

UNSCOP and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Road to Partition by Elad Ben-Dror (translated by Haim Watzman). Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. 272, index. £120 hardback. ISBN: 978-1-03-205963-1.

Elad Ben-Dror's scholarly monograph details the life and times of the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) that in 1947, with Britain quitting its Palestine Mandate, decided on partition of the place into Jewish and Palestinian areas – with 62% of the land going to the Jews – before the two sides ignored UNSCOP and went to war as the last British troops left from Haifa harbour. (The earlier Peel Commission of 1937 had allocated only 20% of Palestine to the Jews.) Haim Watzman has (as always) produced a smooth translation from Hebrew into English. It is based on an impressive range of archival sources, reflecting the eleven UNSCOP nations: Australian, Canadian, Czech, Dutch, Indian, and Swedish. Deep reading of the UN's New York archive and UK and Israeli repositories augments the evidentiary base. Arab primary sources do 'not stand on a comparable archival foundation,' as the author puts it, and he is right. They are not accessible. The same is true for the USSR. Thus, we see Palestinians' and neighbouring Arab States' views through the eyes of others, or via Arabic newspapers and memoirs. Chapter ten sketches out the eleven committee members and these political biographies are important to the argument in this book. (There were alternate UNSCOP members to help with the work, but they came from the same eleven countries: Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, Holland, India, Iran, Peru, Sweden, Uruguay, and Yugoslavia.)

Why bother studying UNSCOP? At best, it was a failed first stab by the UN at solving conflicts through diplomacy and dialogue; at worst, it was a failed first attempt by do-gooders to square the circle of intractable local disputes with meaningless chatter while those on the ground sharpened their swords. War was erupting around UNSCOP as it visited Palestine in the summer of 1947 (the commission went on to visit neighbouring Arab countries and European displaced persons' (DP) camps). Ben-Dror frames his study and its significance around two contending arguments about why UNSCOP favoured Zionism and produced a partition plan that created a viable Jewish State. On the one hand, UNSCOP for the Arabs was a trick to give Britain and the US the opportunity to create a Zionist State, and its conclusion was determined in advance by a panel favourable to Zionism. Meanwhile, for Zionists, UNSCOP was an objective commission convinced by the modernising Zionist project and moved by the plight of the Jewish DPs. Ben-Dror's argument is a version of the latter argument, his main point being that UNSCOP was not disposed one way or the other. It was balanced between pro-Arab and pro-Zionist feelings, at the start anyway. This book details why and how UNSCOP members moved to a partition position preferring Zionism. The

book's grander claim that 'UNSCOP was a watershed for the Palestine question, as it was removed from the hands of the British and the other great powers and came before the United Nations ... fundamentally redefining Palestine's political future' is questionable. Whether UNSCOP came or went the two sides were going to war, what became Israel was going to win as the Jews were much better prepared, and the pre-UNSCOP history of Jewish immigration and settlement under British Mandate founded the State of Israel. Moreover, the British had had enough of the place and were going to leave anyway. The book works best as an interesting, effective bottom-up history detailing the changes within UNSCOP as it moved to a partial position.

Everyone performed to racial stereotypes in 1947. The British were cold and aloof, retaining their 'superiority' and 'icy courtesy' while being 'dry and didactic,' answering questions in a 'contemptuous drawl.' The Arabs were chaotic and venal, especially the self-serving Palestinian leader Hajj Amin al-Husayni (or Mufti, and Israel's *bête noire*). The Jews were clever and conniving, working the UNSCOP team to convert them to the benefits of Zionism. How the Zionists flattered UNSCOP while the Palestinians boycotted it speaks to the power of persuasion, on how to change people's minds, in Ben-Dror's view. The Yugoslav delegate found himself sitting alongside a man who spoke his obscure Slovenian dialect native language, the Jewish Agency having found the only Jewish man in Palestine who spoke it. A Persian woman seamlessly started talking to the Iranian UNSCOP delegate in Farsi; ditto a Czech with the Czech member. And so on. Jews stressed their scientific advancement – how they made the desert bloom. 'What asses the Arabs are' said the Iranian delegate on being shown all the Jewish agricultural and material improvements, unaware that a Jewish Farsi-speaking agent was close by. Meanwhile, the British disinterestedly presented improvements in the country to UNSCOP as a teacher would a student, without mentioning the teacher's role in the achievement. British officials on the ground wondered why small countries like Guatemala and Uruguay had any right to tell the British Empire what to do.

