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**To cite this article:** Jonathan Franco (16 Nov 2023): The Palestine Commission: the forgotten chapter in United Nations peacemaking and peacekeeping in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Middle Eastern Studies, DOI: [10.1080/00263206.2023.2280232](https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2023.2280232)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2023.2280232>



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Published online: 16 Nov 2023.



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# The Palestine Commission: the forgotten chapter in United Nations peacemaking and peacekeeping in the Arab-Israeli conflict

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In the shadow of conflicting national ambitions of Zionists and Palestinians in the land of Mandatory Palestine, Britain decided in early 1947 to pass the question of Palestine's political fate over to the United Nations (UN). Accordingly, the General Assembly appointed the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to enquire into the matter and propose a solution.<sup>1</sup>

UNSCOP's majority proposal, later known as the 'Partition Plan', was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 29 November 1947 as Resolution 181. The 22-page document sought to replace the British Mandate over Palestine with two independent nation-states, one Arab and one Jewish. The future countries were to be bound by an economic union, with Jerusalem placed under an international regime. A preparatory commission, later known as the 'Palestine Commission', was devised to implement Resolution 181 by travelling to Palestine, gradually assuming control from the British Mandate, and then facilitating the creation of the new countries. The Commission was meant to help the future states set up their provisional governments, hold democratic elections, organize armed militias for their defence, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, reality quickly complicated the execution of the ambitious plan. While the Zionists were quick to support partition, because it would grant them their long-awaited independent Jewish state,<sup>3</sup> the Palestinian leadership embodied by the Arab Higher Committee (AHC) had resisted this notion since before Resolution 181 and boycotted UNSCOP's enquiry.<sup>4</sup> Soon after the adoption of Resolution 181, the AHC and the Arab League states threatened to forcefully resist its implementation. A Palestinian general strike followed, and violent clashes erupted between Arabs and Jews in Palestine.<sup>5</sup>

In New York, Jamal al-Husseini, one of the AHC leaders, had articulated the organization's resistance to partition, roughly 2 months before the adoption of Resolution 181. Al-Husseini made four main points: first, the Arabs of Palestine had a strong claim over Palestine because they had been residing there for many generations. Second, the Zionist claim was weak and based on an obsolete association between Jews and Palestine over 2000 years before. Third, any attempt by non-Palestinians to relieve the world's Jewry at the expense of the Palestinians and their homeland was both immoral and illegal. Fourth, a Jewish national presence in Palestine would disrupt the continuity of the surrounding Arab world. He contended, therefore, that the Arabs of Palestine, who constituted the majority there, were entitled to a single Arab independent state in all of Palestine.<sup>6</sup>

A further setback to partition was noted when the Arab-Jewish violence subsequently eroded the former Washington-Moscow consensus on the two-state solution. Over the next few months, the Americans reconsidered whether the execution of Resolution 181 was realistically feasible, and accordingly proposed replacing partition with a UN trusteeship government in Palestine.<sup>7</sup>

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The Soviets, on the other hand, steadfastly maintained their support for partition and collaborated with the Jewish Agency to see it through.<sup>8</sup>

Against this complex international backdrop, the Palestine Commission delegates began their work in January 1948 with the aim of implementing partition. Until May of the same year, they would attempt to carry out their responsibilities under Resolution 181 and create a viable two-state solution in Palestine. This article explores the life cycle of the Palestine Commission and its efforts to implement partition, with special attention to its peacekeeping and peacemaking activity. While describing the Commission's failure in executing Resolution 181, this text will also tie its individual hardships to the wider international context that prevented partition from becoming reality.

When revisiting the events of the Partition Plan and 1948 in primary literature, both Palestinian and Israeli statesmen only scantily referred to the Palestine Commission. Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion and AHC New York Delegate Issa Nakhleh both skipped it entirely in their recounts of the diplomacy surrounding Resolution 181 (even though Nakhleh would be the only AHC representative to formally correspond with the Commission, as shown later in this article).<sup>9</sup> Others only sporadically offered fragments of information about its existence; such is the case with AHC head Haj Amin al-Husseini, Palestinian legal expert Henry Cattán, Palestinian diplomat Akram Zeitar, and Jewish Agency New York delegate Michael Comay. When combining all their testimonies together, we learn only that the Commission's success was foiled by its lack of support from Britain and the Security Council, without much further detail.<sup>10</sup> It is understandable why Palestinian and Zionist statesmen attributed minor importance to the Palestine Commission, given their specific vantage points. As this article shows, the Commission's repeated inability to act made it largely ineffective vis-à-vis the 1948 War, both politically and militarily. Therefore, those who were concerned with the practicalities of the political and military situation at the time considered it to be of minor importance.

