In today's political debate, the UN decision that led to the founding of the state of Israel is often described as a post-colonial act. This is out of pity for the Holocaust in the years before. According to this narrative, the victims were the Palestinians, who were expelled from their land to make way for the new Jewish state. Both claims prove to be myths that do not stand up to comparison with the historical facts.

By Jan Kapusnak [i]

On the evening of November 29, 1947, when the results of the UN General Assembly's vote on Resolution 181 came through the radios, the Jews in the Land of Israel poured into the streets. After centuries of prayer, decades of diplomatic efforts, land acquisition and building their own institutions, the vision of a state of their own was within reach. The international community had just proposed dividing the British Mandate of Palestine into two states – "one Arab and one Jewish".

This moment of euphoria gave rise to a persistent myth: that the UN had handed the Jews a state on a silver platter. In today's anti-Zionist rhetoric, Israel appears as a Western colonial outpost, allegedly conjured up in New York by a "Jewish conspiracy" and by playing a "Holocaust pity card" on a guilt-ridden world – and the same ungrateful Zionists are said to have prevented the birth of an Arab state ever since.

Only seemingly generous

Ironically, this narrative echoes today in the UN's own commemoration of November 29, the "International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People" – a ritual of solemn and sad speeches mourning the "unfulfilled" Arab state, often laced with anti-Semitic references and one-sided blame on Israel. At one such event, Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General, sat under a map on which Israel simply did not exist: the entire area between the river and the sea was labeled "Palestine" – the cartographic fantasy of today's Palestine activists and a scene that aptly captures the spirit of this day of solidarity.

These narratives obscure what the resolution actually said – and who ensured that the Arab state in question did not come into being.

The General Assembly has no power to create states. Resolution 181 merely recommended the partition of the territory of the British Mandate, the basis of

which was the Balfour Declaration of 1917 – the promise to support “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” while guaranteeing the civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities.

In 1922, the League of Nations, the predecessor of the UN, translated this promise into international law, recognized the “historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine” and instructed Great Britain to turn this promise into reality – in effect the beginning of a decolonization process.

The mandate was designed to last until its objectives were achieved. Instead, Britain gradually withdrew from its obligations – in some cases actively blocking the creation of a Jewish state – and lost the will to enforce them. In the end, London handed over the unresolved Palestinian question to the newly founded United Nations.

The resolution allocated around 56 percent of the territory to the proposed Jewish state and around 43 percent to the Arabs. On paper, the Jewish share seemed generous; in reality, a large part of it consisted of the barren Negev desert.

A few months before the vote, the eleven-member UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) toured the Mandate territory to gather the facts on which its recommendations were to be based. The borders it finally proposed were not a product of “colonial arbitrariness”, but were sensibly based on an already existing demographic and economic reality.

In the previous decades, Zionists had established state-building institutions, founded towns and kibbutzim, built roads and harbors. The Jewish settlement area did not grow through the expropriation of Arab property, but through land acquisition and the reclamation of areas that had previously been swamps or wasteland. Scientifically based anti-malaria campaigns transformed swamps on the coast, in the Jezreel Valley and in parts of the Galilee into agricultural and settlement land – a magnet not only for Jewish but also for Arab immigrants. UNSCOP united these contiguous zones into a territorial unit – this became the basis of the Jewish state.

Resolution as a compromise

Arab leaders boycotted UNSCOP and claimed that its members had already

committed themselves before their arrival. The accusation was unfounded. The Dutch delegate Nicolas Blom – whose pro-Arab stance had been shaped by Dutch rule in Muslim Indonesia – opposed partition almost to the end, changing his mind only after travelling the country and seeing that the Zionist community was modern, well-organized and clearly capable of sustaining a state.

The Iranian diplomat Nasrollah Entezam, who also claimed to be anti-Zionist, left a kibbutz in the Negev with the words: “What asses the Arabs are! The land is so beautiful and you can develop it. If you gave it to the Jews, they would turn it into Europe.” His unsparing remark made it clear how much the 1947 map followed the work invested there.

