

# The Israeli-Arab War of 1948

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## Introduction

The long lasting interest in the [war of 1948](#) has not emanated from its unique features as a military campaign. Rather, scholarly interest and public curiosity have stemmed mainly from the wider historical consequences of this war. These consequences include the emergence of Israel, its persistent existence as a spearhead of western civilization in the Middle East, the protracted Arab-Jewish conflict and the unsolved Palestinian problem. Other historical transformations also have causal links to this war and they include the disappearance of the ancient Jewish communities in Muslim countries such as Yemen, Iraq and Egypt through immigration to Israel and elsewhere as well as political and social upheavals in the Arab states and frequent changes of their global orientation after the war.

The [Arab-Israeli war](#) that broke out in 1948 has not yet ended. The campaign did not resolve any of the problems that caused the war. Moreover, the outcomes of the military contest produced newer and more crucial issues, such as the [Palestinian refugee](#) problem and the wavering status of Jerusalem. Every historical analysis of the 1948 war has had actual ramifications and has often been interpreted and discussed outside its historical context and in terms of the continuing struggle at present. In this sense, the historiography of the Arab-Jewish conflict is as unparalleled and unprecedented as the conflict itself.

Interpretation of the conflict focuses attention on its actual aspects and pushes aside its historical roots, increasingly dismissing them as irrelevant — a highly mistaken approach. In Western Europe, the United States and even in Israel, memory becomes shorter, patience diminishes and propaganda competes successfully with historical knowledge. In the post-modernist era it is hardly possible to discern between them.

## The Narratives

A fundamental issue of the war's historiography has been the tension that has developed between contemporary Israeli and Arab myths that later became their respective war narratives. These rival narratives stand in contrast to the findings of historical research. An examination of the contemporary and authentic Israeli and Arab archival sources — where such comparison is possible — reveals narrow

discrepancies between the original versions, but with the lapse of time, polemics have increasingly widened the breach.

At first, one history existed, although it took on slightly different versions. Gradually, this single history has split into separate, opposing and conflicting narratives. In the process of shaping them, the “collective memories” of Jews and Arabs have encrusted the war in a thick layer of fables, stereotypes, myths, polemics and apologies. Now, the historian’s task is to unearth the real war that hides behind and below these masks.

The Israeli story of the war was shaped during the military campaign and in its immediate aftermath, or under the shadow of the threat of a “second round” that hung over the Middle East for many years after the war. Incessant skirmishing along the armistice lines and ongoing Arab political and economic warfare against Israel created an atmosphere of siege that naturally affected Jewish writing on the war. With few exceptions, 1950s and 1960s Israeli historiography and fictional literature exalted the war as a miracle. To amplify the heroic achievement, Israeli writers blamed Britain for covertly directing the Palestinian onslaught on the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) and the Arab armies' invasion of Israel. They condemned the British for attempting to obstruct Jewish statehood and, having failed to prevent the foundation of the State of Israel, to deny it the fruits of victory.

Poetry, theatre, films, fiction literature, school textbooks, popular songs, commemorative statutes and books as well as political polemics molded war narratives before historical research and writing had a chance to do so. Several narratives developed on each side: [Ben-Gurion](#)’s version of the war differed from that of the Israeli left-wing parties that stressed and even exaggerated the contribution of Soviet assistance through diplomatic support and the provision of war-material. The two military schools —the [Palmach](#) and the British army’s veterans — had different views of the causes for military achievements. Even the [Irgun](#) (IZL) had a narrative of its own. Nonetheless, certain assumptions have been common to all Israeli narratives: A profound faith in the purity of Jewish arms, a deep-rooted belief of the Arabs’ enormous superiority in manpower and war material, a conviction of the Arabs’ determination “to throw the Jews into the Mediterranean” and finally the recollections of the Arab leadership’s call to the Palestinians to abandon their homes and its promises of a quick return to their places in the wake of the triumphant Arab armies.

On the Arab side, each Arab country as well as the Palestinians has developed its own narrative. Until the end of the war, Arab public opinion possessed only a vague idea of what was actually happening in Palestine. Through their control of the media, the governments did their best to conceal the military defeats that had led to the armistice agreements. While Egypt negotiated an armistice in Rhodes at the beginning of 1949 following a humiliating military defeat, a poll held by the popular Egyptian

weekly *Akhir Sa'a* revealed that 79% of the 20,000 sample believed that “Egypt won the war against the Zionist gangs.”

Early Arab writing on the war — usually polemic or apologetic memoirs and only rarely scholarly research — assigned guilt rather than analyzed events. The authors exonerated their own conduct, seeking to place elsewhere the blame for the calamity that has befallen the Palestinians and the responsibility for the Arabs’ defeat. Since it was inconceivable that the tiny *Yishuv* routed singlehandedly the Arab armies, it was essential to mitigate the disaster by suggesting accomplices. The Arabs accused Britain of betraying them, blamed the United States for supporting the Zionists and denigrated [King Abdullah of Transjordan](#), who was the only Arab ruler that benefited from the general debacle.

As usual, the Palestinians blamed everyone but themselves. In his recently published notes from 1949, Anwar Nusseiba — the secretary, and later chairman of the Palestinian national committee of Jerusalem — complained that the Arab Legion was Arab by name only and because of its British command could not implement an Arab policy: Iraq was run by the British embassy and had an account to settle with the Palestinian leader, [Hajj Amin al-Hussayni](#), for his role in Rashid Ali al-Kailany's putsch in 1941 and Syria and Lebanon were grateful to Britain for ejecting the French and facilitating their independence. Nusseiba accused all the Arab states of consenting to the first truce shortly after the invasion and asserted that from the beginning they acquiesced to partition and merely simulated the invasion to cover their own impotence. Constantine Zurayq had already made this charge during the war and Mussa Alami repeated it, blaming Britain and the United States for the calamity that befell the Palestinians.

A second Arab obsession has been the question of justice and unfairness. Arab scholars have scarcely endeavored to find out what really took place in that war. Instead, they have elaborated extensively on the rightness of their own case and illegitimacy of the Israeli arguments. In these discussions, exact chronology, reliable sources and accurate arguments have been marginal.

Apart from the Palestinian version of the war, early Arab narratives endeavored to conceal the scope of the military defeat, minimize its significance and exonerate the fiasco by ascribing it to the intervention of the UN and the Great Powers. Of course, the Syrian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Egyptian and Palestinian narratives are incompatible and sometimes mutually reproaching but, like their Israeli counterparts, they too share common notions. The narratives agree on the existence of a pre-meditated Jewish scheme to expel the Palestinians (“Plan *Dalet*”). They also concur on the significance of the Deir Yassin massacre, on the Jews’ military superiority and on the world's support for the Jewish cause. A typical Arab myth maintains that the Arab expeditions

were about to win war when international pressure accompanied by threats imposed the first truce and saved “the Zionist entity” from total destruction.

## **The Palestinian-Jewish War**

Israel’s War of Independence consisted of two consecutive but distinct campaigns fought by different enemies under dissimilar circumstances with different rules. The first encounter commenced early in December 1947, immediately after the UN Partition resolution and lasted until the end of the British mandate in Palestine. It was a civil war between Jews and Palestinians that took place under the watchful eyes of the British troops. The second contest began with the invasion of Palestine by regular Arab armies on May 15, 1948, and continued intermittently until the conclusion of separate armistice agreements between Israel and four Arab states during the first half of 1949. This was a war between Israel and a coalition of Arab states fought by regular armies. Consequently, the Palestinians — who placed their destiny in the hands of the Arab states and armies — disappeared for several decades from the military and political arena of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Until the British withdrawal entered its essential phase with the evacuation of the sixth Airborne Division in April 1948, neither side could gain any territory. Lacking proper military objectives, the adversaries carried out their attacks on non-combatant targets, subjecting civilians to deprivation, intimidation and harassment. Consequently, the weaker, disorganized Palestinian society collapsed under a moderate strain. An increasing flow of refugees to the heart of Arab-populated areas and into the adjacent countries underscored the defeat.