One opinion that several contemporaries of the Palestine Commission share is that at least part of its failure stemmed from the professional and/or personal inadequacy of its delegates. Ralph Bunche, who served as the Commission's Secretary, felt its chairman, Karel Lisicky, never really understood either the Palestine problem or the UN apparatus.<sup>11</sup> Bunche's Deputy Secretary Pablo de Azcárate observed, 'The work of the [Palestine] Commission and its Secretariat seemed to me disorganized, incoherent and without team spirit, with the possible exception of Bunche and the small group of his immediate personal collaborators.'<sup>12</sup> David Horowitz, one of the Jewish Agency's liaison officers to the Commission, wrote that Lisicky was hesitant and lacked assertiveness, and that Bunche was 'the only person among it [the Commission] who excelled in clarity, proactive effort, and action skill.'<sup>13</sup>

The relative disregard of the Palestine Commission by its contemporaries was subsequently replicated by academics. To date, scholarship dedicated to the Commission has been minimal. Some of the prominent works on the UN role in the Arab-Israeli war of 1947–1949 omit it entirely, choosing to start their analysis with Count Folke Bernadotte's mediation in May 1948 at the earliest.<sup>14</sup> Others, like the statesmen's memoirs before them, provide only shards of information about its work as a side note: that it was created under Resolution 181; that it failed to spur Security Council action to enforce partition; and/or that it performed sub-optimally due to British hindrances to its work.<sup>15</sup>

One notable exception that provides more systematic analytical insight into the Palestine Commission is Elad Ben-Dror's book on Bunche's involvement in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Because Bunche served as the Commission's Secretary, Ben-Dror includes a full chapter dealing with its period of existence. There, he offers a slightly more comprehensive explanation for the Commission's failure than others: it comprised personally and/or professionally weak delegates; the Arabs denied its work; London offered it little cooperation; and the Security Council failed to adequately support it.<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding, this chapter is naturally dedicated more to Bunche's personal role and less to the organizational history of the Palestine Commission as a whole.

Considering the primary and secondary literature on the Palestine Commission thus far, this article posits two main arguments. The first is that the Commission deserves more academic attention. Scholars must not automatically disregard the Commission's importance just because the statesmen did so; in fact, its ineffectiveness and isolation, which made it diplomatically insignificant in real time, are precisely what make it historically fascinating. It serves as a useful case study that elucidates the actors and circumstances that failed the Partition Plan, and exemplifies the UN retreat from Resolution 181 shortly after its adoption. The second argument is that the critique levied against the personal and professional conduct of the delegates seems exaggerated; much more significant to the Commission's collapse were the deadly external hindrances to its work, which would have likely overwhelmed even the best of diplomats. Chief among these obstacles were a Palestinian boycott, a Zionist bearhug, a British war of bureaucratic attrition, and a lack of support from the Security Council. The Commission's lonely and fruitless journey symbolized the gap between the bombastic plan of partition, and the international reluctance to implement it in practice.

Each of the three sections of this article explores one of three interrelated and simultaneous efforts of the Palestine Commission, all of which eventually failed, demonstrating the unbridgeable gap between the vision of Resolution 181 and the numerous impediments to its fulfilment. Section 1 covers the Commission's attempt to initiate working relations with the parties present in Palestine. Section 2 discusses the Commission's campaign to create local militias and an international force to carry out Resolution 181. Section 3 deals with the Commission's venture to organize a municipal police force to specifically secure Jerusalem.

This article relies mainly on original documents produced by the Palestine Commission. These repositories are complemented by Jewish Agency diplomatic records and correspondences, Jewish and Palestinian newspapers, Israel State Archives (ISA) and the British National Archives (TNA) files, and publications by people involved in the work of the Commission. Because the Commission was in existence between January and May 1948, all dates henceforth refer to the year 1948 unless specified otherwise.

## Setting up contacts

Following some background work by the Secretariat from December 1947, the first meeting of the Palestine Commission took place on 9 January 1948.<sup>17</sup> After hearing an opening statement from UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie, the Commission elected Lisicky of Czechoslovakia as its Chairman and Raul Diaz de Medina of Bolivia as its Vice Chairman. Its other three members were Per Federspiel of Denmark, Eduardo Morgan of Panama, and Vincente J. Francisco of the Philippines. As soon as the elections were concluded, the Commission unanimously adopted its first resolution: it invited the AHC, the Jewish Agency, and the British government to appoint representatives to liaise with the Commission.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the Palestine Commission's immediate priority was to seek partnerships with these three parties was no coincidence. From the onset, the success of its mission clearly hinged on good collaboration with all of them: a liaison with the Palestinian and Zionist leaderships was necessary for joint work toward the establishment of their respective countries; and until then, the British authorities were the ones governing Palestine. Unfortunately for the Commission, however, impediments would arise in its relations with all three.

The first problem came in the form of a Palestinian boycott. In line with its policy up to that point, the AHC informed the Palestine Commission that it was determined to resist the partition of Palestine, and thus refused to cooperate with its work.<sup>19</sup> In a second and more elaborate letter, Nakhleh reiterated the substantive claims against partition sounded by al-Husseini in September 1947, and bolstered them with circumstantial and legal arguments. He contended that elements in the General Assembly manipulated the timing of the vote on partition to ensure its success;

the American delegation and others applied 'political blackmail' to coerce some member states into supporting Resolution 181; and partition was contrary to the UN Charter and beyond the organization's jurisdiction.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, the press continuously publicized Palestinian threats, chiefly by Jamal al-Husseini, that the Arabs would physically harm the Commission's delegates and their agents in Palestine.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Commission faced a critical problem from the beginning: it was meant to assist the creation of a state whose potential leadership rejected its authority and even marked it as its enemy.