The UN was able to draw a map, but it could not enforce the partition; that depended on the actors on the ground. After painful internal debates, the Zionist leadership accepted the resolution as a compromise: Jerusalem was to be placed under an international regime, many historical areas in Judea and Samaria were to be allocated to the Arab state – and yet this remained the only way to achieve recognized sovereignty. After the vote, David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the state and its first prime minister, spoke of the “greatest success of the Jewish people in its long history since it became a nation”.

The Arab leaders, on the other hand, rejected the plan outright. The Arab Higher Committee in Palestine rejected any arrangement that recognized a Jewish state – no matter how small – and announced that it would prevent the implementation of the resolution “by any means necessary”. It was a familiar pattern: they had already rejected earlier partition plans such as the Peel Plan of 1937, and later offers were also to be rejected. For them, the problem lay not in the borders, but in the mere existence of a Jewish state. Abdel Rahman Azzam, Secretary General of the Arab League, warned that its creation would mean “a war of extermination and a huge massacre that will be talked about like the massacres of the Mongols and the Crusades”.

Events on the ground immediately confirmed these threats. The very next day, November 30, 1947, Arab terrorists attacked two Jewish buses near Kfar Sirkin and killed seven passengers – widely seen as the prelude to the civil war of 1947/48 in British Mandate Palestine. The country was engulfed in brutal fighting between the Jewish Yishuv and Arab militias, while the British troops, already in retreat, barely intervened.

The assessments in Washington at the time were anything but optimistic. A CIA report entitled “The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine”, dated November 28, 1947 – one day before the vote – predicted armed conflict and warned that in a prolonged war of attrition, “the Jews would not be able to resist for more than two years” unless they received massive external support. Doubts were high as to whether a Jewish state could withstand a coordinated Arab attack.

A few months later, this scenario was put to the test. On May 14, 1948, with the end of the British Mandate, Ben-Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel. Within hours, armies from Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq marched in. A civil war had become a regional war.

Robbery without strategy

The new state fought under extremely difficult conditions. Although a UN arms embargo applied to the entire region, in practice it hit the Jews harder than the Arab states, many of which already had regular British-trained armies with organized command structures and well-stocked arsenals. The war was a chain of desperate defensive battles. There was nothing “silver” about the Jewish military circumstances.

And yet this material advantage did not lead to Arab victory because the attackers lacked a coherent political-military strategy. The Arab armies did not form a unified force, but a coalition of regiments with competing goals, rivalries and red lines: Jordan’s Arab Legion, the most professional formation, fought according to its own priorities; Egypt waged its own campaign in the south while trying to prevent Jordanian gains; Syria and Iraq operated on other fronts with only limited coordination. Some even feared a new Arab state as a future rival.

For many, the war was driven less by Palestinian statehood than by territorial ambitions – and simply by the goal of preventing any Jewish sovereignty. Israel, on the other hand, fought on internal lines with a single overriding goal: survival.

If the UN did not “give” the Jews a state, then Czechoslovakia may have helped them to keep it. In a secret supply chain code-named “Operation Balak”, Prague used its arms industry and a sympathy for Zionism that already existed before the Second World War to supply weapons and – crucially – Avia S-199 fighter planes, converted Messerschmitts, to beleaguered Israel.

Behind these deals was intensive Zionist diplomacy: Haganah emissaries traveled through European capitals and presented their case. A key figure was the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk – son of the founder of the state, long-time friend of a Jewish state foundation and himself a “yes” vote for Resolution 181 – who even helped the Haganah envoy Ehud Avriel to obtain Ethiopian cover papers so that the weapons appeared to be officially destined for Addis Ababa.

Czechoslovakia also trained Israeli pilots, among them a young Ezer Weizman, who later became head of the air force and president. What began as an initiative by Prague did not happen in a vacuum: after the communist overthrow in February 1948, Czechoslovakia was firmly in the Soviet sphere of influence, and exports of this magnitude were only possible with Moscow’s approval. Stalin saw an opportunity to weaken Great Britain in the Middle East, hoped that an Israel led by Labor Zionists would tend towards the socialist camp, but at the same time feared openly offending the Arab states.

For a brief moment, Israel’s future depended on a few used airplanes – and on the courage of a small state to ignore international restrictions.

