

# **THE MISSION OF COUNT FOLKE BERNADOTTE, A COSTLY LESSON IN MISPERCEPTIONS**

**Professor Sune Persson**

Associate Professor (docent) in Political Science, University of Göteborg

**ROYAL UNITED SERVICES INSTITUTE, LONDON, 2 JUNE 2004**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and a great honour for me to be here to give the first Folke Bernadotte Lecture. It is particularly a great honour for me to take part in the commemoration of UN Peacekeepers. When I was young and maybe also innocent I also was a UN peacekeeper. I was in the Gaza Strip and in the Sinai in 1959 and 1960 and I saw two of my comrades in the Swedish battalion killed during those six short months. So I am glad to have the opportunity to honour them. Also you should know that the first UN officer to be killed in service was a Norwegian, Ole Helge Bakke. He was killed in Palestine in the summer of 1948, which brings me to the start point of my lecture.

That start point was of course UN Resolution 181 of 29<sup>th</sup> November 1947, the famous, or maybe infamous, Partition Resolution partitioning Palestine into two states, a Jewish state comprising something like 55% or 56% of Palestine (keep the numbers in mind) and an Arab state comprising somewhat less than 44%. The city of Jerusalem, plus surroundings, including Bethlehem, was to be a *corpus separatum* under some kind of international regime and also to become demilitarised. Also, *nota bene*, Palestine was to be an economic union. These two states would have common customs, tariffs, currency, communications, telephone, telegraph systems etc. You know the story that follows. The following day, 30<sup>th</sup> November, the civil war starts and the Palestinian Arab leadership, Jamal al-Husayni, in the Security Council, proudly announces that the Arabs will not accept the Partition Resolution. The UN sends a new mission to Palestine, the United Nations Palestine Commission. These five, unhappy and lonely pilgrims arrive in Palestine and very shortly realise that they would have no power whatsoever to implement the Partition Resolution, being boycotted by the Arabs and being neglected by the British, to put it mildly; the British treated United Nations personnel with great contempt during these months. The Palestine Commission reported back to the Security Council in February 1948, asking it to send military personnel to Palestine to enforce the Partition Resolution. The Security Council refused to do so, the Americans saying that they would not enforce the Partition Resolution which had also been the British standpoint all the time.

I would like to go somewhat into detail on this as this will be seen to mar the whole Bernadotte mission that followed. Why do the Americans and why do the British not want to commit military personnel to Palestine? There are three main reasons. Firstly the Cold War. The Americans and the British are facing a dramatic situation in Europe over Germany. They are threatened with a Third World War against the Soviet Union. They are short of troops, especially the Americans, so for them and for the British, Palestine is a marginal issue, a side show. They do not want to commit any troops to Palestine. Secondly, the Americans and the British realise that if there is to be a Security Council decision on sending military forces to Palestine, it will necessarily include Soviet forces. To have Soviet forces in Palestine, in the centre of the Middle East, is a prospect that is not very pleasant for the Americans and for the

British. Thirdly, 1948 is a year of the Presidential elections in the United States. President Truman is very unpopular and he is facing an uphill struggle against the Republican candidate. In all opinion polls, the Republican candidate is the heavy favourite. And to have American soldiers being killed in Palestine in the summer of 1948 during the electoral campaign is not good for President Truman. So there is a “No” from the Americans.

Then, as you know, there follows the end of the British Mandate between the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> May. We have the Proclamation of the State of Israel on the 14<sup>th</sup> May and we have the non-Proclamation of the State of Arab Palestine. Now this is a very interesting point. Why do the Arabs not declare their State according to the Partition Resolution? And why does the Palestinian leadership, until this day, like Hamlet, ask ‘are we to be a Palestinian state’ or ‘are we not to be a Palestinian state’? Instead we have the first Palestinian War with the surrounding Arab states of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Trans-Jordan and Iraq attacking the state of Israel. What does the Security Council do then? For the first time in the history of the United Nations, the Security Council appoints a mediator and his official title is to be United Nations Mediator in Palestine. This will be the first time in its history that the United Nations intervenes directly in a political conflict in appointing a mediator to solve that conflict. It will also be the last time and that is the continuing lesson of the fate of Count Bernadotte.

