts to prevent military assistance from arriving in Palestine and later in Israel. McDonald summarized Ben-Gurion's objections to the American pressure thus:

Prime Minister unable recall any strong action by U.S. or UN enforce November 29 or prevent aggression by Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq. Instead, embargo encouraged aggressors against Israel whose very existence was in danger. Had Jews waited on U.S. or UN they would have been exterminated. Israel was established not on basis November 29 but on that of successful war of defense. Hence note's suggestion is today unjust and unrealistic for it ignores war and continued Arab threats which make November 29 boundaries impossible.



Fortunately for the Zionists, Moscow and its allies were their enthusiastic supporters.

They provided support for Jewish immigration to Palestine before the 1947 vote. Andrei Gromyko, then the Soviet ambassador to the UN, stunned his listeners by speaking vigorously in May 1947 in support of the Partition Resolution. Soviet support continued through the Resolution's passage in November. It persisted in the teeth of American and British efforts to reverse the Resolution in 1948, most significantly by encouraging delivery of military supplies to Israel via Czechoslovakia in 1948. Moscow also strongly opposed the plan of Swedish diplomat Folke Bernadotte to establish a federal union between an Arab and Jewish state, internationalize Jerusalem, repatriate the Palestinians who had fled the fighting, give the Negev Desert to Transjordan, and turn Haifa into a free port—all of which

would have rewarded Arab rejectionism, reduced the new “union” in size, and denied the Jewish people a state of their own.

Nor did support for Israel come only from the Soviet bloc. Liberals and leftists in London, Paris, New York, and Washington heard Jamal Husseini, the representative of the Arab Higher Committee to the United Nations, reject a Jewish state in Palestine, because, he said, it would undermine the “racial homogeneity” of the Arab world. Such remarks resonated in a profoundly negative fashion with Americans who had followed the appalling news out of Germany during and after the war. In the Senate, Robert Wagner, a major author of New Deal legislation, extolled the Jewish contribution to the Allied cause. He had already denounced appeasement of the Arabs during the war. With the Allied victory, continuing to appease Arab rejectionism surely made no sense. In the House, Democratic Congressman Emanuel Celler of Brooklyn led efforts to focus attention on Jamal Husseini’s cousin, Haj Amin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, who had entered into a written understanding with Germany and Italy to “solve the question of the Jewish elements, which exist in Palestine and in the other Arab countries...as the Jewish question was solved in Germany and Italy.”

The liberal media also took note. Husseini’s collaboration with the Nazis was thoroughly documented in the *New York Post* as well as in the left-wing publications *PM* and *The Nation*, by I.F. Stone, Freda Kirchwey, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning Edgar Mowrer, who urged Husseini’s indictment at Nuremberg. Nevertheless, despite extensive State Department files on Husseini’s collaboration with the Nazis, the American bureaucracy succeeded in resisting efforts to put him on trial and publish its evidence of his Nazi-era activities.

The brief confluence of Soviet and liberal Western sympathies for the nascent Jewish state was brilliantly exploited by Ben-Gurion. He understood better than anyone that it presented a unique moment to

bring Israel into existence, with the assent of the world's two great powers—and that it was an opportunity that would soon close, as indeed it did. During the “anti-cosmopolitan” purges of the early 1950s, Stalin reversed course, spread the lie that Israel was a product of American imperialism, repressed the memory of Soviet support for the Zionist project, and launched a four-decade campaign of vilification against Zionism and Israel. It was one of the most successful propaganda campaigns of the Cold War.

Stalin succeeded in rewriting American history, too. His insistence that it was the Americans and not the Soviets who had wholeheartedly supported the establishment of the State of Israel carried the day. And yet the records of the Departments of State and Defense and the CIA clearly document their emphatic and consequential opposition to the Zionist project.



The differences between the international political landscape of the late 1940s and the one that emerged first in Soviet and then world politics in the 1950s and 1960s need to be reflected in American-Jewish discussions about the establishment of Israel. Contrary to what we've heard at the United Nations for decades, in international BDS efforts, and in academic descriptions of Israel, the Zionist project was *never* a colonialist one.

Just the reverse. The generation that created the state, and its supporters abroad, viewed it as part of the era of liberal and leftist opposition to colonialism, racism, and, of course, antisemitism. The evidence is clear: Whatever faults Israel may have, its origins had nothing to do with American or British imperialism. The argument to the contrary is a conventional unwisdom that has found a home in too much scholarship and journalism of recent decades. Israel's

establishment was not a miracle that eludes historical explanation. It was an episode of enormous moral and military courage for which space was created by canny and hard-headed political leaders in the cause of historical justice—in particular David Ben-Gurion, who seized a fleeting moment, Israel’s moment, to create an enduring achievement. \*

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