The Zionists meanwhile caused an almost opposite problem for the Palestine Commission. Eager to tilt the Commission in its favour, the Jewish Agency appointed three of its most able diplomats as its liaison officers: Head of the Political Department Moshe Shertok (later Sharrett), Abba Eban, and Horowitz.<sup>22</sup> Fearing the imminent war in Palestine and antagonistic toward the Mandate, the Jewish Agency sought the Commission's assistance in three main fields: enabling Jewish immigration to Palestine, lawfully equipping a Jewish militia, and encouraging the Security Council to execute the Partition Plan.<sup>23</sup> As demonstrated below, over the next few months, they would use their ties with the Commission to further their goals. The Palestinian boycott, coupled with the tight Zionist embrace, made it harder for the Commission to work effectively as an even-handed facilitator of the Partition Plan.

As for the British government, London was willing to furnish the Palestine Commission with information but categorically refused from the beginning to surrender any form of administrative powers.<sup>24</sup> In a fateful meeting on 4 December 1947, the British Cabinet reviewed and endorsed a memorandum submitted by Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and the Secretary of State for the Colonies Arthur Creech-Jones. The memorandum stated that 'Since the sharing of authority between the Palestine government and the UN [Palestine] Commission would be intolerable, and since the arrival of the Commission would probably provoke Arab disturbances, thus upsetting our withdrawal plan [from Palestine] and endangering our whole position in the Middle East, we should do all in our power to arrange its arrival to Palestine at a time when we are ready to hand over to it...'<sup>25</sup> This approach would become the cornerstone of London's policy vis-à-vis the Commission: to curb its access to Palestine in order to prevent an overlap of authority there, and to avoid Arab dissent.

In line with the adopted British policy and already in his introductory speech before the Commission, British UN Representative Alexander Cadogan stated, 'His Majesty's Government regard it as essential that, so long as the Mandatory regime is retained, they must retain undivided control over the whole of Palestine. On the appointed day [for the termination of the Mandate] – that is, 15 May – their responsibility for the government of Palestine will be relinquished as a whole.'<sup>26</sup> This approach deviated from the gradual transfer of power envisioned in Resolution 181 and would deprive the Commission of any possibility of affecting the political reality in Palestine.

While denying administrative powers to the Palestine Commission, the British government also refused to implement partition itself. On 14 January, Cadogan reminded the Commission that since UNSCOP's enquiry, London was 'unable to take part in the implementation of the United Nations plan', because 'we could not alone implement any plan not accepted by both sides [Jews and Arabs]'.<sup>27</sup> London thus trapped the Palestine Commission in limbo: on the one hand, it refused to hand powers over to the Commission, and on the other, was unwilling to use its own authority to fulfil the Commission's tasks. Horowitz and Eban both separately recounted that a delegate of the Commission (Eban recalled it was Federspiel) said, 'The British want to create a vacuum in Palestine, but they refused to hand this vacuum over to us.'<sup>28</sup> The British reservations were probably the reason that Lie, initially eager to dispatch the Commission to the Middle East as soon as possible,<sup>29</sup> announced on 28 December 1947 that it would remain at Lake Success for the time being, supposedly to carry out preliminary work prior to its departure.<sup>30</sup>

On 20 January, Lisicky informed his colleagues that London might allow the early dispatch of members of the Commission's Secretariat to Palestine, to set the stage for the delegates' arrival.

However, these Secretariat members would have no executive powers upon arrival, and the rest of the Commission would be permitted into Palestine only 2 weeks prior to the termination of the Mandate. Lisicky expressed his concern that accepting this formula would lead to an ineffective Commission representation in Palestine, while providing the Mandatory authorities a scapegoat against criticism of their policy during the transitional period. Moreover, he felt sending a weak representation to Palestine might tarnish the Commission's reputation with the local population. With these caveats in mind, the Commission eventually decided dispatching to Palestine representatives that would solely inform the Commission on the situation on the ground would still be better than doing nothing.<sup>31</sup>

On the following day, the Palestine Commission raised with Cadogan's team the possibility of sending Secretariat members to Palestine; this was a group that would later be known as the 'Advance Party'. Cadogan had no immediate objection of his own, although his aide, John Fletcher-Cooke (who had arrived at New York after serving in Palestine)<sup>32</sup> revociced the British Cabinet's ominous prediction that 'the arrival of the Commission will be the signal for widespread attacks by the Arabs both on the Jews and on the members of the Commission itself'. Furthermore, he alerted that some 62 per cent of the Mandatory government staff were Arabs, and thus unlikely to continue their work under the leadership of the partition-pursuing Commission.<sup>33</sup> In the next months, the AHC threatened that Arab clerks would not work under the Commission,<sup>34</sup> whereas the Jewish Agency notified the Commission of 4,500 Jewish government officials in Jerusalem who were ready to cooperate with its efforts.<sup>35</sup>