Then there was the *Exodus* affair, the boat filled with wretched Jewish DPs trying to get to Palestine and turned away by the British, whose 'perfect timing' by arriving during UNSCOP's time in Palestine looked as 'if it had been planned by the Zionists.' Jewish Tel Aviv received UNSCOP like 'royalty,' the streets festooned with flowers, flags, and posters. UNSCOP's Jorge Garcia Granados of Guatemala proclaimed Tel Aviv as the 'miracle on the dunes.' Zionists treated UNSCOP with the 'utmost gravity' and Jewish Agency liaison officers 'ceaselessly searched for ways into the hearts' of UNSCOP. A broad team supported this effort, with experts in every field on hand. It sought out Jews with similar backgrounds to UNSCOP members. Other work went on in secret. Jewish Shai (*Sherut Yedi'ot*, Information Service) intelligence

agents bugged UNSCOP telephones; told employees at UNSCOP hotels to retrieve discarded papers and rubbish; special bank accounts paid the bill for this work. When UNSCOP visited the DP camps in Europe – after considerable debate about whether this was appropriate – to see if Jewish refugees wanted to go to Palestine, they discovered that they did, even on unannounced visits. That said, 25% still wanted to go to America. UNSCOP wondered if Zionist propaganda in DP camps might be at play, with posters on show bearing slogans such as ‘Palestine for the Jews’ alongside photographs of a child killed during the re-taking of the *Exodus*. One Jewish camp survivor told UNSCOP: ‘I have been asked these same questions many in the past – I want to go to Palestine.’ Ben-Dror’s position is that DPs were not ‘briefed’ before seeing UNSCOP. The sentiments were genuine.

Against this well-orchestrated campaign what could the Palestinians do? Give up their land? Their position was to boycott UNSCOP, declaring it pro-Zionist. They assumed that Palestine would stay under British rule. Whatever UNSCOP declared, ‘it would make no difference.’ Hajj Amin (the Mufti) spent his time battling other Arabs, not UNSCOP, to assert his custodianship over the Palestine question. He boycotted UNSCOP and never coordinated with other Arab States. At the Arab League in Cairo the atmosphere was ‘chaotic and disrespectful’ during UNSCOP talks. Here is the classic tale of obstinate Arabs. The Egyptian Consul in Palestine called the behaviour of the Palestinian leadership ‘the great crime.’ The Mufti refused to take calls from the head of UNSCOP; Arab journalists shunned UNSCOP; and in cafes and on Palestine’s streets Palestinians avoided all contact with UNSCOP. The British believed that the boycott was ‘folly.’ At one school the Arab teacher kept on teaching when UNSCOP came into the classroom, studiously ignoring the visitors. So many lunches were cancelled that UNSCOP delegates brought their own sandwiches. Palestinians claimed that they would pay with their lives if they talked to UNSCOP. To overcome the boycott, UNSCOP talked to Arab State leaders in talks in Lebanon, but they reiterated the position that all Jews who arrived in the country after 1917 would have to leave. Arab states tried to trick UNSCOP into not visiting Transjordan’s more moderate – or for his critics, pro-Zionist – Emir Abdullah, who nevertheless was ambivalent with ‘winks and smirks’ when he got to meet UNSCOP.

UNSCOP drew its partition borders on the map. This was an impossible business; the populations were intermingled; it was a paper exercise. The final proposal delighted the Jews who with a ‘feeling of victory’ celebrated with champagne. For Arabs, partition meant that ‘blood will flow like rivers in the Middle East.’ Ben-Dror’s point is that this was never a done deal. UNSCOP could have gone either way as there was a balance between Jewish and Arab support: ‘the manifestly pro-Zionist position that a solid majority’ of UNSCOP took with partition ‘could not have been predicted when the inquiry began.’ Here is the paradox

in the book's conclusion: the Arabs/Palestinians were in some measure responsible for partition as by their rejection and boycott of UNSCOP, they forced it to make a larger Jewish Palestine as if it made a smaller one it would be rejected by both sides, whereas if UNSCOP created a larger Jewish Palestine it would be rejected only by one side. Arab non-cooperation and Jewish collaboration with UNSCOP made the partition and the Jewish State.

Ben-Dror is to be congratulated for his meticulous, textured, lively dissection of UNSCOP's 'moment' in the Middle East that while brief was momentous, not so much in forming Israel as in showing how well-organised political campaigns of persuasion are powerful and significant in international politics, and reflect well-organised and strong nations. One final quibble: why the £120 price tag for the actual book – does Routledge only want to sell to well-off, select academic libraries?

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