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Origins of the 1950 Tripartite Declaration on the Middle East

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It is now some 37 years since the foreign ministers of Britain, France and the United States, meeting in London on 25 May 1950, issued the ill-fated Tripartite Declaration Regarding Security in the Middle East.¹ Former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, writing subsequently about the genesis of the Declaration, had this to say on the subject:

In the hope of introducing a restraining and stabilizing influence the three ministers in London issued a declaration on the Arab-Israeli confrontation that is not easy to explain. The available records do not help.²

In view of the fact that Acheson, perhaps more than anyone else, was the moving spirit behind the Declaration, it is somewhat surprising that he fails to recall the considerations which underlay its formulation. Perhaps the blatant failure of the Declaration in 1956 — when the United States lined up with the Soviet Union to condemn its European allies — prompted Acheson to disclaim any undue measure of responsibility for the document.³ However, the newly opened archival sources in London and Washington provide fresh insight into the critical elements which entered into the making of this historic document. The archival papers reveal a divergency of motive which goes far to explain why the Declaration never emerged as an effective instrument for restraining the tempests of war in the Middle East.

The starting point for tracing the origins of the Tripartite Declaration is Israel's growing concern in mid-1949 over the emergence of a Middle East arms race. In the early part of the year Israel and the Arab states had concluded armistice agreements which put an end to the 1948 conflict.⁴ However, to Israel's chagrin, these agreements were not, as was widely expected, harbingers of peace. In fact, voices were increasingly heard in Arab capitals calling for a 'second round' of fighting to eliminate the Jewish state. Arab governments seemed bent on obtaining mass quantities of arms which, given their offensive nature and number, could not be intended for any purpose other than a new military campaign against the state of Israel.⁵

Despite the ominous sounds emanating from Arab capitals, the United Nations acting-Mediator, Ralph Bunche, recommended to the Security Council on 21 July 1949 that, with the conclusion of the armistice agreements, the role of mediator be terminated⁶ and the restrictions imposed on the parties by Security Council resolutions be removed. Those resolutions included a prohibition on the import of arms. Already on 10 June, fully a month earlier, the Egyptian government had turned to the United States with a request for arms.⁷ On 25 July the request was repeated,⁸ and five days later Syria submitted its own shopping list of weapons.⁹

Throughout 1948, the year of Israel's struggle for independence, the
American arms embargo (reinforced by a UN resolution) had worked to Israel's disadvantage. If Israel had been unable to obtain weapons from other sources (mainly eastern) the US embargo would have critically jeopardized Israel's chances for survival in the face of the Arab invasion. Despite all its efforts in 1948 to persuade the US administration to change its policy, Israel was unsuccessful in having the embargo removed. Now, in 1949, the tables were turned and Israel was strongly opposed to the lifting of the embargo. Such a step, Israel claimed, would spur a fully-fledged arms race in the Middle East and would doom whatever prospects yet remained for a negotiated settlement between the parties. These arguments, it would appear from the record, carried considerable weight with State Department officials, who were inclined to support retention of the embargo. However, various considerations led them 'on balance' to recommend to President Truman that the United States endorse Security Council lifting of the arms restrictions. A key factor was the knowledge that Britain and France, with the authorization of the acting-Mediator, were already making arms deliveries to Arab countries, on the ground that these were needed for 'internal security'. Outlining American policy to the Security Council on 4 August 1949, Ambassador Warren Austin made the following points:

The conclusion of the armistice agreements justifies confidence in the early establishment of permanent peace in Palestine ... Therefore, the Security Council ... may appropriately bring to an end the stringent measures ... including [the arms] embargo. ... The United States does not intend to allow the export of arms which would permit a competitive arms race in the area. Export of arms to that area of the world should be strictly limited to such arms as are within the scope of legitimate security requirements. We hope that prudence will prevail not only among the parties but among all nations of the world which are in a position to supply arms and that they will pursue a policy similar to that which we intend to pursue.

In line with the last sentence in Austin's statement, President Truman subsequently approved a secret memorandum which called for 'informal discussions' with the British and French governments 'for an exchange of information and for consultations on shipments of arms to the Near Eastern area'.

Despite Austin's statement and other public pronouncements by American officials, Israeli concern was not assuaged. Two related developments heightened this concern. One was the American drive to establish a Middle-East security network. American policy-makers were intent on setting up some sort of collective security arrangement in the Middle East, either by extending NATO to the area or by erecting an independent defense network. Bolstering the region against Soviet penetration and domination entailed, as a first step, strengthening the existing military establishments of the states of the area. The second development was the British search for a resolution of the continuing crisis between Egypt and Britain over the status of the Suez Canal Zone.