From 21 January until mid-February, the Palestine Commission and the British authorities negotiated the terms of the Advance Party. They agreed that a group of six Secretariat members would travel to Palestine to represent the interests of the Commission on the ground.<sup>36</sup> The Commission originally proposed no fewer than sixteen goals that the Advance Party could pursue,<sup>37</sup> but its work was eventually narrowed to three main avenues: to make logistical arrangements for the later arrival of the rest of the Commission, such as the preparation of housing and transportation; to enquire with the Mandatory Government about the departmental staff that the Commission would require in order to take over the administration in Palestine; and to consult with the Palestine administration on establishing contacts with Arabs and Jews.<sup>38</sup>

The British administration demonstrated its disinclination to support the Advance Party by amassing restrictions on its work since even before its departure. Although some accommodation options were examined for their use, London eventually told the Palestine Commission that Britain would not cater to the housing, working, and security needs of the forward group. The Commission could, if it wanted, send one member of the Advance Party about a week before the rest to make these arrangements themselves.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, constraints were placed on its activity: the Mandatory authorities would not loan or second to the Advance Party any Mandatory staff; Advance Party members would be prohibited from directly contacting Arabs or Jews;<sup>40</sup> they could arrive to Palestine no earlier than 1 May;<sup>41</sup> and they would generally have 'no authority to take decisions but merely confine themselves to exploratory talks...'<sup>42</sup> These limitations led to protests by the Palestine Commission,<sup>43</sup> and some would later be relinquished. Regardless, they indicated the difficult working environment the Advance Party could expect upon arrival.

Arguably the worst constraint was that, barring the Advance Party members, the rest of the Palestine Commission would not be welcome in Palestine earlier than 2 weeks before the expiration of the Mandate. Cadogan reiterated the two already-known reasons for this policy: the need to avoid two concurrent overlapping authorities in Palestine, and fear of Arab disturbances.<sup>44</sup> The Commission urged the British government to reconsider its policy, because its physical absence from Palestine and the immediate and full transfer of power would prevent it from adequately preparing to assume its local responsibilities.<sup>45</sup> The British Cabinet, while disinclined to publicly appear uncooperative with the Commission, felt it necessary to defend its

decision, again due to its estimate that the Commission's arrival would destabilize Palestine's security.<sup>46</sup>

After tiring negotiations, the Advance Party finally arrived in Palestine on 2 March. Azcárate, who had been appointed as Bunche's Deputy Secretary, was charged with leading it.<sup>47</sup> He was accompanied by three advisors: a military expert, the Norwegian Officer Ragnvald Rocher-Lund; an economist, Professor Dwarranath Ghosh; and a legal professional, lawyer Constantin A. Stavropoulos. The group also included two secretaries.<sup>48</sup> But even after their arrival to Palestine, the unforthcoming British attitude continued. No one was there to welcome them at Lydda Airport, and they had to pass customs and passport inspections like ordinary passengers. Their accommodation, a small British secured zone near the King David Hotel in Jerusalem that the Mandatory authorities did eventually provide, was in such bad condition that Azcárate considered declining it. Sometimes, the most basic of goods, such as food, failed to arrive.<sup>49</sup> Even the personal safety of the members was at risk given the surrounding security situation, and they were instructed to stay inside the British compound<sup>50</sup> (although they occasionally defied their quarantine and left for outside meetings).<sup>51</sup> A few days after the Advance Party's landing, Fletcher-Cooke wrote to Bunche, apologizing for the 'inconvenience', but also deflecting responsibility by stating that the difficulties had been foreseen and communicated to the Advance Party, which in turn decided not to postpone its arrival.<sup>52</sup>

All in all, the establishment of contacts in the first two months taught the Palestine Commission that the conditions surrounding its mission were going to be difficult. They had to navigate their work between a Palestinian boycott, a Zionist stranglehold, and a British government bent on maintaining full control over Palestine until the expiry of the Mandate. Nonetheless, the Palestine Commission continued its efforts to enforce peaceful conditions and a two-state solution in Palestine.

## Enforcing partition: an international force, local militias, and Security Council action

The Palestine Commission was aware from the onset of the Arab-Jewish hostilities taking place in Palestine, and that enforcement was necessary to curb violence and enable the success of a peaceful two-state solution. The first trajectory for the restoration of security was to try to spring the Security Council into action. Even though it was not immediately discussed,<sup>53</sup> as early as 14 January, Francisco submitted to the Commission a draft resolution on the matter. It outlined the known facts about hostilities in Palestine and requested Security Council action 'in order that international peace and security may not only be maintained, but also in order that the Palestine Commission may in due time take over and administer the areas of the Palestine territories...'<sup>54</sup>

