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The task of the UN observers in Palestine was to maintain the cease-fire and keep the military balance intact and the territorial status quo unchanged until a political settlement could be attained. The rival parties, on the other hand, tried their best to change the status quo and improve their respective positions, in order to decide the war in their favour at the next round of fighting. In a war which was, in fact, an armed truce interrupted by short outbreaks of fighting, the role of the UN observers would be expected to be decisive, but it was not so.

THE UN OBSERVER CORPS UP UNTIL THE END OF THE FIRST TRUCE

The establishment of the UN Observer Corps in Palestine, later called the UN Truce Supervision Operation (UNTSO), was based on the Security Council’s resolution of 29 May, which initiated the truce and the embargo. Under that resolution, the UN Mediator in conjunction with the SC Truce Commission was ‘to supervise the observance of the truce’, helped by a ‘sufficient number of military observers’ and see ‘that no war material or fighting personnel were introduced into Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen during the truce’. The resolution did not specify what a ‘sufficient number’ of observers was, or from which countries they should come, or how they should operate. The UN Mediator, himself inexperienced in this kind of a job, was not able to get the Security Council’s advice on these matters, because the Council itself was split over these issues. Bernadotte was not free to make his own decision on the situation: when his decisions were not liked by the USA, the Americans threatened to withdraw their support, and when he changed his mind to follow the American dictate, he was harshly criticized by the USSR. This action left the way open for countries such as Czechoslovakia not to
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abide by the embargo rules. At least Bernadotte was lucky to have at his disposal an experienced team of UN officials, headed by Dr Ralph Bunche, who knew Palestine well.

Bernadotte’s immediate intention was to mobilize observers from both sides of the Iron Curtain, but the USA forced him to accept a formula according to which observers could only come from the three countries which were members of the Truce Commission, namely USA, France and Belgium, with the addition of a few Swedes. UNTSO was clearly designed to be an instrument of the Western powers to implement their plan of a settlement. The small number of observers put at the Mediator’s disposal also resulted from the Cold War situation. The manpower establishment chart for the Observers Corps was drawn up by a badly-briefed, low-ranking British soldier, Major Guy Campbell, who had been sent by his uncle, the British Ambassador in Cairo, to give Bernadotte practical advice about Palestine. Campbell knew Palestine well, but had the wrong idea as to what the task of the observers should be. He believed that he was being asked to calculate how to man checkpoints on the Palestine borders and he was not told that they would have to supervise 500 km of twisting front-line in difficult terrain, most of it inside Palestine, as well as airfields, ports, coastlines and lines of supplies in seven countries. Thus, Major Campbell simply multiplied the number of the border-crossings to Palestine by four and added one command post, reaching the figure of 68 observers. Since the UN Secretary-General in New York, Trygve Lie, was desperate to obtain some figures in order to launch the peacekeeping operation, Campbell’s temporary assessment was rushed to him, and it was approved by the Security Council. When this assessment turned out to be numerically highly inadequate, the USSR had already objected to the way in which the observers were selected and it was no longer easy to extend the number of observers.

The 68-man establishment was thus divided equally between the USA, France and Belgium, 21 officers from each, with five more officers from the Swedish army. Even this arrangement took too long to implement. When the first truce came into effect not a single UN observer was yet in operational position and when the observers did begin to arrive, they came piecemeal. In its initial strength, the force did not suffice even for the task of supervising the cease-fire, which was the mediator’s first priority. Bernadotte’s second priority was to supervise food convoys to besieged Jewish Jerusalem and to the Negev and checking Jewish immigration, to which he committed himself in return for the two parties acceptance of the truce. Bernadotte also needed