During this period, the principal Jewish paramilitary organization (the [\*Haganah\*](#)) transformed from a territorial militia into a regular army based on conscription. Simultaneously, the autonomous Jewish national institutions that had emerged during the mandatory era as a "state in the making" developed into an independent and sovereign government that controlled the *Yishuv*’s war effort.

Palestinian society lagged behind. Unaware of the difference between anti-colonial insurrection and a national war, the Palestinian leaders preferred to conduct the struggle from safe asylum abroad as they had done during their rebellion against the British in 1936-1939. The Palestinians failed to establish central political, financial and military facilities for conducting a war. This failure of the central leadership resulted in a rapid deterioration of local institutions and eventually led to anarchy. [The Arab League](#) contributed to the chaos by being unable to determine Arab Palestine’s political future or let the Palestinians shape their own destiny.

From the outset, the Arab League assigned the Palestinians a secondary role in the Arab war effort. Early in October 1947, the League Council appointed a committee to examine the military situation in Palestine. Six weeks later, its chairman, the Iraqi general Isma'il Safwat, reported that to compete at all the Palestinians would need massive assistance from the Arab states in manpower, war material and experienced command. Frustrating partition, Safwat warned, required the intervention of the Arab regular armies which were unprepared for a task of this magnitude. Safwat urged the League member-states to start preparing their armies for the forthcoming war.

Owing to the differences and mutual suspicions among its members, in December 1947 the League ignored Safwat's warning and undertook to raise the Arab Liberation Army that should have carried the main burden of the Palestine campaign. This half-regular force was composed of volunteers from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and North Africa as well as Palestinian recruits. It hastily assembled in Syria and between January and March 1948 moved into Palestine. Originally, its mission was to defend the Arab areas until the end of the mandate, while avoiding incidents with the British and major clashes with the Jews. The Palestinian's rapid escalation of the civil war dragged the ALA into a premature involvement in combat and led to its defeat and disintegration.

The progress of the British evacuation enabled the adversaries to change their tactics. Early in April, the *Haganah* launched several large-scale operations across the country. By contrast, the Arab forces remained dispersed and disarrayed, clinging to their traditional patterns of small warfare and loose organization that had become anachronistic under the new circumstances. Between early April and mid-May 1948, the nascent Jewish army crushed both the Palestinian militias and the League's expedition.

Contrary to the old Israeli narrative, the British neither helped the Palestinians nor encouraged the Arab invasion. On the contrary, the Palestinians' collapse occurred when the British were still sovereigns over Palestine. Had the British authorities wished to stop the *Haganah*, they had sufficient air and land forces in Palestine to do so. Determined to complete their withdrawal according to schedule, however, the British were reluctant to intervene, and watched from the sidelines while the *Haganah* crushed the Palestinians and the ALA. At most, the army provided the Arabs with transportation and escorts to facilitate their exodus.

Britain's position did not stem from any sympathy for the Jewish cause. Rather, Britain's main goal was to prepare the ground for Transjordan's King Abdullah to seize the country's Arab areas after the end of the mandate. The British decided to endorse the king's ambition despite the fact that it violated the UN resolution to establish a Palestinian State in the area. Abdullah's aspirations were unpopular among

the Palestinians and the other Arab states were likely to oppose their implementation. The Palestinians' defeat should have made them, as well as the Arab states, more amenable to the annexation of the Arab part of Palestine to Transjordan in the absence of any practical alternative.

This British–Transjordanian plot against the Palestinians led to an attempt to modify the partition plan at Israel's expense. Wishing to allay the Arab states' likely opposition to Transjordan's expansion, Britain sought to excise the Negev — Palestine's southern desert area — from the Jewish State. The prospect of preserving the Arab world's territorial continuity appeared to the British sufficiently attractive to ease Egypt's opposition to merging Arab Palestine with Transjordan. British officials and diplomats played with the idea of a Saudi-Transjordanian condominium in the Negev. This original solution would have compensated King Ibn Saud for his Hashemite foe's aggrandizement by granting Saudi Arabia an outlet to the Mediterranean. For his part, Abdullah could show a spectacular achievement on behalf of the general Arab cause, justifying his occupation of Arab Palestine and abstaining from war with the Jews. Israel, of course, was expected to pay the price for this scheme.