One proposed means to enforce partition was the creation of armed Jewish and Arab militias that could police the peoples of the two states. The formation of these militias was required under Resolution 181, which determined, 'The Provisional Council of Government of each state shall, within the shortest time possible, recruit an armed militia from the residents of that state, sufficient in number to maintain internal order and to prevent frontier clashes.'<sup>55</sup> As early as 1 December 1947, UN Undersecretary-General Andrew Cordier explained that one of the Palestine Commission's first priorities should be to form a Jewish militia to protect the Jewish population in the wake of the British evacuation. An Arab militia was also required by Resolution 181, but he considered its creation unlikely given the Arab rejection of partition.<sup>56</sup> The topic of militia was covered by a Secretariat working paper,<sup>57</sup> which was presented before the Palestine Commission on 16 January.<sup>58</sup>

The original plan of the Palestine Commission was that, in accordance with Resolution 181's sequencing, the militias could only be organized after the establishment of the provisional governments.<sup>59</sup> The Jewish Agency, on the other hand, sought to expedite the creation of a Jewish

militia while benefitting from whatever support the Palestine Commission would be willing to offer. On 21 January, the Jewish Agency transmitted to the Commission a report on the prospect of establishing a Jewish militia. They also requested that the Commission help the free provision of arms 'to authorized bodies cooperating with the UN Commission' (clearly the Jewish Agency), and the withdrawal of arms from 'those who might use them in an attempt "to alter by force" the arrangement prescribed by Resolution 181' (clearly the AHC).<sup>60</sup> They were not rebuked for taking initiative on the Commission-led assignments, and in fact, Shertok and Horowitz were allowed to present their plan before the delegates, who were rather impressed with the scheme.<sup>61</sup>

The British government, on the other hand, complicated the matter. On 30 January, Cadogan was asked whether the British authorities were willing to accommodate the recruitment of local militias as prescribed by the Partition Plan. His typical answer was 'My government cannot allow the formation of such forces prior to the termination of the Mandate.' This reply clearly upset Lisicky, who asked in response, 'Does it cover even the preparatory steps to the formation of this militia for the period after the termination of the Mandate?' Cadogan diplomatically hinted at the affirmative.<sup>62</sup> Just a day earlier, the Commission released a press statement announcing it had agreed to 'make arrangements for the organization of armed militias in the Jewish and Arab states at the earliest possible time, without awaiting the termination of the British Mandate,'<sup>63</sup> possibly in a desperate and unsuccessful bid to force London's hands.

A second, complementary idea to the militias was to enforce partition using an international force that would answer to the Palestine Commission and/or the Security Council. Interestingly, this idea was introduced to the Commission by the Jewish Agency. On 26 December 1947, Shertok learned of news reports that a UN international force for Palestine might be formed.<sup>64</sup> And indeed, Lie was contemplating proposing the creation of an international force to the Security Council at the time but eventually abandoned the idea.<sup>65</sup> After unsuccessfully appealing to various UN member states to push this initiative forward,<sup>66</sup> Shertok proposed to the Commission on 15 January that the 'maintenance of law and order and the protection of life and property in the coming months' could be achieved through a combination of local militias and an international force.<sup>67</sup> Afterwards, Eban and Horowitz spoke to Bunche and Lisicky in private to further convince them of the desirability of an international force under the auspices of the Security Council.<sup>68</sup>

The Jewish Agency's proposal successfully piqued the interest of the Palestine Commission. On 22 January, Bunche submitted a working paper on precedents concerning international forces that had been created under the Treaty of Versailles or the League of Nations.<sup>69</sup> It was presented in the Commission on the following day, and Lisicky contemplated the would-be force possibly being steered by a committee of eleven experts, each representing one Security Council member.<sup>70</sup>

Until February, the Palestine Commission was preoccupied with drafting its First Monthly Report to the Security Council, which consciously did not deal with the issue of an international force.<sup>71</sup> The Commission felt this matter had to be scrutinized thoroughly and separately from its other work.<sup>72</sup> But in early February, Francisco's 14 January idea to seek the help of the Security Council resurfaced. By then, the first report had already been submitted; the Commission was growing increasingly frustrated with London's marginalization of its work;<sup>73</sup> and reports were flowing in from the Jewish Agency and the Mandatory authorities about escalating violence in Palestine.<sup>74</sup>

The basis for discussion was a working paper put together by the Secretariat, concerning the desired relations between the Palestine Commission and the Security Council. Among the subjects discussed in the paper were whether the Commission could employ an international force and under what conditions the Security Council might be willing to provide it.<sup>75</sup> After some discussions, the Commission decided it was going to dedicate a special report to the Security Council, alerting it to the potential collapse of security following Britain's departure on 15 May and requesting its help in taking steps to ensure security in Palestine.<sup>76</sup>



The Palestine Commission seems to have considered this report decisive in importance. On 29 January, Henri Vigier, one of the Secretariat members, stressed to a Jewish Agency member that 'without creation by the Security Council of some international force the whole [partition] scheme will become unworkable'. Therefore, he urged the Jewish Agency to assist the Commission in presenting a strong case before the Security Council, by transmitting to the Secretariat factual materials on the Arab military incursions into Palestine, belligerent statements by Arab leaders, Arab state-backed Palestinian armament, and the like.<sup>77</sup> The Jewish Agency indeed furnished the Commission with a report on 2 February disclosing such information.<sup>78</sup>

On 16 February, the Palestine Commission submitted its First Special Report to the Security Council, on the problem of security in Palestine. It stated that the decision to submit it was '... the extreme gravity of the situation in Palestine now'. After presenting the information it had available on the military situation, it noted that establishing the local militias would prove difficult, because the British authorities prevented the creation of the Jewish militia while the AHC was boycotting the Commission's work. Its conclusion was that 'the Commission has decided to refer to the Security Council the problem of providing that armed assistance which alone would enable the Commission to discharge its responsibilities on the termination of the Mandate... otherwise, the period immediately following the termination of the Mandate will be a period of uncontrolled, widespread strife and bloodshed in Palestine...'<sup>79</sup>

But the Palestine Commission was facing an unenthusiastic Security Council. As mentioned above, the earlier Washington-Moscow agreement on partition had eroded, while London refused to implement any arrangement in Palestine that was not acceptable for both Jews and Arabs. Consequently, back in December 1947, the Security Council reviewed its role in implementing Resolution 181 but decided to postpone the matter without taking any action.<sup>80</sup> This reluctance to act persisted until February 1948 and led Lie not to publicly endorse the Palestine Commission's proposals even though he was supportive of their content.<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless, on 24 February, Lisicky presented both the First Monthly Report and the Special Report of the Palestine Commission before the Security Council. Also in attendance were observer representatives from the Jewish Agency, Egypt, and Lebanon. In his long statement, Lisicky stated that for the Palestine Commission to assume responsibility for lives and property in Palestine, as well as to implement Resolution 181, it would require 'non-Palestinian military forces available not in some symbolical form but in effective, adequate strength'. He reiterated the last paragraph in the Special Report, calling for the Security Council to provide the necessary assistance.<sup>82</sup>

Expectedly however, the Security Council members' responses were hardly what the Palestine Commission had hoped for. In the ensuing debate that lasted from 24 February to 1 April, little support for the notion of an international force was expressed. The Americans sounded the opinion that the situation in Palestine did not pose a threat to international peace, and later announced partition could not be realistically enforced; the British delegation reiterated London's known policy that it would not enforce any solution not accepted by both Arabs and Jews; the Syrians condemned partition as the General Assembly's mistake and advocated the creation of a single Arab country in all of Palestine. Long deliberations eventually produced three resolutions: Resolution 42 appealed to the elements in Palestine to prevent or reduce disorder; Resolution 43 called upon the parties to make themselves available for the Security Council for a ceasefire; and Resolution 44 asked Lie to convoke a General Assembly special session to deal with the future government of Palestine. None of these resolutions referred to the suggestions on an international force.<sup>83</sup> Lie observed that among the Great Powers, 'only the Soviet Union seemed to be seriously intent upon implementing partition.'<sup>84</sup> The situation led the Commission to release an unusually aggressive statement on 9 March, claiming the Commission, and not the Security Council, had chief jurisdiction vis-à-vis the implementation of Resolution 181, and that the Security Council had no authority to overturn the General Assembly's decision.<sup>85</sup>

A major culprit in the Palestine Commission's failure to elicit a satisfactory Security Council response was the Commission's composition. Horowitz pointed out that the members selected to

sit on the Commission represented countries that both lacked political power in the global sphere and had demonstrated a reserved stance toward partition to begin with.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, the sending countries of the delegates were unlikely to back any Commission-proposed plan to enforce partition; and even if they did, they were not necessarily powerful enough to persuade the Superpowers to follow suit. Furthermore, none of the Commission member states were also a Security Council member, which allowed the two organizations to drift too far apart in their work. When discussing the composition of the Commission's member states, Eban went as far as to contend that, 'if the UN had wished to illustrate its impotence it could not have chosen the team more deliberately.'<sup>87</sup>

Abandoned by the Security Council and marginalized by the Mandatory authorities, the Palestine Commission could do little more in relation to either militias or an international force. By 8 March, Francisco submitted a report overviewing the Commission's dealings with Britain concerning militias and concluded, 'It is my considered view that no useful purpose could be served in pursuing any further consultation with the representatives of the Mandatory Power on the object of militia.'<sup>88</sup>

### The last stand: creating a Jerusalem municipal police force

Another endeavour of the Palestine Commission was to organize a municipal police force that would oversee security in Jerusalem. The creation of a Jerusalem force was also a requirement of Resolution 181: 'To assist the maintenance of internal law and order... the [Jerusalem] Governor shall organize a special police force of adequate strength...'<sup>89</sup> The preoccupation with the Jerusalem police force began in January. The Secretariat put together a working paper, informing that at that time, a Mandatory Police Force was stationed in Jerusalem, consisting of British, Arab, and Jewish personnel. In the case of its withdrawal, the Holy City would have no police protection, and therefore, the Palestine Commission should work to enlist a force of about 2,000 officers and men, possibly retaining some of the policemen already serving under British rule.<sup>90</sup>