It will be recalled that since 1945 the Egyptians and the British had been in dispute over the British presence in the Suez Canal base. The Egyptians, of course, had endured some form of British rule since 1882, when Gladstone first sent in troops. In 1936, in the face of the Italian threat in the Mediterranean, Egypt had signed a 20-year treaty with Great Britain which authorized the stationing of British forces in the Canal Zone. In the aftermath of the Second World War and the removal of the Italian threat, Egypt demanded the termination of the 1936 treaty and the exit of all British forces. But it was precisely at this stage, with the advent of the Cold War, that the Suez base once again became crucial to Britain's Middle East strategy. Egypt and the Canal were the fulcrum around which everything else in Middle East security revolved. The Middle East could serve as the springboard from which to launch an attack against the Soviet Union to supplement any projected attack from Western Europe. It was, therefore, essential that Britain retain at least the right to revert to the base in the case of need. In October 1946 the foreign ministers of the two countries, Bevin and Sidky, succeeded in drawing up an agreement which was a triumph of diplomacy — it restored the Canal to Egyptian sovereignty and control but integrated Egypt into British defense planning so that in the event of actual or threatened hostilities Britain would be permitted to return and make use of the base. But in the end, the agreement ran aground on the shoals of the Sudan. Egypt claimed that Sudan was an integral part of Egypt itself, and Britain, faithful to the ideals of self-determination (and, patently enough, a little self-interest too) firmly refused to concede Egyptian title to the Sudan.

The breakdown of these negotiations led Egypt to haul Britain before the Security Council, which similarly failed to satisfy Egypt's demands for control of the Sudan. No resolution emerged from the United Nations. Britain remained in uneasy control of the Canal area and insisted that its lease was confirmed by international treaty until 1956. Anglo-Egyptian relations were at their nadir.

The ignominious results of Egypt's intervention in the Palestinian conflict in 1948, oddly enough, led to an improvement in Anglo-Egyptian relations. Cairo, it should be noted, had refused to invoke the 1936 treaty even when crisis threatened. Thus, even when Israeli forces under Yigal Allon had crossed the international border in December 1948 and were poised to reach El Arish and seal off the Egyptian forces in the Gaza strip, Egypt had steadfastly refused to summon British aid. Britain unilaterally invoked the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian alliance and threatened to intervene against the Israelis. A confrontation was narrowly avoided.

In the aftermath of the Egyptian débacle in Palestine a new note was heard from Cairo. Despite the conclusion of an armistice agreement with the Israelis the Egyptians were apparently not set on concluding a peace settlement; rather, in concert with other Arab states, they seemed bent on launching a second round of the Palestine War. While previously they had spurned British overtures to create a common defense arrangement, they now began to speak of joint Anglo-Egyptian efforts to ensure the security of the region. In this manner, they apparently felt they might best obtain a fresh supply of weaponry. The new turn in policy was launched by King Farouk himself. Early in March 1949, with the ink barely dry on the 24 February Egyptian – Israeli
armistice agreement, Farouk proposed to the British Ambassador that the United Kingdom and Egypt initiate ‘technical talks regarding defense matters’. Later that month, the Chief of the British Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal W. J. Slim, visited Cairo and met with the Egyptian monarch. ‘When Slim spoke of good relations existing between British and Egyptian troops Farouk said he was aware of this and hoped relations would improve more.’ The King, moreover, took the initiative in proposing Anglo-Egyptian military talks. The British Ambassador was quite overwhelmed by the change in attitude of the Egyptian authorities. ‘He was struck by the fact that the [Egyptian] Prime Minister said flatly that he favored Anglo-Egyptian military cooperation and spoke of British bases in Egypt as a matter of course. ... He could not guess what reservations, if any, were in the mind of the Prime Minister.’ Egypt’s intentions were bared when it became clear that Cairo was intent on organizing and equipping a ‘large land army’. It fell to British representatives to try to convince the Egyptians that ‘their principal functions’ in the defense of Egypt should be ‘anti-aircraft, radar and fighter defense and waterworks’.

For their part the British were only too happy to supply the arms requested and, by this means, not only to fortify the area against Russian expansionism but also to attenuate the dispute over the British presence in Suez. In a real sense, therefore, Britain was, consciously or unconsciously, buying time in the Canal Zone through arms payments. This was the situation at the end of 1949 and early in 1950. Egypt was reconciled to the British presence in the Suez Canal area but was content to get new arms supplies. The British were seeking a means of extending their lease in the Canal Zone; and both they and the Americans were interested in organizing the Middle East into some sort of defense framework, linked or unlinked, to NATO, the European security network. The picture, as of early 1950, was neatly summed up in a Report by the US National Security Council entitled ‘United States Policy Toward Arms Shipments to the Near East’.