The British machinations, however, did not materialize. In late April 1948, it seemed that without outside intervention to stop the *Haganah's* offensive, the Jews might take over the entire country. This would cause the imminent demise of Arab Palestine and a heavy increase of refugees pouring into the adjacent states. Thus, the Palestinians' debacle in their own war facilitated an invasion by the surrounding armies and the Arab–Israeli war.

## **The Invasion**

A military intervention in Palestine had been a possibility since the convening of the Arab League's [Council at Bludan](#) in June 1946. Nonetheless, the Arab governments (except Transjordan) had plenty of reservations about sending their troops to Palestine. These armies were young, untrained and poorly equipped. Their principal task was defending the regimes against domestic subversion. Dispatching the troops to Palestine was likely to expose the rulers to internal dangers. The expeditions' possible failures would have triggered further risks when embittered soldiers would return from the battlefield and menace the political stability — which is precisely what happened after the war in 1948.

Competition and animosity among the members of the Arab League made the creation of a military coalition a difficult task. Aware of their domestic necessities and military defects, the Arab leaders discarded the idea of an invasion by their regular armies. As a substitute, they embarked on the hasty formation of the Arab Liberation Army. In

April 1948, the ALA's setbacks and the Palestinians' defeat thrust the issue back onto the Arab leaders' laps. Under pressure of public opinion, which was agitated by news from Palestine and incited by wild rumors spread by Palestinian refugees, they reluctantly decided to invade the country.

The Israeli narrative tells that the Arab invasion had been planned since the beginning of hostilities in Palestine – namely since the resolution on partition – and its purpose was “to push the Jews into the sea.” The invading Arab expeditions were quite incapable of taking over the entire country. Despite the wild rhetoric that had accompanied the invasion and fostered the Israeli narrative, the invaders' goal was not “pushing the Jews to the Mediterranean.” The aim of this propagandist slogan on Arab radio broadcasts was to mobilize domestic support for lame politicians who had undertaken a crucial decision against their best judgment and feared its consequences.

Drawn into the war against their will, the Arab governments' primary intentions were (1) preventing the *Haganah* from occupying the whole of Palestine, (2) saving the Palestinians from total ruin and (3) avoiding the flooding of their own countries by more refugees. From the Arab leaders' perspective, had the invasion not taken place there would have been no Arab force in Palestine capable of checking the *Haganah*'s offensive and eventually, the bulk of the panicked Palestinian population would have fled to the neighboring Arab countries.

The *Yishuv*'s comprehension of the Arab onslaught was, of course, very different. Against the backdrop of the Palestinians' violent opposition to the Zionist enterprise since the early 1920s and the Arab states' support for their struggle since 1936, the *Yishuv* genuinely perceived the invasion as a threat to its very existence. Having no real knowledge of the Arab armies' true lack of military efficiency, the Jews took Arab propaganda literally and prepared for the worst.

### **The Balance of Power**

In war, the stronger belligerent almost always wins and the [Israeli War of Independence](#) was no exception to this rule. A detailed examination of the balance of power reveals that throughout most of the war, excluding the period from the outset of the invasion on May 15 until the first truce in June 1948 the Jews were superior in personnel, equipment, logistics and organization. However, in the first month after the invasion the Arab armies enjoyed a considerable superiority in the air, artillery and light armor.

Moreover, the Jewish troops were exhausted after six months of combat and had already sustained heavy losses in manpower and equipment. By contrast, the invading Arab formations were fresh and complete. Nonetheless, even at this stage, the

expeditionary forces and their local auxiliaries were quantitatively inferior to the *Yishuv*'s mobilized manpower. Throughout the rest of the war, the *Haganah* and the [IDF](#) remained stronger both qualitatively and quantitatively.