Following Lisicky's enquiry to Cadogan on the matter, Cadogan reported on 30 January that at that time, Jerusalem had 900 members of the British Police and additional 350 Palestine Police, supported by more than a brigade of troops. Cadogan wrote that before the end of February, the Mandatory government planned to establish a municipal police force of 300 Arabs and 300 Jews. He proposed keeping this force in place after the termination of the Mandate, along with the British policemen who would volunteer to extend their existing contracts. Cadogan also suggested that, within an advance notice of some weeks, the Mandatory government could survey for volunteers among the British Section of the Police who would like to serve under the Commission's Jerusalem security force.<sup>91</sup> Following Cadogan's letter, the Palestine Commission decided to issue a proposal to the current civil servants in Palestine, to continue their service after the Mandate under the same terms of service. They also wanted to enquire with the British government on a suitable commander for the Jerusalem force.<sup>92</sup> In late February, the Commission's call for Mandatory employees to retain their work was drafted,<sup>93</sup> and subsequently circulated by the British authorities in early March.<sup>94</sup>

By mid-March, matters in Jerusalem were becoming critical and urgent. Azcárate and his Advance Party, bent on taking action to stop the guerrilla warfare and prevent escalation,<sup>95</sup> warned the Palestine Commission in New York that Jerusalem posed a typical example of 'a real state of latent or potential war.'<sup>96</sup> The Commission was meanwhile surprised to learn that some of the British officers in Palestine had already left,<sup>97</sup> and Lund reported that he heard from the British Chief of Staff in Palestine that British withdrawal from Jerusalem was imminent.<sup>98</sup> In a bizarre conversation between Azcárate and the British High Commissioner, the latter announced he was going to remove the furniture from the Government House in Jerusalem, lest Arab pillagers loot its contents after it was left defenceless.<sup>99</sup>

Zionist elements also urged the Palestine Commission to consider the deterioration in Jerusalem,<sup>100</sup> and even proposed various remedies. One example was when Shertok suggested the Commission should re deploy to the Holy City the Scandinavian forces that were at the time serving with the Allied Military Occupation forces in Germany<sup>101</sup> (Lund had recommended this idea to the Jews).<sup>102</sup> The Commission replied that this plan was not only impractical, but also not within its mission scope.<sup>103</sup> A few days later, Lund reported a meeting with the Military Liaison Officer of the Jewish Agency. The latter proposed that the police force recruit people from all over Palestine and be placed under the then-Jaffa-Tel Aviv Chief of Police.<sup>104</sup> The Jews were anxious to help the quick deployment of the Jerusalem police force, because their military hold over the city was weak in late March and early April, and they feared that the local Jewish community was facing 'total annihilation unless [an] international [police] force [was] dispatched'.<sup>105</sup>

In the meantime, London was beginning to disengage from the issue of the police force and renounce its former promise to recruit 300 Jewish and 300 Arab policemen. On 1 April, Fletcher-Cooke wrote to Bunche that London could not suggest a British candidate for the post of Chief of the Jerusalem City Police. Furthermore, the Mandatory government could advise the Commission on volunteers for the Police Force but could not put forward or recommend any names.<sup>106</sup> On the same day, Azcárate reported that the Mandate was arranging a far smaller force than the one originally promised.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, only 200 British policemen volunteered for the new force. Even though this number was disappointing, the Commission hoped these volunteers could serve as a useful nucleus for the police.<sup>108</sup> As of mid-April, Lisicky felt that entering arguments with London was useless, and gaining whatever possible from the Mandate through negotiations was preferable.<sup>109</sup> Azcárate hardly shared these sentiments, and since early April felt New York would be better off dissolving the Advance Party and employing him as Lie's direct representative in Jerusalem.<sup>110</sup> Fletcher-Cooke was equally pessimistic; on 31 March, he telegraphed Jerusalem, expressing his opinion that 'there was now no prospect whatever of there being any UN body to which a handover could be made on 15 May'.<sup>111</sup>

As far as it was concerned, the Palestine Commission did whatever possible to facilitate the creation of the police force. After receiving information from Britain on the logistical and financial requirements for the creation of the force,<sup>112</sup> the Commission requested a budget for its maintenance from Lie. Lie agreed and allocated an emergency sum of 500,000 dollars to finance the first month of the police's function, to enter duty on 16 May.<sup>113</sup> The Commission also arranged with the British authorities to send an official to Palestine for the recruitment of British personnel for the force, although London noted it could not assist that representative in travelling around Palestine, due to the problematic security situation. Additionally, the Mandate government promised to re-enquire on the numbers and ranks of volunteers to the Force.<sup>114</sup>

On 14 April, the Palestine Commission officially decided to 'immediately' set up the Jerusalem Police Force, even announcing its intention to the press.<sup>115</sup> The Advance Party seemingly played a significant role in this decision: two days earlier, Lund reiterated the necessity of recruiting 1,000 men to such a force as fast as possible,<sup>116</sup> and later submitted a lengthy report outlining the current structure and function of the Palestine Police.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, in the 14 April meeting, Stavropoulos (who had been recalled from Palestine for consultations) stressed the importance of appointing a commander for the force and reminded his colleagues that after 15 May, no superior officers were going to stay in Palestine. After his speech, the delegates decided that Lund or a special recruiting officer had to immediately proceed to Palestine to ensure the potential British volunteers would constitute the nucleus of the Jerusalem police force as planned.<sup>118</sup> Until such a commander was dispatched, Azcárate was instructed to inform all those who volunteered in Palestine that the Force was to be established quickly.<sup>119</sup>

