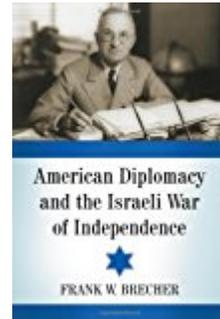




Frank W. Brecher. *American Diplomacy and the Israeli War of Independence*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2013. 212 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7426-4.



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Published on H-War (May, 2014)

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The Evolution of U.S. Foreign Policy during the Israeli War of Independence

Frank W. Brecher's *American Diplomacy and the Israeli War of Independence* is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Israeli War of Independence. In this book, Brecher—a diplomatic historian and career foreign service officer—seeks to link the continuities and changes within U.S. diplomatic approaches regarding the 1948 war to Cold War politics and, most important, to U.S. domestic politics and institutional and personal conflicts within the Truman administration. Despite several problems with his presentation style, Brecher succeeds in this goal; and in doing so, he provides interesting insights into the dynamics that shape international history, while also providing support to some revisionist interpretations of Israeli history.

A particular strength of this book is its use of recently released primary source material. Brecher's analysis draws on diaries and diplomatic cables from key players who shaped U.S. policy in the lead-up to and during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. These key players include President Harry Truman, James G. McDonald (Truman's appointed representative to Israel), and vari-

ous State Department officials, including Robert Lovett (undersecretary of state). These documents reveal that Truman's policies toward the conflict—first with support for the 1947 Partition Plan, and, second, for support of the Bernadotte Plan in mid- to late 1948—represented negotiation between competing international and domestic concerns and the interests of the individual actors who took part in forming and implementing Truman's policies.

Influencing Truman's approach to the 1948 war, Brecher notes, were strategic concerns regarding Soviet influence in the Middle East and regional stability. The foremost goal for the Truman administration, throughout this war, was ensuring that the conflict ended quickly and remained confined to Palestine. At the same time, Truman and his representatives in the State Department wanted to ensure that the new status quo did not favor the Soviets. For instance, Truman and the State Department wanted to ensure that the United States appeared to favor neither the Arabs nor the Israelis in the negotiations. Appearing to favor one side risked driving them to

Soviets for political support. This dynamic helps explain why Truman was so adamant in pressuring the Israelis to adhere to the terms of the Partition Plan and, later, the Bernadotte Plan.

Despite his attempts to pressure Israel into accepting his preferred policies, Truman lacked the ability to force the Israelis to comply. As Brecher shows throughout the book, Truman faced considerable domestic political constraints that prevented him from expanding his pressure beyond strongly worded letters and the withholding of aid money. These political constraints emanated from the deep support Israel enjoyed within Truman's Democratic Party and from influential private citizens.

Although much of Brecher's analysis focuses on political pressures shaping U.S. diplomatic approaches, he also gives credit to the ability of individuals to shape foreign policy. Truman, for instance, had deep concerns about the plight of Palestinians driven from their homes during the war. These humanitarian concerns helped shape his decision to pressure Israel to accept the right of return, even though it was clear that Israelis would not agree to these terms, given security concerns. Other individuals who exerted major influence on U.S. policy were important figures within the Democratic Party, like Eleanor Roosevelt and McDonald, who was a stronger supporter of Israel and used his access to the president to help moderate Truman's approaches toward Israel. Brecher states that McDonald's voice acted as an effective counterweight to individuals within the State Department who pushed for a tougher approach toward Israel.

Ultimately, these competing pressures, Brecher argues, caused the Truman administration to pursue an unrealistic diplomatic approach to the 1948 war. Truman's desire to appear neutral failed, given that the Arabs recognized that the Israelis had strong support within the United States. His attempts to pressure Israel also failed because Israel was willing to tolerate the minor difficulties imposed on it by the United States to protect its security gains. Once the conflict died down by 1950, however, the Truman administration quietly de-escalated its pressure on the Israelis, as the new status quo seemed

to produce a stable balance of power in the region that served U.S. interests.

To students of international history, this book provides an excellent example showing that states are not monolithic entities; instead, their policies in war and peace are shaped by a multitude of variables, be it domestic, international, or even the emotions of individual actors. These variables, however, can undermine the ability of states to produce rational policies, as evidenced by the Truman administration's unrealistic policy approaches to the 1948 war. This book also provides further evidence to revisionist interpretations of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Brecher's account demonstrates that Israel was not in a position of weakness during the 1948 war. Israel, in fact, enjoyed numerous benefits over its Arab adversaries in that the United States more closely aligned itself with its interests, which constrained the United Nations from exerting real pressure on the provisional government of Israel to agree to its policies.

Despite its many strengths, this book suffers from problems with its presentation style. In chapter 3, Brecher presents nearly twelve pages of U.S. diplomatic logs that, although interesting, interrupt his narrative flow and threaten to limit the accessibility of this book to more casual readers. He returns to similar techniques throughout the book. Presenting these documents in this manner helps the reader follow the progress of U.S. policymaking, but it may have been more advisable to summarize these documents in the body of the book and present them in their entirety in appendices.

In the end, this book will be valuable to students of U.S. diplomatic history and modern Israeli history. It is also a valuable book to anyone interested in how foreign policy forms and evolves in response to a variety of external and internal pressures. Although his presentation style may drive away casual readers, Brecher's extensive use of primary source documents and his deep knowledge of the intricacies of the U.S. State Department enables him to unravel and explain the story of how and why U.S. foreign policy evolved in the manner that it did during the Israeli War of Independence.

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Citation: Andrew L. Chadwick. Review of Brecher, Frank W., *American Diplomacy and the Israeli War of Independence*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2014.

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