This statement deserves an explanation. As in most statistics, a comparison here is unfair. The figures on the Israeli side include the entire military to the last clerk of the Second Echelon. The Arab troops dispatched to Palestine consisted of combat and combat-support troops while their logistic infra-structures, GHQs and base depots remained behind. In a comparison of the numbers of combatants and fighting-support troops, adding the Palestinian auxiliaries to the Arab expeditions, the Israeli superiority would shrink considerably and the ratio would be close to equality.

Jewish material superiority was also significant. During the civil war, the Palestinian performance and the information on available arms did not support the high estimate of the arsenal at the Arabs' disposal. The shortage of arms and munitions was a constant source of anxiety for the Palestinians, fuelled both by scarcity inside the country and difficulties in obtaining weapons abroad.

Most Arab armies depended on Britain for their supply of arms, munitions and spare parts. Hence, they suffered heavily from the embargo that the UN Security Council imposed in May 1948. But for two or three exceptional cases, the British government adhered to the embargo despite pressures from the army and its diplomats in the Arab countries. Toward the end of the war, the Arab governments found alternative sources of supply on the free European arms market, but it was too late to have a significant effect on the situation at the fronts. By contrast, the Israelis — having a long tradition of clandestine purchase and shipment of weapons — effectively circumvented the embargo. Since April 1948, small deliveries arrived by air and sea from Czechoslovakia and elsewhere and the large influx began after the end of the British mandate. By July, the IDF had balanced the initial superiority of the Arab armies in heavy equipment.

The Israeli narrative of “few against many” has been based on popular myth. Ben-Gurion had denied it during the war and repeated the denial long after it ended. Nonetheless, this popular narrative reflected an authentic anxiety in the *Yishuv*. The concern was natural for a small community surrounded by a hostile Arab world that appeared to most Jews as strange, savage and threatening. The “few against many” slogan did not emanate from the battlefield's reality but from the existential situation of the Jews in the region.

Throughout the war, the IDF and the Arab armies underwent opposing processes: The *Haganah* and IDF evolved from a territorial militia into a regular army of mobile

formations. This transformation enabled the IDF to concentrate its forces against the Egyptian army and to crush it in the campaigns of October and December 1948.

When the Arab armies invaded Palestine, they were free of static duties, civil commitments and territorial responsibilities and could concentrate on their military mission. As the thrust of the Arab offensive waned, however, the military commanders found themselves encumbered with ever-growing non-military responsibilities and commitments. The troops dispersed thinly along lengthy lines and defended what was left of Arab Palestine. The Israeli military planners skillfully took advantage of this dispersion, particularly of the Egyptian and Iraqi expeditions, while planning the operations of autumn and winter 1948.

Despite all of this, Israel's military superiority was still insufficient to explain the final outcomes of the war. Ultimately, the enormous Jewish advantage laid in the social, organizational and technical infrastructure behind the troops and the successful transformation and application of these factors in the military sphere. The disparity between a modern society and a traditional–patriarchal community was a principal factor in deciding the war. While the small *Yishuv* mustered its potential almost to the utmost, militarily, economically and even politically, the structure of Palestinian society crumbled under the strain of war and the inheritance of the abortive rebellion in the 1930s against Britain. The Arab states were proved incapable of a coalition's war and when their first thrust was checked after the invasion engaged in internal strifes that led to a rapid disintegration of their coalition. What started as a joint venture ended in separate armistice agreements with Israel that left out the Palestinians altogether.

The military triumph notwithstanding, the war was also the most costly that Israel has ever fought. The number of fatal casualties exceeded 6,000 – about 1% of the Jewish population in Palestine at the beginning of the war. Lack of preparedness and mistaken conceptions – not Arab might – were the main reasons for the high toll.

Before the war, the *Yishuv* leadership believed that the Great Powers should safeguard the partition solution against any outside onslaught. Ben-Gurion was the only exception to this rule. His colleagues, however, did not share his vision of the approaching war and consistently objected to his demands to prepare the *Yishuv* for a total war and reform the *Haganah* accordingly.

Until 1948, the *Haganah* anticipated an enhanced repetition of the Palestinian revolts of 1936-1939, ignoring potential dangers from across the border. Various setbacks that the organization sustained in the course of the civil war demonstrated that it had not been adequately prepared even for that contingency. Learning and recovery were quite rapid, but drawing the lessons, devising appropriate operational responses, mass

training and reorganization in the midst of fighting required time and departure from long-established traditions, like the division of roles between the *Palmach* and the rest of the *Haganah* or the central place of the agricultural settlements. The high proportion of casualties was the price. Several myths surrounding the war have masked guilt-feelings about this mishap and represented polemics about who should be blamed for the negligence.

### **The Emergence of the Refugee Problem**

The most enduring outcome of the war has been the problem of the Palestinian refugees. For many years, the Israelis have swept the problem under the rug, portraying it as a humanitarian, and not a political problem. At the same time, the Palestinians have consistently developed their national ethos around the “Right of Return” (*al-Auda*). They have composed a false narrative of deliberate expulsion in 1948, invented the centrality of the transfer idea in pre-war Zionist thought, stressed the role of the so-called massacre of Deir Yasin and Plan *Dalet* in their exodus and exonerated themselves of any responsibility for the war and its outcomes.

In fact, during the civil war the Palestinians were not expelled; they simply ran away. Throughout most of the next stages of the war, until the liberation of the Northern Negev and Central Galilee in October 1948, local deportations were the result of military needs, mainly used to deny the invaders bases in the vicinity of Jewish settlements and securing control of important roads. Even in October 1948, massacres and lesser atrocities were sporadic and exceptional and expulsions were partial.

Unlike the Jews, who had nowhere to go and fought with their back to the wall, the Palestinians had nearby asylums. Flight accompanied the fighting from the beginning of the civil war and an increasing flow of refugees drifted from mixed Jewish-Arab towns into the heart of Arab-populated areas as well as to the adjacent countries. The Palestinians had not yet recovered from their revolt between 1936 and 1939.

In this early phase of the war, their fragile social structure crumbled not because of military setbacks but owing to economic hardships and administrative disorganization that worsened as the fighting intensified. Contrary to the Jews who built their “state in the making” during the mandate period, the Palestinians had not created substitutes for the government services that vanished with the British withdrawal. The absence of leaders, the collapse of services and a general feeling of fear and insecurity generated anarchy in the Arab sector.

When riots broke out early in December 1947, many middle class Palestinians sent their families to neighboring countries, joining them after the situation worsened. Others moved from the vicinity of the front lines to less exposed areas in the interior

of the Arab region. Non-Palestinian laborers and businessmen returned to Syria, Lebanon and Egypt to avoid the hardships of war. First-generation emigrants from the countryside who had moved to the urban centers returned to their villages. Thousands of government employees — doctors, nurses, civil servants, lawyers, clerks, etc. — were fired as the mandatory administration disintegrated. This created an atmosphere of desertion that rapidly expanded to wider circles. Between half and two-thirds of the inhabitants of cities such as Haifa or Jaffa had abandoned their hometowns before the Jews stormed them in late April 1948.

In the last six weeks of the British mandate, the Jews occupied most of the area that the [UN partition plan](#) allotted to the Jewish State. They took over five Arab and mixed towns and 200 villages. Approximately 250,000 to 300,000 Palestinians and other Arabs fled to Palestine's Arab sectors or to neighboring countries. The Palestinian irregulars and the League's army disintegrated and became militarily immaterial.

This rapid and almost total collapse astonished all observers. It was unbelievable that plain defeatism lacking any ulterior motives had prompted this mass flight. The Jews suspected that the exodus was nothing but a conspiracy — concocted by the Palestinian leadership — to embroil the Arab states in the war. Later, this guess would become the official explanation of Israeli diplomacy for the Palestinian mass flight. The documentary evidence, however, shows that Palestinian and other Arab leaders did not encourage the flight. On the contrary, they tried in vain to stop it. The old Israeli narrative of conspiracy is as wrong as the new Palestinian one of expulsion, as the historical picture is far more complex.

Before the invasion of the Arab armies, fleeing was for the most part voluntary as it preceded the conquest of the Arab towns. Dependence on fallen towns, the quandaries of maintaining agricultural routine and rumors of atrocities exacerbated mass flight from the countryside. Many hamlets that the *Haganah* occupied in April and May were found empty. No premeditated deportations had taken place at this stage and the use of intimidation and psychological warfare was sporadic. Quantitatively, the majority of Palestinian refugees fled under the circumstances of an inter-communal civil war.

During the civil war, Palestinian behavior stood in sharp contrast to the *Yishuv's* performance. Only a dozen remote or besieged settlements sent mothers and children to safer places in the interior. The central leadership took measures to reinforce vulnerable posts. Unlike the Palestinians, the *Yishuv's* center displayed a proven solidarity with its periphery.

At the transition from civil to regular war, certain IDF actions on the eve of and after the invasion were aimed at expelling the Arab population from villages close to

Jewish settlements or adjacent to main roads. These measures appeared indispensable in the face of looming threats by the invading Arab armies. The Israelis held the Palestinians responsible for the invasion and believed they deserved severe punishment. Local deportations in May and June of 1948 from villages along the anticipated route of the Egyptian army and in the vicinity of Haifa appeared militarily vital and morally justified.

By July 1948, Israeli restraint from crossing the UN partition line faded. During the Ten Day Campaign (July 9-18), the IDF occupied three more towns and dozens of villages in the Arab areas. Rather than protecting the Palestinians, the Arab armies' invasion doubled their territorial losses as well as the number of refugees. Later waves of mass flight were the result of the IDF's counter offensives against the invading forces. The position of these new fleeing or expelled Palestinians — such as the inhabitants of Lydda and Ramle — was different from that of their predecessors who had run away in the pre-invasion period. Their mass flight was not the outcome of an inability to hold out against the Jews. Rather, the Arab expeditions failed to protect them. These refugees were sometimes literally deported across the lines. In certain cases, IDF units terrorized Palestinians so as to hasten their flight and isolated massacres took place that might have expedited the flight.

After the conquest of the Galilee, the feasibility of the West Bank's occupation depended to a large extent on the likely reaction of the civilian population to the advent of the IDF in the region. Ben-Gurion tried to predict the inhabitants' response: Would they run away as their predecessors had done before the invasion, or would they stay to burden Israel with countless political, economic and administrative problems. The lessons of the campaigns in the Galilee and the Negev implied that the Palestinians might not flee of their own will. An occupation of the West Bank would result in either a large amount of atrocities — provoking domestic and international repercussions — or the absorption of a large Palestinian population, an equally dreadful outcome. So as to avoid either of these unattractive options, Ben-Gurion decided to give up the conquest of the West Bank and to embark on negotiations with Transjordan.

As they were fleeing, the refugees were confident of their eventual homecoming at the end of hostilities. This “end” could mean a cease-fire, a truce, an armistice and, certainly, a peace agreement. The return of refugees had been customary in the Middle East's wars throughout the ages. When the first truce began in June 1948, many Arab villagers tried to resettle in their hamlets or at least to gather the crops. They were not received warmly.

Most Israelis hailed from Europe and their historical experience and concepts of warfare were different. In Europe, war refugees seldom returned to their former places

of residence once the enemy had occupied their homes. Usually, they resettled and began new life elsewhere. This was particularly true after the [Second World War](#). The mass repatriation by the allies of millions after the war concerned their own nationals, while refugees or deportees of defeated belligerents resettled to begin new lives elsewhere. People still remembered the exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece in the early 1920s. Europe was full of White Russians who had left their homeland after the revolution and the subsequent civil war.

The Israelis applied this principle to the Middle East. In the summer of 1948, the provisional government objected to any repatriation of refugees before a peace treaty was signed. Truces and armistices were considered parts of the war and not of a peace settlement. The IDF forcibly blocked infiltration during the truces and after the war and demolished abandoned hamlets to prevent them from being used as shelters by infiltrators. Concurrently, the Israeli authorities seized abandoned lands and used them to accommodate evacuees from Jewish settlements that had been occupied by the invading Arab armies. New immigrants and demobilized soldiers settled in deserted Arab towns and villages. Thus, the presumably temporary flight turned into a permanent refugee problem.