But reality again extinguished the Palestine Commission's efforts. On 17 April, Fletcher-Cooke announced to Bunche the disappointing result of the second survey on British volunteers: their numbers dwindled even below the former 200, and this time included only 50 policemen. Most of them were young and inexperienced constables, and none of them were officers. Additionally,

Fletcher-Cooke noted some of them had 'local connections which would make them unsuitable for employment in an international force.'<sup>120</sup> When Bunche and Fletcher-Cooke continued their conversation over the phone, Fletcher-Cooke claimed the Police Force project collapsed because of the tardy action of the Commission, disclaiming all Mandatory responsibility for the failure. Bunche retorted that the Commission was waiting to receive the consent of the Mandatory government to establish the Force, which they received only 5 days later. In the subsequent Commission meeting, Bunche recounted his exchange with Fletcher-Cooke to the delegates, and Lisicky instructed the former to put together a paper examining all the stages of this project for submission to the General Assembly.<sup>121</sup> In his conversations with the Zionists, a frustrated Lund took the position of Fletcher-Cooke and not that of Bunche: he held the Commission responsible for the failure of the demarche, claiming it should have immediately taken on the 200 volunteers who made themselves available only 10 days earlier.<sup>122</sup>

Unsure whether to establish the Force with the limited means available, the Palestine Commission enquired with Azcárate about the situation on the ground.<sup>123</sup> In his reply, Azcárate confirmed only 50 British policemen declared themselves willing to serve at that time, and none were officers. He added that a force of 200 policemen was the absolute minimum, and a force of 500 or more was desirable. He felt that without external reinforcements brought from outside of Palestine, the Police Force was impracticable. Accordingly, on 22 April, the Palestine Commission decided to postpone action on this matter. However, it did pass Azcárate's report on to the French UN delegation, because it was working at the time on a General Assembly resolution concerning the protection of Jerusalem.<sup>124</sup>

After the failure of the Jerusalem Police Force, the Palestine Commission did little to promote any kind of peacekeeping. The last meetings of the Commission were dedicated to administrative matters, such as Palestine's sterling bank balances, food supplies, and passport status.<sup>125</sup> On 14 May, considering the escalating war, the General Assembly appointed a mediator for Palestine and relieved the Palestine Commission of its responsibilities.<sup>126</sup> On 17 May, the Commission held its last meeting and adjourned itself *sine die*. In his concluding remarks, Lisicky told his colleagues they could disperse with a clear conscience and feel confident that history would judge the Commission favourably.<sup>127</sup>

## Conclusion

Regardless of whether the critics of the Palestine Commission were right about the delegates' personal and/or professional flaws, it is that even the shrewdest and most talented group of diplomats would have eventually failed in fulfilling their goals. This is because of the deadly external obstacles faced by the Commission.

The discrepancy between the immense task entrusted to the Palestine Commission and the meagre means with which it was equipped to pursue it was striking. On the one hand, its challenging mission was to transform a war-torn land of two stateless peoples into a peaceful territory, harbouring two functioning democracies and one international regime. On the other hand, it was a group of five representatives from minor states, which received little help from other UN organs and was left alone to grapple with an Arab boycott, a Zionist bearhug, and a British bureaucratic war of attrition. Lisicky rightfully told his colleagues already in January 1948, 'Nobody can expect miracles from five lonely pilgrims who at this moment have nothing but the UN flag, and perhaps this gavel as well, as all their means for enforcing resolution [181].'<sup>128</sup> Later, on 10 April, the Commission articulated to the General Assembly that, '...the armed hostility of both Palestinian and non-Palestinian Arab elements, the lack of cooperation from the Mandatory Power, the disintegrating security situation in Palestine, and the fact that the Security Council did not furnish the Commission with the necessary armed assistance, are the factors which have made it impossible for the Commission to implement the [General] Assembly's resolution [181].'<sup>129</sup>

Behind the facade of historical irrelevance, the Palestine Commission makes up an important analytical case study that highlights key inhibitions that prevented a two-state solution from becoming reality in 1948. Its story also serves to show the tragic dissonance between the grandiose UN rhetoric surrounding the Partition Plan, and the limited resources invested into it. The Commission was arguably the only international entity truly willing to enforce Resolution 181; consequently, although it quixotically contemplated far-reaching steps, such as the formation of an international force or a Jerusalem police, it could barely even deploy its operatives in Palestine. Meanwhile, the other UN organs washed their hands of the Palestine question after adopting partition; Arabs and Jews were left to settle their dispute with force; and the British Mandate was solely preoccupied with safely withdrawing its personnel from the warzone. The resulting chaos paved the way for the long-lasting Arab-Israeli conflict.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr Harel Chorev for providing feedback on an earlier draft of this text.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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