Bernadotte was appointed by UN General Assembly Resolution 186 of May 14<sup>th</sup> and I will quote his mandate which is important. It is a long resolution but his main tasks are as follows. Firstly, I quote, “To use his good offices with the local ..... authorities in Palestine ..... to promote a peaceful adjustment of the future situation in Palestine”. I will call that the political task of Count Bernadotte. Secondly, I quote, “To cooperate with the Truce Commission” that had been appointed earlier by the Security Council; that will be his military task, to establish a truce in Palestine. Thirdly, I quote, “To invite, ..... with a view to the promotion of the welfare of the inhabitants of Palestine, the assistance and co-operation of appropriate specialised agencies of the United Nations ..... and of the International Red Cross”. I will call that his humanitarian task. As you can see, this mandate is a very broad one and it begets the mediator, Count Bernadotte of Sweden, a very large operational mandate. And that forms the foundation of his work during the few months in the summer of 1948 when he achieves a kind of pivotal political role in Palestine. It also means that the existing UN bodies, the Palestine Commission, the Truce Commission and others fade away into the background with Bernadotte taking central stage in Palestine. *Nota bene* in the Resolution, the United Nations gives no resources whatsoever to the mediator. He has wide responsibilities but he receives no resources whatsoever to implement them.

That Resolution was proposed by the British and drafted by the Americans but the Soviet Union who saw no need of a UN mediator voted No. The Arab states abstained. So you see that from this very first stage, the Cold War intervenes in his mission. He is supported by the British, he is supported by the Americans and he is opposed by the Soviet Union. The Arabs are neutral. They do not support him but they do not reject him either. The state of Israel, of course, is not yet a member of the United Nations.

If we now examine this Resolution, we can say, of course, that his most important task, the over-arching task, is the political one, to establish a peaceful settlement in Palestine. And that is also the reason why he takes central stage during the summer of 1948. And that is also the reason why he was killed. When, during subsequent years and even until today, of those judging or trying to evaluate the mission of Count Bernadotte, many will be fairly negative.

Some say that he was a naïve mediator; some say that he was amateurish and, to put it simply, he was a failure. Indeed, there was no peaceful settlement. For myself, the basis for these fairly negative judgments is that they concentrate upon his political task and overlook his other tasks, the Truce and the humanitarian objectives. I would like to go firstly into these two tasks and then return to the political objective.

When Bernadotte came to the Middle East, initially to Cairo on the 28<sup>th</sup> May, he was met with great scepticism. The Palestine problem had remained unsolved for many years. The British had not been able to solve it. The United Nations had not been able to solve it. So, what should this optimistic, naïve Swede be expected to achieve? However, the scepticism was changed fairly quickly into admiration. As it turned out, Bernadotte started a very intense shuttle diplomacy and he was able to arrange a truce, declared on the 11<sup>th</sup> June. It was a four-week truce and while this had been suggested by the Security Council and the warring parties had seen it convenient to agree the truce, it was Bernadotte who was able to negotiate it. Ralph Bunche, his closest collaborator, wrote in his diary that only he, Count Bernadotte, could have done it. And I think that is correct. But, as you know, the truce broke down and there was more fighting. Bernadotte dashed from Palestine, flying to New York to appear before the Security Council where he made a vigorous speech stating that the Security Council should take stronger measures. It did so. It ordered the new truce, the first time in the history of the United Nations that the Security Council ordered a truce. Further, it threatened that if the truce was not accepted, the United Nations would invoke Chapter 7 of the Charter, another first for the UN. This second truce was an indefinite truce. It had no time limits and it would be effective until the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question.

The Security Council also now mandated the Mediator to supervise the truce. So Count Bernadotte built from scratch what I think was to be the first peacekeeping operation in the history of the United Nations although the term “peacekeeping” was not known in 1948. He built the Truce Supervision Organisation and, during the first truce, roughly 1400 men tried to supervise it. Of these, about 1100 were American, the balance being French and Belgian and 5 Swedish officers. One of these, Colonel Bonde, became the first Chief of Staff of the Truce Supervision.

During the second truce, a similar organisation, the Central Truce Supervision Board, was established to handle the complaints of violations of the truces. When this truce began, roughly 1,900 men were sent to Palestine. Of these, about 1400 were American and again the rest being French and Belgian and 10 Swedish officers. One of the Swedes, General Lundström, became the first chief of staff. So Count Bernadotte should be credited for building the first UN peacekeeping mission which was to become the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO). UNTSO, based in Jerusalem, was formally established in 1949, and from then on became one of the most important UN instruments in the Middle East. But the structures were already there in 1948 and they were fairly successful. In September 1948, before the death of Bernadotte, they had demarcated roughly 380km of the 400km of front lines. They had demarcated a no-mans-land and they had demarcated the demilitarised zones in Jerusalem; also, the Mount Scopus enclave and the Government House enclave. Up until the death of Count Bernadotte, there were numerous violations, in fact hundreds, but there were no major violations and the truces were kept. The Israeli military offensives that destroyed the truces were carried out after the death of Bernadotte and that was no coincidence.

I turn now to the welfare of the inhabitants of Palestine. Count Bernadotte, who had seen immense suffering as the Head of the Swedish Red Cross at the end of the Second World War and who had seen the German concentration camps from the inside and the immense suffering in Europe after 1945, became extremely appalled by the plight of Palestinian refugees. As early as his first report of 27<sup>th</sup> June, he recommended “The right of residents of Palestine ..... to return to their homes without restriction and to regain accession of their property”. That also featured in his second plan, the Progress Report, the origin of the famous Resolution 194 of December 1948, giving refugees the right to return to their homes. As you know, that remains one of the fundamental demands of the Palestinian leadership.

He also took numerous practical steps, using his immense network of contacts in the International Red Cross and in other humanitarian organisations. So, already, by the summer of 1948, he was able to organise relief for Palestinian refugees. By doing this, he laid the foundation for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) which is still the body responsible for Palestinian refugees.

So, the two points I want to make here are that we tend, or the world community tends to forget what Bernadotte actually did achieve; the truces, the building of the Truce Supervision Organisation and organising relief for Palestinian refugees.

Now let us look on his political plans. There are two plans; the first was published on the 27<sup>th</sup> June when he suggested that Palestine should be defined as the 1922 British mandatory Palestine, that is including Trans Jordan; and that within this Palestine, there should be a union of two member states, one Jewish and one Arab with limitations on the sovereignty of both states. He suggested territorial adjustments. He suggested that all or part of the Negev would be included in the Arab territory while all or parts of Western Galilee would be Jewish territory. Also, he proposed that the city of Jerusalem would be Arab territory. The implications of his first plan was that the Jewish state would be a very small, compact statelet. The big winner would be King Abdullah of Trans Jordan who would have not only Arab Palestine, according to the 29<sup>th</sup> November Partition Resolution, but also parts of the Negev and also the whole of Jerusalem. This plan was rejected by both sides. The Arabs rejected it as they would not accept any kind of Zionist state. The Israelis also rejected it. They were furious. They would accept no encroachment on their sovereignty, being especially enraged by seeing Jerusalem handed to the Arabs. So, from that point on, Count Bernadotte became a hated man in Israel.

His second plan came on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September. Remember that date. By September, Bernadotte has learned from his mistakes and he now declared that the state of Israel was a fact, a reality but, still, there would be territorial adjustments. The whole of Galilee would be Jewish territory while the whole of the Negev would be Arab territory. Still, Bernadotte said, there were strong reasons why Arab Palestine should be merged with Trans Jordan. The main change was Jerusalem where he changed his mind. Jerusalem, he now said, should now come under some kind of United Nations rule. So he tried to placate the Israelis by giving the state of Israel complete sovereignty and by not handing Jerusalem over to the Arabs. But the main winner was still King Abdullah of Trans Jordan and, of course, indirectly, the British who were the allies of Trans Jordan.

Now I come to what I think has been the major finding leading to my dissertation on these events. I had the opportunity to read the private papers of Count Bernadotte and also look

through the United Nations Archives. I was probably the first researcher to have access to these United Nations Archives and also secret documents in US Archives. The second 'Bernadotte Plan' which, as shown on this map, depicts the state of Israel as a compact, small entity covering roughly 21 % of Palestine compared with the 55% or 56% of the Partition Resolution but this was not only the UN Mediator's plan. When Bernadotte was putting the last touches to his Progress Report, two visitors came to Rhodes where he had his headquarters. One visitor, from the British Foreign Office, was Sir John Troutbeck, head of the British Middle East Office in Cairo. The other, Robert McClintock, was from the US State Department. They came to Rhodes in great secrecy and during the last days of preparation of Bernadotte's plan, this was calibrated closely with that of the British and Americans. Thus, the Progress Report of the UN Mediator actually was the UK/US master plan of September 1948 for solving the Palestine question. In fact, this was the first time since the 1920s that the British and the Americans could agree on a joint project on Palestine. The plan was that, after the Progress Report had been signed on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, a meeting of the UN General Assembly would open in Paris on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September. Count Bernadotte would go to Paris and, with his enormous authority and prestige, present this as the UN Mediator's plan for the solution. It would be supported by the Americans and by the British and the French who now were also in it. These three major Western Powers would bulldoze the plan through the General Assembly where they had an absolute majority and this plan would then replace the Partition Resolution. Then, the Bernadotte Plan would be imposed on the parties. The British would persuade the Arabs to acquiesce while the Americans would persuade the Israelis to accept the UN Mediator's proposal. It was very important that it would be seen as the UN Mediator's plan, not a British or American plan. In one of the documents from the British Foreign Office, written in September, it was stated that, from the moment Bernadotte's proposals became known, they should carry the label 'Mediator, made in Sweden'.