Top secret consultation between the Governments of the United Kingdom and the United States has revealed plans of the British Chiefs of Staff for a form of Anglo-Egyptian military partnership to assist the defense of the Near East in case of Soviet aggression. These plans call for the strengthening of the Egyptian army with British military equipment, including heavy items. It is foreseen that one of the results of this development will be the increasing dependence of the Egyptian army upon the United Kingdom for military supplies and replacements, a fact which will enhance the prospects of continued British presence in the Suez Canal zone.

The Report went on to warn that ‘it is essential, of course, that this process not involve the resumption of hostilities by the parties to the Palestine dispute’. British arms supplies would not produce such a result, it was said. ‘By direct control of spare parts and replacements, the British believe they will be able to restrain the Egyptians from military adventures not connected with the regional defense purposes for which British arms are being furnished.’

But this whole concatenation of events, with active British and American courtship of Egypt, was anything but pleasing to Israeli ears. Arab refusal to conclude a peace treaty coupled with a steady chorus for a second round deeply stirred Israeli anxiety. Talk of building up Egypt’s military potential could not fail to interest Israel. The aforementioned National Security Report frankly acknowledged the depths of Israeli concern. The Israeli government, it said, had issued ‘strong criticism’ of the US government for its failure ‘to prevent the shipments of arms to the Arab states by the United Kingdom’ which, it claimed, was ‘fostering an arms race in the Near East and encouraging the Arabs to resume hostilities’. Israel called on the United States to act to stem the arms race or at least to balance Arab acquisitions with the supply of arms to Israel. In pressing home the point, Israel utilized not only the regular diplomatic channels — Ambassador Eliahu Elath in Washington and Ambassador James G. McDonald in Tel Aviv — but resorted also to extraordinary plenipotentiaries, such as the former US Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, who was now head of the United Israel Appeal, and even President Chaim Weizmann who addressed a letter on the subject to President Truman. The usual response of the State Department was to deny that an arms race was under way. The British, it was said, were only furnishing arms to the Arab states for the limited purpose ‘of maintaining internal law and order’ and the ‘reasonable requirements of self-defense’. Moreover, the State Department said that any party to the Middle East conflict was intent on renewing hostilities. In a letter to Congressman Jacob Javits on 12 January 1950 Secretary of State Acheson assured him that if any information was received of serious preparations for a renewal of the conflict, ‘the United States Government would be quick to use all of its influence in an attempt to prevent such a tragic eventuality, both within the United Nations and outside’.

The Acheson letter to Congressman Javits prompted a vigorous comment by an unnamed Israeli official. His remarks were reported in extenso in the Palestine Post. For one thing, he asked, how it could be contended that supplies of arms for Egypt were intended strictly for the ‘purpose of maintaining internal law and order’ when these arms supplies included destroyers, submarines, dozens of Vampire and Meteor jet planes, and large quantities of the heaviest types of tanks and artillery. ‘These heavy armaments can clearly be intended only for use in external war,’ the Israeli spokesman declared. He also dismissed Acheson’s promise that the United States would use its influence to prevent a new outbreak of fighting. ‘The experience of the Arab war of aggression against Israel offers conclusive evidence that Israel cannot rely for its defense on the moral influence of other powers,’ he stated. He called on the Secretary of State to act while there was yet time to prevent a ‘calamitous arms race’. The following week Ambassador Elath met with Secretary Acheson and presented an Israeli request for the purchase of arms in the United States. Unlike the Arab states, he said, Israel could not acquire arms in the United Kingdom, and ‘the United States was the only source open’. In reply, Acheson promised to investigate the possibilities although, in principle, he was against a pattern of trying ‘to match every piece of military equipment acquired by any other country’ in the Middle East.

It was at this point in the Israeli campaign for arms to redress the imbalance
that an interesting exchange took place in Washington. At a meeting on 6 February 1950 between Ambassador Elath and Stuart Rockwell of the Near East and African desk in the State Department, the Ambassador once again stressed that the United States was the sole source of arms to redress the balance. Mr Rockwell politely inquired why this was so in view of the Israeli-Czech connection. In reply the Ambassador stated he was glad this frank question was asked. The answer was that `Israel did not wish to become too deeply entangled with the Czechs'. Past acquisitions from Czechoslovakia had been made only as `a last ditch measure in a time of desperate emergency. However, Israel knew that its future lay with the United States'.

This was the reply of a skilled diplomat. In fact, of course, Israel was by then no longer free to obtain arms from the Soviet bloc, as a result of the marked cooling-off in relations which had set in over the previous few months. For over a year, since the end of 1948, no further supplies of heavy arms had reached Israel from the East. Light arms supplies continued to reach Israel until mid-1950 and then dried up completely.) But American intelligence was apparently unaware of this situation, and thus, even as late as 28 March 1950, a National Security Council report to the President warned that `Israel, as a result of its anxieties regarding Egyptian import of heavy military equipment, might turn to the communist states for additional arms'. None the less, the National Security Report endorsed a continuation of current American policy on limited arms sales to the Middle East and supported British military aid to Egypt. In conclusion, the report advocated that the United States `remain alert for any developments unfavorably affecting the present trend from war to peace in the Near East'.

