

**U.S. Government's Future Position on Palestine, Memorandum, George Kennan, Director of the Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State
(24 February 1948)**

Kennan, George. "Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning George Kennan to the U.S. Secretary of State." Department of State, FRUS. The Near East and Africa. Vol. 5, part 2. 1947. 655-7.



Figure 1 George F. Kennan, c. 1947. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, no known restrictions)

In February 1946, George Kennan, who had served in the U.S. embassy in Moscow from 1944-1946, prepared a long private report that focused on the Soviet Union's post war political conduct. While the USSR was an ally of the U.S. during WWII, Kennan argued that its political goals were in opposition to capitalism and democracy, and that it was vital for the U.S. to engage in "firm and vigilant containment of Russia's expansive tendencies."

In March 1947, U.S. President Harry Truman announced a policy of containment, which was aimed at curbing the growth of Communist influence in the eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Greece and Turkey. Meanwhile, in the postwar Middle East the British government announced its readiness to leave Palestine, and turn control of its future over to the newly established United Nations. U.S. government officials were displeased by the prospect that the British departure would cause a vacuum in the region, and tried to persuade the

British not to open the possibility of Soviet expansion into that region as well. In November 1947, after keen discussions, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181, which called for the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, leaving Jerusalem with a special political status. Portions of the State Department did not want to endorse American support for partition, but the U.S. ultimately voted for it, as did the Soviet Union. Zionists were delighted by the UN vote that legitimized the creation of a Jewish state. Arab and Moslem states opposed the idea of partition and instead wanted one state where Arabs would be the majority. The U.S. State Department remained vexed by the reality of continued Arab-Jewish violence in Palestine and

the prospects that a two-state solution would cause a war between the sides, which might force unwanted U.S. intervention in the region.

In early 1948, the State Department tried to persuade the British not to give up their presence in Palestine and delay a two-state solution. In this context, Kennan, who was head of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, oversaw the drafting of a detailed memorandum that outlined U.S. opposition to a two-state solution. It was the State Department, led by Secretary of State George Marshall, which continued to oppose American support for the already UN-endorsed creation of a Jewish state.

The memorandum contained more than half a dozen reasons why the U.S. should not support implementation of the UN Resolution. These included (1)

potential Soviet exploitation of the differences between Arabs and Jews in Palestine; (2) a fear that the U.S. might undesirably be drawn into possible conflict to protect what was seen as the weaker Jewish community, which might in turn invite Soviet intervention on the side of Arab states, which might ultimately lead to a Soviet-U.S. confrontation; (3) the partition of Palestine would antagonize Arab leaders; (4) it would jeopardize American and western allies' access to the Suez Canal, which would endanger American access to Arab oil sources; (5) Jews in other parts of the Middle East would suffer physically because Arab countries would let out their anger against Jews resident in their countries; (6) pro-Western Arab leaders would be tossed from power, and Arabs throughout the region would resent American support for a Jewish state. These were neither positions nor outlooks that the State Department wanted the U.S. to cultivate.

Once Israel declared statehood on May 15, 1948 and the Jewish State survived an onslaught from six Arab states, the State Department by the end of June 1948 supported Israeli efforts to reach an accommodation with Arab states. At no time in 1948 does one find evidence of US Department of State correspondence for the establishment of a separate or independent Palestinian State.



Figure 2 the Suez Canal (shown here from an aerial perspective, c. 1934) was a critical shipping lane. The need to maintain open passage through the Canal was a significant foreign policy priority for the United States. (Author: Walter Mittelholzer, Public Domain –U.S.)

-Ken Stein, March 2010'

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[Washington,] February 24, 1948.

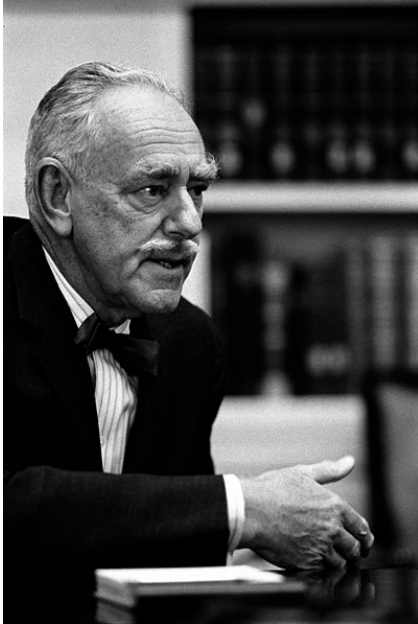


Figure 3 Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson, a close confidante of President Truman and a critical player in American foreign policymaking. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, no known restrictions)
consulted.

When Mr. Acheson first spoke to me about the Planning Staff, he said that he thought its most important function would be to try to trace the lines of development of our foreign policy as they emerged from our actions in the past, and to project them into the future, so that we could see where we were going.

During the first months of the operation of the Staff, I hesitated to undertake any such effort, because I did not feel that any of us had a broad enough view of the problems involved to lend real value to our estimate.

I have now made an effort toward a general view of the main problems of our foreign policy, and I enclose it as a Staff paper. It is far from comprehensive and doubtless contains many defects; but it is a first step toward the unified concept of foreign policy which I hope this Staff can someday help to evolve.

The paper is submitted merely for information, and does not call for approval. I made no effort to clear it around the Department, since this would have changed its whole character. For this reason, I feel that if any of the views expressed should be made the basis for action in the Department, the views of the offices concerned should first be

This document should properly have included a chapter on Latin America. I have not included such a chapter because I am not familiar with the problems of the area, and the Staff has not yet studied them. Butler, who is taking over for me in my absence, has had long experience with these problems and I hope that while I am away he and the Staff will be able to work up some recommendations for basic policy objectives with regard to the Latin American countries.

GEORGE F. KENNAN

(The paper included key regions of the world: they were United States, Britain, and Europe; European Recovery Program, Germany, The Mediterranean, Palestine and the Middle East, USSR, Far East, International Organization, Department and Foreign Service, and Conclusions note that there was no section for Latin or South America, or Africa)

V. Palestine and the Middle East

The Staff views on Palestine have been made known in a separate paper. I do not intend to recapitulate them here. But there are two background considerations of determining

importance, both for the Palestine question and for our whole position in the Middle East, which I should like to emphasize at this time.

1. *The British strategic position in the Middle East.*

We have decided in this Government that the security of the Middle East is vital to our own security. We have also decided that it would not be desirable or advantageous for us to attempt to duplicate or take over the strategic facilities now held by the British in that area. We have recognized that these facilities would be at our effective disposal anyway, in the event of war, and that to attempt to get them transferred, in the formal sense, from the British to ourselves would only raise a host of new and unnecessary problems, and would probably be generally unsuccessful.

This means that we must do what we can to support the maintenance of the British of their strategic position in that area. This does *not mean* that we must support them in every individual instance. It does *not mean* that we must back them up in cases where they have gotten themselves into a false position or where we would thereby be undertaking extravagant political commitments. It *does mean* that any policy on our part which tends to strain British relations with the Arab world and to whittle down the British position in the Arab countries is only a policy directed against ourselves and against the immediate strategic interests of our country.

2. *The direction of our own policy.*

The pressures to which this Government is now subjected are ones which impel us toward a position where we would shoulder major responsibility for the maintenance, and even the expansion, of a Jewish state in Palestine. To the extent that we move in this direction we will be operating directly counter to our major security interests in that area. For this reason, our policy in the Palestine issue should be dominated by the determination to avoid being impelled along this path.

We are now heavily and unfortunately involved in this Palestine question. We will apparently have to make certain further concessions to our past commitments and to domestic pressures.

These concessions will be dangerous ones; but they will not necessarily be catastrophic if we are thoroughly conscious of what we are doing, and if we lay our general course toward the avoidance of the possibility of the responsibility I have referred to. If we do not lay our course in that direction but drift along the lines of least resistance in the existing vortex of cross currents, our entire policy in the Middle Eastern area will unquestionably be carried in the direction of confusion, ineffectiveness, and grievous involvement in a situation to which there cannot be— from our standpoint—any happy ending.



Figure 4 Secretary of State George Marshall led the opposition to the implementation of a two-state solution within the U.S. Government. (Public Domain, U.S.)

I think it should be stated that if this Government is carried to a point in the Palestine controversy where it is required to send U.S. forces to Palestine in any manner whatsoever, or to agree either to the international recruitment of volunteers or the sending of small nation forces which would include those of Soviet satellites, then in my opinion, the whole structure of strategic and political planning which we have been building up for the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern areas would have to be re-examined and probably modified or replaced by something else. For this would then mean that we had consented to be guided, in a highly important question affecting those areas, not by national interest but by other considerations. If we tried, in the face of this fact, to continue with policy in adjacent areas motivated solely by national interest, we would be faced with a duality of purpose which would surely lead in the end to a dissipation and confusion of effort. We cannot operate with one objective in one area, and with a conflicting one next door.

If, therefore, we decide that we are obliged by past commitments or UN decision or any other consideration to take a leading part in the enforcement of Palestine of any arrangement opposed by the great majority of the inhabitants of the Middle Eastern area, we must be prepared to face the implications of this act by revising our general policy in that part of the world. And since the Middle East is vital to the present security concepts on which this Government is basing itself in its worldwide military and political planning, this would further mean a review of our entire military and political policy.

X. Conclusions

An attempt to survey the whole panorama of U.S. policy and to sketch the lines of direction along which this country is moving in its relations with the rest of the world yields little cause for complacency.

We are still faced with an extremely serious threat to our whole security in the form of the men in the Kremlin. These men are an able, shrewd and utterly ruthless group, absolutely devoid of respect for us or our institutions. They wish for nothing more than the destruction of our national strength. They operate through a political organization of unparalleled flexibility, discipline, cynicism and toughness. They command the resources of one of the world's greatest industrial and agricultural nations. Natural force, independent of our policies, may go far to absorb and eventually defeat the efforts of this group. But we cannot depend on this. Our own diplomacy has a decisive part to play in this connection. The problems involved are new to us, and we are only beginning to adjust ourselves to them. We have made some progress; but we are not yet nearly far enough advanced. Our operations in foreign affairs must attain a far higher degree of purposefulness, of economy of effort, and of disciplined co-ordination if we are to be sure of accomplishing our purposes.

In the western European area communism has suffered a momentary check; but the issue is still in the balance. This Government has as yet evolved no firm plans for helping Britain meet her basic long-term economic problem, or for fitting Germany into western Europe in a way that gives permanence of assuring the continued independence and prosperity of the other nations of western Europe.

In the Mediterranean and Middle East, we have a situation where a vigorous and collective national effort, utilizing both our political and military resources, could probably prevent the area from falling under Soviet influence and preserve it as a highly important factor in our world strategic position. But we are deeply involved, in that same area, in a situation which has no direct relation to our national security, and where the motives our involvement lie

solely in past commitments of dubious wisdom and in our attachment to the UN itself. If we do not effect a fairly radical reversal of the trend of our policy to date, we will end up either in the position of being ourselves militarily responsible for the protection of the Jewish population in Palestine against the declared hostility of the Arab world, or of sharing that responsibility with the Russians and thus assisting at their installation as one of the military powers of the area. In either case, the clarity and efficiency of a sound national policy for that area will be shattered.

In the Far East, our position is not bad; and we still have a reasonably firm grip on most of what is strategically essential to us. But our present controls are temporary ones which cannot long endure, and we have not yet worked out realistic plans for replacing them with a permanent structure. Meanwhile, our own public has been grievously misled by the sentimentalists on the significance of the area to ourselves; and we are only beginning with the long and contentious process of re-education which will be necessary before a realistic Far Eastern policy can receive the popular understanding it deserves.

In all areas of the world, we still find ourselves the victims of many of the romantic and universalistic concepts with which we emerged from the recent war. The initial build-up of the UN in U.S. public opinion was so tremendous that it is possibly true, as is frequently alleged, that we have no choice but to make it the cornerstone of our policy in this post-hostilities period. Occasionally, it has served a useful purpose. But by and large it has created more problems than it has solved, and has led to a considerable dispersal of our diplomatic effort. And in our efforts to use the UN majority for major political purposes we are playing with a dangerous weapon which may someday turn against us. This is a situation which warrants most careful study and foresight on our part.