So this was, in fact, a joint American-British plan to solve the Palestine conflict, thus enabling the British and the Americans to concentrate on Germany, the Berlin Crisis and the looming threat of the Third World War against the Soviet Union.

Then, Mr Chairman, comes the assassination of Bernadotte. On the following day, the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, Count Bernadotte was in Jerusalem where he was ambushed and assassinated, together with the French Colonel Sérot, the Chief UN Observer in Jerusalem. The murderers were never found, they were never convicted and they were never punished. But from the very beginning, many surmised they belonged to the *LECHY*, *Lochamei Cherut Yisrael*, 'The Freedom Fighters of Israel', which the British had called the Stern Gang. This is well documented and, indeed, I have myself interviewed three of their four leaders. It was the central committee of *LECHY* that decided to execute Count Bernadotte. The three members of the *LECHY* central committee were Nathan Friedman Yellin, Israel Scheib, and Yitzhak Yezernitzky, who later became Yitzhak Shamir, later Prime Minister of Israel. These three men decided, probably in August 1948, to eliminate the UN Mediator, being a threat to the existence of the state of Israel. Two of them I met, Israel Scheib, now called Israel Eldad and Yehoshua Zetler, the latter being the *LECHY* commander in Jerusalem and the man who actually planned and organised the assassination. They were very proud of the murder, claiming that they had saved the state of Israel in 1948 since Count Bernadotte was a major threat to its existence.

Now, to the conclusion of my lecture. What is the legacy and what is the importance of

this? Firstly, by killing the Mediator, the Israelis also killed his plan. In the absence of Count Bernadotte, after several weeks of deliberations, the whole of his plan, minus the paragraph on the Palestinian refugees, was rejected by the General Assembly. In the General Assembly, a strange unholy coalition was forged, consisting of Israel and its allies, including the Soviet Union at that time, and of the Arab states and their allies, who were all against Bernadotte's plan. The death knell came when President Truman on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, in a speech in New York, repudiated the plan. Of course this stance was to win the Jewish vote in the State of New York and in other important states of the United States. After that, the United States withdrew its support for the Bernadotte Plan. Only the British supported it until the end but they could not push it through. Thus, the Bernadotte Plan was killed.

My last point is that the assassination of Count Bernadotte was not just an assassination of a Swedish count or of one single individual - it was the killing of the United Nations and the United Nations Mediator. After him, there have been no more United Nations mediators. All successors have not been called mediators but have been called Special Representative of the Secretary General or similar. As both Eldad and Zetler told me, "Count Bernadotte appeared like a Napoleon to us. What we in *LECHY* proved was that Count Bernadotte actually was a Napoleon, albeit with no army". And as the Israelis say, "*Um schmumm*"- "*the United Nations is nothing*". The United Nations is a zero and from then on, from 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1948, the Israelis never respected any resolution or any representative of the United Nations in the Middle East because they had seen that the United Nations would put no resources behind them. Indeed, the UN did nothing in 1948 after the assassination of the UN Mediator. It declared no sanctions against the state of Israel and it took no practical actions against the state of Israel. The murderers were set free. Of course, the Arab states and other smaller states, like Sweden, drew the same lesson. The United Nations obviously is not capable of taking care of or giving protection to its representatives. From that point on, we can follow up to the recent blowing up of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, including the UN Special Representative. What did the United Nations then do? How do they now protect their representatives?

I think that was a very tragic lesson of misperceptions. The misperceptions of Count Bernadotte and of his collaborators in 1948 was that they completely underestimated the leaders of the state of Israel and their icy-cold determination to protect their state using all means. He also vastly overestimated the United Nations and its capabilities. He could of course not imagine that the UN Secretary General, Trygve Lie of Norway, as we know now, cooperated in great secrecy with the Israelis and secretly handed over to the Israelis confidential documents including the papers of the UN Mediator. Finally, he vastly overestimated the Americans and their political will and capability to support the United Nations.

Thank you for you interest.

\*\*\*\*\*