Jewish quarter destroyed

The outcome of the 1948/49 war reflected the priorities of both sides. On the Israeli side, it was clear: survival. Israel emerged from the war with around a third more territory than the UN had originally allocated – at the cost of around 6,000 dead, around one percent of a population of barely 600,000 people, many of whom had only recently escaped the Nazi death camps, and many more wounded.

At the same time, the Old City of Jerusalem, including the Wailing Wall and Temple Mount, fell to the Jordanian Arab Legion, the Jewish Quarter was destroyed, and most of the territory intended for an Arab state went to Jordan in the West Bank and Egypt in the Gaza Strip. The elimination of a Jewish state, not the establishment of an Arab one, corresponded to the interests of the neighboring regimes – a fact that is hardly ever mentioned at the UN’s 29 November ceremonies. Instead, the impression is often created that Israel has to apologize for agreeing to partition and daring to fight for its existence.

In the certainty of a quick victory, many Arab leaders and media had called on the local Arab civilian population to flee during the war – with the promise of a quick

return after Israel's defeat. Years later, Khaled al-Azm, Syria's prime minister in 1948, wrote in his memoirs: "We . . . encouraged them to leave . . . We plunged over a million Arab refugees into ruin by urging and begging them to leave their country."

This does not explain the whole refugee story – there was also brutality, expulsion and chaos – but it shows how Arab hubris turned a "tactical flight" into a long-term disaster for their own people. This was later mythologized under the name Nakba (catastrophe) in a propagandistic effort to equate it with the narrative of the Holocaust and thereby create a Palestinian identity.

But the story is incomplete without another, often overlooked fact: in 1948, a sizable Arab population remained within Israel's borders and became Israeli citizens – about one-fifth of the early population – and still forms the core of the Arab minority today. Israel's Declaration of Independence, adopted in the midst of the war, called on the Arab inhabitants to "preserve peace" and promised "full and equal citizenship".

Regardless of later friction and complaints, Arab citizens vote, form parties, sit in the Knesset, study at Israeli universities and use the same public health system – with far greater political freedoms and a higher standard of living than in much of the region. This reality undermines the notorious claim that Israel was conceived by supremacist Zionists as an ethnically or religiously "pure" project.

"It was our mistake"

In 2011, the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, almost miraculously described the Arab rejection of the 1947 partition plan as a historic mistake: "It was our mistake. It was an Arab mistake as a whole," he said – acknowledging that the Arabs had missed an opportunity for statehood alongside Israel. Yet to this day, the Palestinian Authority – not to mention Hamas – refuses to recognize Israel as the Jewish state envisaged in Resolution 181.

What is even more revealing is that Palestinian statehood is often thought of in exclusionary categories: as a state in which Jews would not be allowed to live – or at least not as citizens with equal rights. Therein lies a glaring asymmetry that the international community all too often overlooks: Israel is repeatedly condemned even though it has integrated a large Arab minority as citizens, while a future

Palestinian state is often taken for granted as a “Jew-free” community – and this assumption is rarely questioned with the same moral urgency.

So what did the United Nations actually give the Jews on November 29, 1947? They gave them neither secure borders nor security; both were won in a war in which Jews were already under attack the morning after the vote. They did not give them victory; that was paid for – as the poet Natan Alterman foresaw – with the lives of young men and women, the real “silver platter”.

Resolution 181 offered something more modest but decisive: international legitimacy for a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. It brought the term “Jewish state” into the language of the UN and gave legal and diplomatic recognition to a claim that Jews had made for generations. For a brief historical moment, the vocabulary of the UN coincided with the simple meaning of Zionism: Jewish self-determination – the organized, ultimately fulfilled desire of a people scarred by anti-Semitism and recurring pogroms to have their own state.

Everything else was done by people, not the United Nations – Zionist leaders who worked the world for years while organizing defense; Holocaust survivors who took up arms a few weeks after leaving a displaced persons camp; women who smuggled weapons; youths in improvised uniforms who guarded remote kibbutzim.

The myth that the Jews were given Israel on a silver platter not only falsifies history; it insults those who actually were that silver platter. The Jewish state exists not because it was granted to the Jews as a favour, but because its people paid the price to turn a resolution on paper into a living country – making Zionism arguably the most successful decolonization movement in modern history ever.

Jan Kapusnak is a political analyst and author and lives in Tel Aviv. This article first appeared in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung