



Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab/Israeli Conflict

John B. Judis

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A probing look at one of the most incendiary subjects of our time—the relationship between the United States and Israel

There has been more than half a century of raging conflict between Jews and Arabs—a violent, costly struggle that has had catastrophic repercussions in a critical region of the world. In *Genesis*, John B. Judis argues that, while Israelis and Palestinians must shoulder much of the blame, the United States has been the principal power outside the region since the end of World War II and as such must account for its repeated failed diplomacy efforts to resolve this enduring strife.

The fatal flaw in American policy, Judis shows, can be traced back to the Truman years. What happened between 1945 and 1949 sealed the fate of the Middle East for the remainder of the century. As a result, understanding that period holds the key to explaining almost everything that follows—right down to George W. Bush's unsuccessful and ill-conceived effort to win peace through holding elections among the Palestinians, and Barack Obama's failed attempt to bring both parties to the negotiating table. A provocative narrative history animated by a strong analytical and moral perspective, and peopled by colorful and outsized personalities and politics, *Genesis* offers a fresh look at these critical postwar years, arguing that if we can understand how this stalemate originated, we will be better positioned to help end it.

Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab/Israeli Conflict Details

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Author : John B. Judis

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From Reader Review Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab/Israeli Conflict for online ebook

Peter Goodman says

“Genesis: Truman, American Jews and the Origins of the Arab/Israeli Conflict,” by John Judis (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). Although the ultimate focus of the book is the three or four years between the end of WWII and the foundation of the state of Israel, the very important first half is devoted to the century or so before that: who lived in Palestine (the vast majority Arabs, a small number of Jews); the origin of Zionism, which was seen as a colonialist move based on European imperialism; the relations between Arab, Jew and Brit up to WWII. One core argument is that there were two strains of Zionism: one which focused entirely on creating a Jewish state and paid no attention to the previous occupants, and a second, smaller but intellectually powerful movement that understood there were other people on the land, and wanted to create a spiritual and intellectual homeland for Jews within a larger Arab population. The two sides sparred, but the Jewish state Zionists won, especially after the Balfour declaration. He considers the declaration to have been a serious mistake; among other things, it did not provide political rights to the Palestinians. There was tension with the Arabs pretty much from the beginning. The Zionists were buying the best land, their population was growing, they were throwing their weight around. But the Arabs were also completely intransigent—Judis needs to speculate intensely to see glimmers of openings for the development of any peaceful relationship. The Zionists set out to create a state within a state. Very importantly, they wanted the Jews to be economically independent, and so only hired Jewish workers, Jewish farmers, Jewish factories, etc. They shut the Arabs out. The British thought it was possible to make a peaceful settlement; the Zionists didn’t really care, as long as they created a Jewish state. He documents Arab atrocities, including the Hebron massacre among non-Zionist Jews in the city. In the period right after WWI, the Arabs in the area thought they could create a greater Syria, including Lebanon, Palestine and Syria proper. But there never was a successful, unified Palestinian or Arab movement. Within Palestine itself two clans fought with one another for control. They did not develop institutions the way the Jews did. The British put down a massive Arab rebellion from 1936-1939, which killed off most of the leaders. The Arabs turned toward the Nazis as a way to rid themselves of the British and the Zionists. Then the book turns to American Jewry and the growth of American Zionism as a movement and a political lobbying force. By the time Truman became president, American Zionists were very well organized, well funded, deeply connected within the administration. Whenever Truman attempts to create a reasonable plan with equal place for Arab and Jew, the Zionists mounted great political pressure on him. Truman, concentrating on Europe and the growing Cold War, did not focus on the Mideast much, and he vacillated, contradicted himself, gave off different messages. Time and again the Zionists made him back down. (Of course, the Arabs messed things up for themselves by refusing to participate in the debate at all. The recognition of Israel by the US was a close-run thing. Judis also makes it clear that the Israelis were much better armed and organized as a military and political force than either the Palestinians or the Arab armies. The Palestinians did strike first, but they were completely outfought by the Israelis, who took advantage of a civilian exodus to drive the Palestinians out of their lands. Judis brings the chronology up to Obama, who runs into the same problems Truman did---largely that any real attempt at an even-handed treatment of the two sides is quashed by the still-powerful American Zionist lobby. Judis does not see much hope for the future. He says over and over that the Zionists “screwed” the Arabs out of their land, that Israel is a colonial power. He does accept and argue for the continued existence of Israel as a Jewish state, but he puts a great deal of the onus of continuing problems on Israel and American Zionists. He points out that American liberals, concerned with civil rights and equality, ignored their own principles in supporting the creation of Israel and its treatment of the Palestinians.