Upon receiving the report President Truman criticized it as `much too one-sided'. He felt `it would cause trouble'. In response, Secretary of State Acheson said there were three points to consider:

1. the military necessity for arming the Egyptians;
2. the fact that we were not doing what we should to arm the Israelis properly;
3. the possibility of resolving the problem `if the British, French and the United States could get non-aggression declarations from the Middle East countries which could be announced'.

The President, according to Acheson, `was much interested in this [latter] idea'. A subsequent State Department memorandum on the subject of arms summed up the Department's position by stating that, `although the strengthening of the Near East through Anglo-Arab military cooperation is the element of the greatest importance in the present situation, the relationship between the Arabs and the Israelis is also important'. Thus, while priority was to be given to building a security network centering on Egypt, the implications of such a move on the Arab-Israeli relationship could not be ignored.

Israel's concern over arms shipments to Egypt apparently alerted some members of Congress, who turned to State Department officials for an explanation of the American position. Secretary of State Dean Acheson and his aides met with some 30 Congressmen on 28 March 1950. In response to their inquiry the Secretary of State explained that there were two problems involved: One was the Arab-Israeli relationship. The other was the problem of the defense of the Eastern Mediterranean, which was a matter of gravest importance to the US and UK. ... The US and the UK were convinced that it was necessary to have in the Near East some kind of defensive forces. ... A strong Egyptian army would in this case certainly be much better than no Egyptian army. ... We had to see that Egypt could do something."

The difficulty with the British, declared Acheson, was in just the opposite direction. `We were having difficulty persuading the UK that they must help us share the responsibility of defending the free world.' He assured the Congressmen that `the Near Eastern trend was away from war towards peace'. Mr Rusk, also present at the meeting, added the point that `the Israelis had qualitative superiority over the Arabs.' It was at this juncture that Representative Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr. raised a suggestion that was to be the germ of the 1950 Tripartite Declaration. He wondered whether at the forthcoming meeting between the Foreign Ministers of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, scheduled for May 1950, `the three representatives could not frankly state the reasons why their countries were shipping arms to the Near East, and declare that their nations would take every possible step to prevent the resumption of the war in Palestine'. Acheson replied that `this was an interesting suggestion' which he would be `glad to consider'.

In the meantime, while the Truman administration was subject to pressures on the arms question and was devising means of responding to those pressures, the British were viewing the Middle East scene from a different angle. Although British strategy for the Middle East was still very much focused on Egypt and the Suez Canal, it was also directed to developing Trans-Jordan as an outpost of British security for the region. In 1948 the Foreign Office had failed in its attempts to have the Negev detached from Israel and joined to Trans-Jordan; none the less, Britain was still very much intent on consolidating King Abdullah's regime on both sides of the Jordan. At a meeting which Ernest Bevin held on 14 September 1949 with George McGehee, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Bevin said: `As the State Department knew, I had always been in favour of allowing Jordan to take over Arab Palestine and I thought that the time had come to consider how this could best be brought about'.

Thus, parallel with the interest of the State Department in a declaration on the Middle East arms race, the British Foreign Office was intent on obtaining some sort of British-American pronouncement on Middle East borders. The British aim was to shore up Abdullah's regime by ensuring international recognition of his annexation of the West Bank. Thereby, threats by the Israelis and the anti-British Mufti to Abdullah's territory might be forestalled. Moreover, Jordan would emerge as the center-piece of British planning and strategy in the Middle East. To this end, the British were anxious to extend the scope of the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty of Alliance to cover the West Bank. On 6 April 1950 the British Embassy formally proposed that a joint Anglo-American statement to deter aggression in the Near East be issued to coincide with a proclamation (expected a week later) by King
Abdullah on the constitutional union of Jordan and Arab Palestine. The Americans declined to go along with the British suggestion. Washington was not prepared to approve Abdullah’s move publicly; moreover, it was not inclined to guarantee borders, much less armistice lines, in advance of a peace treaty. Instead, it suggested that the issue of Middle East security and the arms race be made the subject of consideration at the Foreign Ministers’ meeting scheduled for 10 May. Thus, by early April 1950, Washington and London were advancing towards a common policy pronouncement on Middle East security, each for its own considerations. The Americans, wished to alleviate the ‘public excitement’ caused by arms shipments to the Middle East while the British strove to obtain a joint Anglo-American ‘guarantee of frontiers’, with the focus on the Trans-Jordanian-Israeli armistice line. When Acheson proposed to President Truman on 24 April the issuance of a joint American, British and French declaration on the sale of arms to the Middle East, the President readily consented and said that the proposed declaration would remove the objections he had voiced earlier regarding the one-sidedness of the previous State Department draft on the Middle East.

At about the same time, Bevin submitted a paper to the British Cabinet outlining several steps he proposed to take in relation to the Arab states (essentially Jordan) and Israel. ‘The only Arab ruler who has so far shown realism and willingness to come to terms with Israel is King Abdullah of Jordan,’ he stated. Moreover, the Law Officers had confirmed that the Anglo-Jordanian treaty, since the signature of the armistice agreement between Israel and Jordan, ‘applied automatically to the portions of Arab Palestine now in the occupation and control of Jordan. ... The incorporation of this part of Arab Palestine in Jordan is undoubtedly the only logical solution and the one best calculated to ensure the welfare of its inhabitants,’ he said. Abdullah was about to invite the new Jordanian Parliament, elected by the population on both sides of the Jordan, to approve the union between the Kingdom of Jordan and Arab Palestine. Recognition of this act by His Majesty’s Government, together with acknowledgement that the Anglo-Jordanian treaty applied to the whole territory would, Bevin maintained, contribute significantly to the stability of the area. ‘It would strengthen the Israel Government against expansionist opposition groups, and encourage them [force them?] to seek a settlement with Jordan on the basis of the present provisional frontier.’ Accordingly he asked the approval of the Cabinet for British recognition of the act of union. He also indicated that he would, at the same time, announce de jure recognition by Britain of the State of Israel. In conclusion, he proposed a general statement of policy to the effect that the United Kingdom would use all its influence ‘both within and outside the United Nations to prevent the use of force or threat of force by any State in the Middle East’. If the American proposal for a three-power statement on the Middle East, with the focus on arms, was intended essentially to placate Israel, the British statement, with the focus on boundaries, would seem to have been designed to restrain Israel.

The dichotomy between the American and British approaches is reflected in the revisions which the Foreign Office introduced into the draft American declaration. The British revision contains a sentence lacking in the final American version: ‘The three governments should they find that any state in the area was preparing to violate existing frontiers or armistice lines would, consistent with their obligations as members of the United Nations, immediately take action, both within and outside the United Nations, to prevent such violation.’ This sentence reflected the key focus of British concern, namely boundaries.

In the course of the discussions at London, Secretary of State Acheson, faithful to the line he had raised with the President, added an extra facet to the proposed declaration on arms. Each of the Middle East countries receiving arms would be asked to issue an assurance that it ‘does not intend to undertake any act of aggression against any other state in the Middle East’. ‘If we can announce,’ said Secretary Acheson, ‘that everyone has given us assurances re non-aggressive intentions by [a] series of unilateral declarations, these declarations would add up to something short of, but having similar effect to, a non-aggression pact.’ Thus, in addition to settling the issues of arms and borders, the proposed declaration, by eliciting commitments from states receiving arms, would constitute a regional type of non-aggression pact. In the absence of an overall peace settlement this was an attractive alternative for Washington policy-makers. Certainly, if it could be presented in this manner to the Israelis, it would help to assuage the concern of this beleaguered state.

The whole thing was portrayed, even in secret State Department memoranda, as the forerunner to an overall Middle East security network which would include Israel and the Arab states. ‘By such means,’ it was said, ‘the strategic position of the West in the Near East will be improved.’

After the British and Americans had, more or less, agreed on the text, the question arose whether the French should also be drawn in to the picture. At a meeting with the US Ambassador at large, Philip Jessup, the British Assistant Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Michael Wright, argued against involving the French. The influence of France in the Middle East, he declared, was at a ‘low ebb’ and French participation would only have a ‘weakening effect’. But the British Foreign Secretary, Bevin, decided in favour of a tripartite declaration. In this, his views coincided with those of US Secretary of State Acheson who maintained that it would be useful to include the French, since ‘they were supplying arms to Syria and this loophole should be plugged’. No doubt a further factor was the desire to avoid offending the French who would tend to look ‘amiss’ at their ‘exclusion’ from a declaration bearing on an area with which they had had traditional ties.

At the final stage in London on 18 May, therefore, Acheson invited the French Foreign Minister, M. Robert Schuman, to join his British and American counterparts in making the declaration on the Middle East a tripartite document. After consultation with Paris, Schuman readily agreed, and the Declaration was issued over the signatures of the three foreign ministers on 25 May 1950.

The dual purpose of the Declaration — to restrain the arms race and to accord recognition, if not actual guarantees, to Middle East borders or armistice lines — is aptly summed up in a Foreign Office memorandum of 5 May 1950 entitled ‘Proposed Anglo-American Statement on the Middle East’. 
Ever since the beginning of the Palestine conflict we have inclined to the view, which is strongly held by our Representatives in the Middle East, that some form of Anglo-American guarantee of the frontiers between Israel and the Arab States provides the best, and perhaps the only, prospect of a lasting settlement. We have on occasion discussed this question with the State Department, who while not dissenting from our view, have hitherto indicated that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for them to undertake any such guarantee. Recently, however, they have indicated willingness in principle to participate with us in a joint statement on policy in the Middle East which, while not constituting a guarantee of the frontiers between Israel and the Arab States, would go as far as possible in that direction. They have indicated at the same time that they attach importance to any such statement also covering the frontiers between Saudi Arabia and the Hashemite countries, with which view we agree.

2. A related question is that of arms supplies to the Middle East. The State Department, and Mr. Acheson personally, have loyally defended our deliveries of arms to the Arab States in the face of strong Zionist pressure in Congress and outside. We have of course to meet similar criticism in this country. The Americans have indicated their desire to find some formula which could be included in a joint statement on Middle East policy and which could assist both of us to meet such criticisms. 70

These were the aims of the Declaration. However, in no way was the Declaration meant to operate as a binding commitment—either from one signatory to another or from the signatories to the objects of the Declaration, namely the parties to the Arab—Israeli dispute. All of this emerges from a secret Foreign Office memorandum summarising up the strictly limited legal implications of the Declaration.

The following is the United Kingdom interpretation of the last sentence of the draft tripartite statement:

(a) All the obligations arising out of this simultaneous declaration of policy are moral obligations. It is not a legal international engagement which would have to be registered with the United Nations under Article 102 of the Charter.

(b) None of the three Governments is by this statement giving any undertaking of any character towards any Government except the other two parties to the statement. In particular, no undertaking of any character is thereby given towards Israel or any of the Arab States.

(c) The statement does imply that, when any one of the three Governments considers that a situation has arisen where, under the statement, some action should be taken, it may call upon the other two Governments to consult with regard to the matter. If such consultation results in the three Governments agreeing (i) that a situation calling for action under the statement has arisen, and (ii) what action each of the three Governments should take in the circumstances, then it is implied that each of the three Governments will act in accordance with what was agreed as a result of this consultation.

(d) If the consultation referred to in (c) above does not lead to agreement on both (i) and (ii), each of the three Governments is free to take whatever action it considers appropriate or not to take any action at all.

(e) Each of the three Governments also remains free, if it considers it necessary, to act immediately in advance of the consultation or before agreement is reached in the process of consultation. 71

Since the Declaration was not intended to have anything more than hortatory effect, it can be well appreciated why its influence was so minimal. The slightest cause of discord between the signatories or the slightest crisis in the Middle East was sufficient to demonstrate how vacuous the Declaration really was. For the time it was issued (May 1950) it served its purpose: it allowed the Truman administration to demonstrate that it was doing something about the Middle East arms race and it allowed the British to bolster Abdullah’s regime by gaining a modicum of international recognition and support for the expanded Kingdom of Jordan. 72 But, like so many other marriages of convenience, once the convenience disappeared, the marriage fell apart.

NOTES


4. See the report dated 6 July 1949, by the US Consul at Jerusalem, William Burdett: ‘Arab efforts are now turning to relatively long range plans for the time when it will be possible to resume the war against Israel. ... The Arabs have no immediate intention of resuming hostilities, but the movement is towards a day in the future when a successful war will be possible instead of a day in the future when real cooperation with Israel will be possible’. Foreign Relations of the United States 1949, Vol. 5, The Near East, South Asia and Africa (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 1204. (Hereinafter FRUS 1949.) See also the letter of President Chaim Weizmann to President Truman, dated 24 June 1949, ibid., p. 1172. According to Weizmann, ‘the Arab States are making no secret of their intention of resuming war whenever they are ready for it. ... Not a week passes without our being warned ... of the coming second round. The Arab States are rearming on a big scale, building up modern armament industries and purchasing the most deadly modern weapons.’

5. FRUS 1949, pp. 1240–41.

6. Ibid., p. 1115. In presenting the request, the Egyptian ambassador pointed out that no serious
fighting had occurred for six months. The Arab states, he declared, 'have no aggressive intentions'.

Subsequently, American officials endeavoured (unsuccessfully) to make use of this statement to induce Egypt to rescind the blockade it maintained on Israeli-bound cargo ships through the Suez Canal. It was inconsistent, the Americans argued, to request arms, on the ground that the state of war had ended, and at the same time to enforce a blockade, a manifestly belligerent act. See, in this regard, ibid., pp. 148, 1253–54, 1304, 1323, 1328, 1368, and 1493.

