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Quirks of fate helped establish Israeli state

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General Assembly was meeting, the diplomats said. It was fought in the delegates' lounge, in their hotel rooms, in the Oval Office of the White House and in the limousines shuttling between Flushing Meadow and Manhattan.

"The Jewish lobby played political hardball," said Rusk recently from his office at the University of Georgia where he is Samuel H. Sibley professor of international law. "President Truman was pressed unmercifully."

"The Arabs had no lobby," said Jamali from his modest home in Tunis, where he has lived in political exile from Iraq for 25 years. "We were weak in those days. Our countries were recently independent from colonial rule. Among the Arabs, only Iraq and Egypt had diplomatic experience," explained Jamali, one of only three living signers of the U.N. charter.

As the General Assembly moved toward a vote in late November, the outcome was still uncertain.

"We knew that the Arabs and Muslims would be against us," explained Eban during a recent visit to New York. "We assumed that Latin America would be tough because the Vatican was not willing to recognize a Jewish state," he said. "And we assumed that the Soviet bloc would not be with us."

But the Soviet Union shocked the world by supporting partition. "It was a great sensation, it was the turning point," said Eban. "Nobody doubted that it was not so much out of love of Israel but of their own self-interest."

Sir Harold Beeley, 79, a British delegate to the session, explained from his home in London: "The Russians thought the British position in Palestine was a Western asset and they wanted to be sure that we were removed from Palestine."

"President Truman was somewhat schizophrenic on the matter of Palestine," said Rusk. "He was strongly in support of a homeland for the Jews, but wanted to find a solution that the Arabs could live with." Convinced there was no alternative, Truman finally threw U.S. influence behind partition.

Except for England, most of the Western European countries joined the major powers in voting for partition for reasons similar to those of Denmark. "The Danes felt the impact of the Holocaust so profoundly that even though partition was not the perfect solution, it was the closest we could get," Lannung said from his office in Copenhagen.

Partition was opposed not only by the five Arab nations, but also by India, Pakistan, Yugoslavia and Turkey, countries with large Moslem populations.

The rest of the 57 members were caught in the cross fire.

Some countries were influenced by more subtle reasons. Canada, for example, supported partition largely because of the marriage of Princess Elizabeth of England.

"MacKenzie King, our prime minister, wanted Canada to stay out of international conflicts," said George Ignatieff, 74, then a Canadian delegate to the United Nations. His senior representatives at the General Assembly, on the other hand, supported partition.

"But King was very keen on the royal family and went off to the princess' wedding for two or three months." That freed the Canadian diplomats to vote their own minds, Ignatieff explained from his home in Toronto.

The crucial vote was scheduled in the United Nations for Wednesday, Nov. 26, 1947. But on Monday and Tuesday, the Arabs tried an almost desperate series of diplomatic maneuvers that delayed it. They even proposed that a Jewish state be established in Tanganyika (now Tanzania).

Jamali of Iraq demanded an opinion from the International Court of Justice in the Hague on the U.N.'s legal authority to determine the future of Palestine. "My proposal was supported by several speakers," Jamali said, "but the vote was postponed until the evening session and many of those who had spoken in favor of it were invited out to dinner and did not return in time."

The vote was postponed for Thanksgiving and then rescheduled for Friday.

For most of the delegates that Thursday was not exactly a holiday. "During the Thanksgiving recess, the Zionist lobby and President Truman worked hard to put pressure on some states to change their votes and support partition," Jamali said.

Eban agreed. "The delay of the vote was really providential for us," he said.

At breakfast on Friday, Jewish leaders read in the press that 30 countries would support partition. They needed 32.

There was an electric thrill in the atmosphere as the General Assembly convened at 11 a.m. Overnight the Haitian government had succumbed to U.S. pressure and ordered its dele-



An elderly Jewish man weeps last Thursday during a memorial service at a cemetery in Holon, just south of Tel Aviv, on Victims and Martyrs of the Holocaust Day.

gation to shift from opposition to support. A coup in Siam forced the recall of a pro-Arab delegation. Chile moved from abstention to opposition. No one was sure which side France would take.

"The United Nations is today on trial," declared Sir Mohammed Zafrullah Khan of Pakistan, the opening speaker that morning. "The world is watching."

What it saw was five more hours of speeches with no resolution of the issue. The meeting adjourned at 4:38 p.m. The vote was postponed yet again.

"Spectators from the packed galleries thronged into the corridors, asking one another what was behind the delay," *The New York Times* reported on Saturday. "Delegates and advisers, equally baffled, poured into the delegates' lounge, where they but-tholed one another."

On that clear fall Saturday morning the Jewish leadership gathered to plan their final strategy. Eban said he was dispatched to the Barclay Hotel to meet with the first speaker of the day, Thor Thors of Iceland. He needed to ensure that the session would open with a strong speech decrying any further delays.

"I pointed out his responsibilities," said Eban. "He was absolutely with me. He said he had never dreamt that a small country like Iceland would have a decisive role to play in a major international decision."

"It was a very strange idea. 'What the hell am I doing here?'" Eban recalled thinking as he left Thors' room. "Iceland deciding my people's fate? And it did."