Natalie says

3.5 stars. This book wasn't exactly what I expected, but I enjoyed it. I thought it would focus a lot more on Truman and his actions regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict, but that only made up the last third of the book. Judis provided a lot of great background on the origins of the conflict and has a short afterword on what has been done (or not, actually) between Truman's time and now. If you want an intro to the conflict that is an interesting read and fairly easy to follow, I'd recommend this book

L.A. says

This is one of the best written histories of the conflict that I've read. It's very easy to follow and a good read, although it may feel somewhat long/repetitive if you already know a fair bit about the conflict. For example, it takes a lot of chapters to get up to the time of Truman, which is where Judis has the most interesting insights.

At the same time, I am not sure that I entirely agreed with Judis' characterization of the moral wrongness of the various actors. He seems determined to also explicitly pass judgement, which on the one hand I admire for being at least forthright with his opinions, but on the other hand is somewhat frustrating because it feels like to endorse this book I have to endorse all of his his opinions. Nevertheless, I do recommend it, because I think it's an important perspective, even if it's one I don't entirely agree with.

Ultimately, this is a very good book on the history of US-Israel relations, but do not let it be your only book on the conflict.

Morris Massre says

Very insightful, but I have to admit that the author seems a bit biased towards the Palestinian cause. One thing we must all not forget is that all residents, Jew & Arab alike, were Palestinians at one time as that was the name given by the British during their mandate. Arabs just chose to keep it after Israel's independence. It's also obvious the British could have done a much better job of managing the country during the mandate.

Paul says

Somewhat lugubrious overview of the origins of the current Israeli/Palestine conflict focusing on the early days of Zionism and then the powerful lobbyists that pushed Truman, against his better judgment, to recognize the state of Israel without a plan to resettle the Arab refugees caused by the six day war. Definitely slants liberal but gives enough concrete instances where that slant is justified.

Murtaza says

This is an excellent book on the origins of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the various intellectual strands of Zionism that helped bring it about, and the initial ascent of the "Israel Lobby" that has gained so much attention in recent years.

The book first begins by describing the origins of the Zionist movement and its protagonists. Its worth noting that Zionism has never been a monolith and in the past there was a diversity of opinion regarding what the goals of Zionism should be and what view should be taken of the rights of the Palestinian Arabs. People like Asher Ginsberg and Judah Magnes were sensitive to Palestinian rights and advocated binationalism or the creation of a "Jewish Vatican" instead of a Jewish state.

Unfortunately with time these strands lost out to the violent, proudly colonialist views of Ben Gurion, Weizmann and Ze'ev Jabotinsky. It is stunning to read today how baldly they expressed their colonialism and racism in propagating their cause, and it is lays bare what an essentially colonial enterprise Zionism, in practice, has always been at its core.

The book also discussed the series of events whereby American Zionists pressured Truman into recognizing their state. Truman comes off particularly poorly, as someone who was simultaneously oblivious, passionate, and malleable to the threats and pressure of Zionists - despite his own repeatedly stated belief in an equitable solution for Palestinian Arabs. He ended up giving in to maximalist Zionist demands he didn't truly believe in because it simply became the path of least resistance; a pattern which repeats itself today.

This is a great work of history and a worthy contribution to a changing dialogue on Israel. The author makes a compelling case that Israel is the last colonial power on Earth, and while denied by its apologists today its founders practically reveled in that fact.

The blow-by-blow of Truman's interactions with Zionist groups in the run-up to the recognition of the state dragged just a little bit, but for the most part this was a page turner which I recommend without hesitation.

The Jewish Book Council says

Review by Seth J. Frantzman for the Jewish Book Council.

Socraticgadfly says

This is a solid overview of the pressures Harry Truman felt from American Zionists, and especially one substrand within them, to not only support a "homeland" for Jews in Palestine, but, to call for an end of the British League of Nations-era mandate there, to reject a federated state (whether permanent or a transitional structure) and support an immediately independent state of Israel.

As background, Judis starts with the formation of Zionist movements in Europe in the late 1800s, and distinguishes between different ones and differing philosophies. From there, he goes to the Balfour

Declaration of 1917, which tangled with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of the year before. He notes this was one of the key causes of later problems.