8. Ibid., p. 1249.
9. Ibid., p. 1271.
11. See the remarks of Ambassador Elihu Eilath to Under Secretary of State Dean Rusk on 28 July 1949, FRUS 1949, p. 1263. See also the memorandum by Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, 1 August 1949, ibid., p. 1272, and the Rusk memorandum, 3 August 1949, ibid., p. 1279.
12. See the views of Ambassador Warren Austin and of his deputy, John C. Ross, ibid., pp. 1270–71; see also the Rusk memorandum, ibid., p. 1278.
13. Ibid., p. 1279.
14. Ibid. In advising President Truman to endorse removal of the arms embargo, Secretary Acheson suggested that if there was need to provide Israel with 'reassurance' against an arms race, 'we might join with others in expressing the same desire and thereafter take such diplomatic steps as were available to prevent this from occurring. The President thought that this was a sound view' (p. 128).
15. Ibid., pp. 1283–84.
16. Ibid., p. 1342.
17. See the memorandum of Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, 16 May 1949, ibid., p. 1011, and the memorandum prepared in the State Department, 13 June 1949, ibid., pp. 31–45; but cf. ibid., p. 169. See also the Paper on Middle East Policy presented to the Cabinet by Foreign Secretary Bevin in August 1949. Under the sub-heading 'Middle East Pact' it was said: 'In order to be assured of ... facilities, our ultimate object must be to see the whole Middle East area covered by a system of defence agreements. Thought is being given to the desirability of a general Middle East Pact complementary to the Atlantic Pact.' CP (49)183, 25 August 1949, p. 5. See also FRUS 1950, pp. 152 ff.
20. FRUS 1949, p. 198.
21. Ibid., p. 199.
22. Ibid., n. 3.
24. Ibid., p. 219, n. 1.
25. FRUS 1950, pp. 131–5, and see ibid., pp. 163–6.
26. Ibid., p. 132. In a conversation on 10 March 1950, Secretary Acheson told Senator Herbert Lehman of New York, 'it was essential that the British stay in the Canal area as long as possible, and ... if the Egyptians felt that they had more military responsibility in partnership with the British for the defense of the Canal, they could be counted upon to be more effective in the military sense'. Ibid., p. 801.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., pp. 672–3 and 742–5.
30. Ibid., p. 658.
32. Ibid., p. 685.
34. Ibid., pp. 712–15. Israel’s list of arms requests was formally submitted on 13 February 1950. See ibid., p. 737, n. 2. The State Department publicized the Israeli request on 27 February. See ibid., p. 759. For its formal non-committal, albeit sympathetic, reply, see ibid., p. 773.
35. Ibid., pp. 725–6.
37. FRUS 1950, p. 133.
38. Ibid., p. 135. The final paragraph was added to the Report at the suggestion of the State Department consultant over the objections of the Department of Defense and the National Security Resources Board. Ibid., p. 134.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 137.
42. Ibid., pp. 125–30.
43. Ibid., p. 127.
44. Ibid., p. 130.
45. Ibid., pp. 129–30. The same day, 28 March 1950, Dr Nahum Goldmann, Jewish Agency representative in the United States, also met Secretary Acheson and raised the possibility of a Great Power declaration ‘concerning the territorial integrity of the Near Eastern states’. Goldmann went on to say that ‘he understood that the U.S. could not guarantee frontiers, but perhaps there was some other approach which might be effective’. FRUS 1950, p. 820. Given both the timing and the similarity in the Roosevelt and Goldmann suggestions, one wonders whether the two were entirely unconnected. The Biblical account of Bathsheba’s request receiving the endorsement of Nathan the Prophet, as related in Kings I, comes readily to mind.
46. The name Trans-Jordan was changed to Jordan when King Abdullah, on 24 April 1950, approved the action of his parliament that day, uniting both banks of the Jordan river into the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.
47. See, in this connection, FRUS 1948, pp. 1550, 1544, 1549, 1554 and 1571. See also Louis, The British Empire, pp. 550–63.
48. FO371/75287/E11158. In a top secret Foreign Office minute, dated 12 May 1949, it was stated: ‘We informed King Abdullah in July 1948 that in our view the most logical decision on the future of the Arab parts of Palestine would be their incorporation in the Kingdom of Transjordan. We added that this would automatically mean that the integrity of his new territory would be guaranteed by H.M.G. under the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty equally with the territory of his present Kingdom’. FO371/75287/E6695. McGeorge responded to Bevin’s suggestion by arguing that the time was not yet ripe.
49. In a memorandum dated 6 October 1948, the British Chiefs of Staff concluded: ‘There would be very great advantage, from an operational point of view, in locating a proportion of our peacetime Middle East land and tactical air forces in the ... area of Greater Transjordan.’ Df5.6/7.3P/461080(T.O. of R.) Later, on 2 May 1949, in a top secret memorandum entitled ‘Armed Assistance to Transjordan’, it was said: ‘The question to decide was whether, and if so, when, an official announcement to this effect should be made, [regarding the extension of the Anglo-Transjordan treaty to the West Bank] in order to prevent further territorial demands by the Jews.’ FO 371/75287.
50. See FRUS 1950, pp. 139 and 844–7. Mr. Burrows, Counsellor at the British Embassy, stressed that it was urgent ‘to strengthen Jordan Government efforts against the activities of the Mufti and his followers’. Ibid., p. 846.
51. Although the Department believes the eventual incorporation of Arab Palestine in Jordan to be desirable and that the British, the Departmental representatives were doubtful that the U.S. would wish to make a public declaration of approval of the Union at the present time’ (i.e. before the conclusion of a Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty). Ibid., p. 140. Annexation, it was thought, might appropriately take place ‘in the context of a final peace settlement’. Ibid., p. 870. See also ibid., pp. 844 and 855. In particular, US officials were doubtful whether extension of the Anglo-Jordan treaty to Arab Palestine would not contravene the armistice agreement. Ibid., p. 845.
52. Ibid., p. 158.
53. Ibid., p. 139. In the matter of arms sales to the Middle East the British were primarily concerned that they not become the exclusive suppliers to the Arabs, with the Americans the sole suppliers to the Israelis. This would be "a most undesirable situation". See, in this regard, Stimson, 'The 1948 American Embargo', pp. 510–12.