Thousands of visitors crowded around the gray building in Flushing Meadow hoping for one of the thousand seats in the gallery. Every available U.N. guard and city policeman was mobilized to control the mobs in the corridors, the aisles and even the press section.

Just after 4 p.m., Thors stood before the Assembly. "He demanded a decision and no more procrastination," said Eban. "At that moment I had the feeling we were pretty well home."

At 5:30 General Assembly President Oswaldo Aranha began the roll-call vote on the partition of Palestine.

Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia. As he went down the alphabet, the silence deepened. "France," he called. "Oui," answered Alexandre Parodi, the ambassador. The hall erupted

with applause. Venezuela, Yemen, Yugoslavia.

"Partition is approved 33 votes to 13, with 10 abstentions," Aranha announced.

The implications of their decision were driven home 167 days later. On the 5th of Iyar, 5708 (May 15, 1948) according to the Jewish lunar calendar, Israel declared its independence. The next day the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria invaded.

The conflict was inevitable, the diplomats agreed. "Palestine has been promised too many times to too many people," Ignatieff says today.

"I've had an Arab prime minister read to me from the Koran and I've had a Jewish prime minister read to me from the books of Moses," Rusk explains. "I could not sit there and tell them, 'No, don't give me that stuff.' The feelings on both sides are so deep and so bitter that it will be a long time before we find a solution." ■

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Quirks of fate helped establish Israel

Participants remember vote on anniversary

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The Jews cheered, the Haitian ambassador wept and the Arab delegates stormed out.

As more than 300 reporters fought for phones to broadcast the news, Amir Adél Arslan of Syria rose to respond to the U.N. vote establishing a Jewish state in Palestine.

"My country will never recognize such a decision," said Arslan, Syria's delegate to the United Nations.

As Israel celebrates its 40th anniversary on April 22, those consequences still loom over the young state and the diplomats whose momentous decision of Nov. 29, 1947, led to the country's creation.

"Everybody hoped that the General Assembly would be able to straighten things out peacefully, that the Jews and Arabs would find a modus vivendi," said Hermod Lannung, then a member of the Danish delegation. "But things have worked out much worse than we ever anticipated."

Lannung, 93, is one of the few participants of the 1947 General Assembly who is still alive. In a recent series of interviews he and six other survivors scattered throughout the world unveiled how Israel's creation stemmed from a series of quirks of fate, as much as from months of diplomacy.

Key delegates missed votes because they were eating dinner, Thanksgiving Day forced a postponement of the decision, a coup deposed a government friendly to the Arabs and a royal wedding distracted the attention of one head of state.

At stake was the future of the 1 million Arabs and 700,000 Jews living in Palestine.

England had seized control over the region in 1920 after the defeat of the Turks in World War I, with the col-



The first Jewish refugees arrive in Haifa, Israel in May, 1948, ending their journey to the promised land. Israel turns 40 this week, beset by

rebellion among Palestinians who have spent more than half that time under occupation and a wrenching debate on the nation's future.

lapse of the Ottoman Empire. Over the next 25 years Britain maintained an uneasy balance between Arab nationalism and the increasing desire of Jews to return to their historic homeland.

The balance was tipped after World War II when survivors of the Holocaust demanded a haven from persecution. The ancient dream of a Jewish state in Palestine was rekindled. But it was thwarted by Arab insistence that Jewish immigration be limited. Caught between two immovable forces, Britain turned the Palestine question over to the newly formed United Nations.

"The British took the very comfortable view that they would accept any agreement that was acceptable both to the Arabs and to the Jews," recalled former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, 79, then a member of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations. "So they let the U.N. fight it out."

The fight lasted seven months. The Jews demanded that Palestine be partitioned into separate Jewish and Arab states.

"The Arab objective was to save Palestine from partition," said Mohamed Fadhil Jamali, 82, former Iraqi foreign minister and U.N. delegate. "We wanted to preserve it as an

independent country where all inhabitants regardless of race or religion had equal rights."

Neither side could prevail without the support of a two-thirds majority of the United Nations. World leaders worked to forge a compromise. England and France warned the Jews that they could not win a military conflict. But Jewish leaders disagreed with their assessment, explained Abba Eban, 73, a former foreign minister of Israel. "The trouble with the Egyptian army is that the officers are too fat and the soldiers are too thin," he said at the time.

Unable to budge either side, diplo-

mats threw up their hands in exasperation. "Why can't the Jews and Arabs just settle this in a true Christian fashion?" said Warren Austin, head of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations. "In the official records it says 'a true brotherly spirit,'" noted Per Federspiel, a Danish representative to the United Nations. "But I heard it. He really did say 'Christian fashion.'"

The battle between the Arabs and the Jews was not confined to the floor of the former ice-skating rink in Flushing Meadow, N.Y., where the

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Israel's prime ministers



David Ben-Gurion
1948-1954, 1955-63



Moshe Sharett
1954-55



Levi Eshkol
1963-69



Golda Meir
1969-1974



Yitzhak Rabin
1974-77



Menachem Begin
1977-83



Shimon Peres
1984-86



Yitzhak Shamir
1983-84, since 1986