Another was that most Zionists either, following descriptions of the likes of Mark Twain, thought Palestine was largely unoccupied, or following the thinking of European colonial powers in Africa, thought their increasing presence would civilize, enlighten and financially better the Arabs — attitudes still prevalent today, of course.

I thought the book could have used a bit more documentation of some of the political pressures Truman felt. It does mention a third-party candidate, Jewish, winning a special election for a NYC Congressional seat, and his affiliation with Henry Wallace's Progressive movement, but I would have liked to see even more like that. Similarly, since Judis mentions later presidents, a few more detailed incidents with all of them, not just Obama, would have been nice.

But, there's nothing factually wrong here. Nor can anybody who doesn't contribute to AIPAC quarrel with the reasoning.

As for Truman? Judis doesn't use the word "fault" very often, but he does make clear that the buck didn't often stop at his desk on formation of Israel issues.

Jason Hebert says

This book presents a detailed look at the founding of Israel, the politics behind the choices made and the mistakes as well as crimes committed by all those involved. It is impossible to understand the intransigence of the current state of affairs without the knowledge of how we reached this point. This book provides you with that knowledge, and left me very pessimistic about the possibility of improvement any time soon.

Edward Newman says

An essential read--the fascinating history of the tensions over what Israel would be. A Jewish spiritual center, like the Vatican? A federation of Arab and Jewish states? Or the nation-state it became? All three had strong and serious proponents, Truman supporting the Federation option because he feared theocracy. Whether his fears were borne out is left for the reader to decide, but this book is essential history for anyone interested in how the current Middle East came to pass. Of especial interest are the sections on how inter-Arab dissension led to repeated losses of the chance for a strong Arab state--the Grand Mufti and his family were opposed by other prominent Arab families; the Jordanians wanted to simply take over Arab Palestine for themselves...recommended.

Mshelton50 says

A wonderfully informative and well-written book. Anyone interested in recent American diplomatic history and/or the Arab-Israeli conflict should read this book. John Judis has done an exhaustive amount of research, and his careful, well-reasoned argument is a welcome respite from the emotional harangues we too often hear when this subject is discussed. Cannot recommend this highly enough.

Danny says

Does a splendid job of outlining the history, but the narrative is long and boring. Learned a lot, but at a very slow pace.

Colleen says

Glad I read this thoroughly researched, detailed history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I'm definitely better informed now. However, my personal opinion did not change, it was just solidified.

David says

President Truman, preoccupied with the end of WWII and beginning of the Cold War has to also deal with the issue of a Jewish State in Palestine. Being a Jeffersonian Democrat, Truman believes no state should be comprised of only one religion. He tries to engineer a single state in which both Jews and Palestinians can live and govern side by side. Events leading up to the 1948 establishment of Israel make this impossible. This book is a well-researched and well-written account of the history of events in Palestine and the politics of both Britain and the US. No one looks good. Arabs are leaderless and against each other; Zionists ignore the Arabs living in Palestine; Britain, through the Balfour Declaration and other related moves, causes all kinds of difficulties for everyone; Truman is not the decisive "buck stops here" president he's supposed to have been. The book ends with hope that something will be done to finally bring peace to the area but even that hope seems dim. It will take leaders from the US and Europe who can withstand the political pressures from all sides to force the parties to negotiate in good faith. Like I said, the hope dims.

Samantha says

Lucidly written but not without flaws, *Genesis* explores the role of American politics in the early years of the Israel/Palestine conflict. American Zionism, it argues, was largely social and humanitarian in nature, rooted in Reform Judaism, and essentially different from its European variety. The role of Truman and American Jews (particularly notable personages such as Louis Brandeis and Abba Hillel Silver) is not really discussed until roughly 130 pages in. The first section lays out the role of the British in creating the conditions that the Americans found themselves in after WWII. Truman's vulnerability to domestic politics is cited as a major factor in successive American governments' alignment with Israel vis-a-vis its Arab inhabitants. But Judis also recognizes that the American leaders who have variously funded Israel and pushed or induced the Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table were and remain outsiders, often (deliberately or not) filtering their perceptions of the situation through the filter of domestic concerns. *Genesis* touches on issues of justice but is non-polemical. At a time when many relatively well-informed readers still take an uncritical outlook of American policies assumed to be "default" positions, a reading of relatively recent history becomes essential from time to time.