54. FRUS 1950, p. 138, n. 3.

55. C.P. (50) 78, 20 April 1950.

56. In discussion with State Department officials Burrows explained the purpose of the proposed statement in Parliament: "It was essential for the U.K. to let the Near Eastern states know exactly where it stood concerning Arab Palestine". FRUS 1950, p. 870. At the same time (24 April) British Foreign Office officials in London told the US Embassy officers that the 'time had come to back Abdullah against the Arab League' and that 'extension of the treaty to Israel's border should be the best assurance to the Arabs against the possibility of Israeli expansion'. Ibid., n. 1. Recognition of annexation, however, did not extend "to the portion of Jerusalem... occupied by Jordan" since this was "suspended from Internationalization... under the terms of the United Nations Assembly resolution of 9th December 1949".

57. De jure recognition of Israel also extended to Israeli-occupied Jerusalem.

58. This final paragraph on Middle East security was ultimately dropped from the statement made to Parliament. The State Department had, in the interim, indicated that it was intent on endorsing a tripartite declaration on Middle East security and requested that no unilateral British statement be made at this time. The British Cabinet readily assented. See FRUS 1950, pp. 875–6 and n. 1; FO371/81910/E1023/92, 23 May 1950.

59. FRUS 1950, p. 146. The sentence had been included in an earlier American draft but, apparently at the insistence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had been eliminated. See ibid., pp. 140–41 and n. 2.

60. Ibid., p. 161.

61. Ibid., p. 159.

62. Ibid., p. 164. See also FO371/81910/E1023. In a preliminary meeting in London on 11 May 1950, Bevin told Acheson that there was a 'risk that states in the area would turn to U.S.S.R. and satellites for arms if they could not get them from us'. FRUS 1950, p. 160.

63. See ibid., p. 160, n. 4.

64. Ibid., p. 143 and see FO371/81910/E1023/89.

65. FO371/81910/E1023/89.


67. FO371/81910/E1023/89.

68. FRUS 1950, p. 168, n. 3.

69. The full text, reprinted at ibid., pp. 167–8, is as follows:

1. The three governments recognize that the Arab states and Israel all need to maintain a certain level of armed forces for the purposes of assuring their internal security and their legitimate self-defense and to permit them to play their part in the defense of the area as a whole. All applications for arms or war material for these countries will be considered in the light of these principles. In this connection the three governments wish to recall and reaffirm the terms of the statements made by their representatives on the Security Council on 4th August, 1949, in which they declared their opposition to the development of an arms race between the Arab states and Israel.

2. The three governments declare that assurances have been received from all the states in question, to which they permit arms to be supplied from their countries, that the purchasing state does not intend to undertake any act of aggression against any other state. Similar assurances will be requested from any other state in the area to which they permit arms to be supplied in the future.

3. The three governments take this opportunity of declaring their deep interest in and their desire to promote the establishment and maintenance of peace and stability in the area and the unalterable opposition to the use of force or threat of force between any of the states in that area. The three governments, should they find that any of these states was preparing to violate frontiers or armistice lines, would, consistently with their obligations as members of the United Nations, immediately take action, both within and outside the United Nations, to prevent such violation.

70. FO371/81910/E1023/89.