### **The Collusion That Never Was**

With the exception of the Gaza Strip, at the end of the Israeli-Arab war of 1948 Israel and Transjordan shared the whole of Palestine. Against the backdrop of the Arab coalition's defeat, Abdullah's success in retaining what had been left of Arab Palestine extremely displeased his allies. The king's success stood in sharp contrast with his Arab partners' profound sense of failure after the war. This gap spawned a wave of charges that accused Abdullah of collaborating with the Jews and betraying the Arab cause. Palestinians, Egyptians, Syrians and Transjordanian exiles joined hands in vilifying the king and plotting to eliminate him.

Similar allegations about a previous agreement that the Jewish Agency had made with Abdullah to partition Palestine spread in Israel. The sponsors were mainly rivals of David Ben-Gurion and adherents of "One Palestine Complete" on both the left and right wings of the Zionist movement who opposed partition. Until the mid 1960s, strict censorship prevented public debate in Israel on these issues, but the story spread through the grapevine. The "Collusion" story became one of the war's counter-myths. The first to publish the allegation openly was Israel Ber. In 1948, Ber held a senior post in the IDF General Staff and was promoted to Lt. Colonel after the war. At that time, he belonged to the left-wing [United Workers Party](#) (*Mapam*) and sharply criticized Ben-Gurion's conduct of the war. In the midst of the campaign, Ber asserted that Ben-Gurion should be removed from his post as Minister of Defence, calling him a menace and claiming that he harmed the proper conduct of the war. Ber also alleged

that Ben-Gurion had a secret understanding with Abdullah on partitioning the country and this was the reason he forbade the IDF to crack down on the Legion. Eventually, Ber transferred his loyalty to Ben-Gurion and was appointed official historian of the war. He was also the first holder of the chair of military history at Tel Aviv University. In 1961, however, Ber was arrested and sentenced to ten years imprisonment for spying on behalf of the Soviet Union. He died in prison before completing his term.

In jail, Ber wrote a book — *Bitchon Israel: Etmol, Hayom Umachar (Israel Security: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow)* — that was published posthumously in 1966. In his book, Ber developed the allegation of an Israeli–Transjordanian collusion to let Abdullah take over the West Bank and annex it to his kingdom. Ber’s dubious record and personal involvement did not lend much credence to these theories. They were, however, compatible with similar contemporary accusations on the Arab side that had been raised in the memoirs of a former Legion officer, Colonel Abdullah al-Tal, and the former Iraqi Chief-of-Staff, General Salih Juburi.

For 20 years, the collusion theory was dormant. In the late 1980s, however, Avi Shlaim adopted it in his comprehensive study, *Collusion across the Jordan*. In certain details he departed from Ber’s original allegations and in others he elaborated on his predecessor. Since the summer of 1946, Shlaim argued, the Jewish Agency and King Abdullah held a secret agreement to share the land of Palestine at the expense of the Palestinians. When the time came to implement this agreement, both sides feigned a short war and then embarked on executing their previously agreed upon scheme.

Truly, the Jewish Agency and Abdullah had a common interest in opposing the ambitions of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Hussayni. Many Jews openly preferred Abdullah as their neighbor to a Palestinian irredentist state. Yet, Shlaim’s conjecture of a deliberate and pre-meditated anti-Palestinian “collusion” does not stand up to a critical examination. The documentary evidence on the development of contacts between Israel and Jordan before, during and after the war unequivocally refutes Shlaim’s conclusions. If there was any collusion against the Palestinians in 1948, it was not concocted by Israel and Abdullah but rather, by Britain and Transjordan. The outcomes reveal that the British acquiescence to a Transjordanian takeover of Arab Palestine was merely a choice by default rather than a plot.

Abdullah’s relationship with the Jews, which dated back to 1921, led to an agreement between the King and the Jewish Agency in the summer of 1946. The king undertook to support partition as the preferable solution to the Palestine problem. The Jewish Agency stated its preference for sharing the country with Abdullah and granted him financial aid to promote his standing among the Palestinians and to encourage his subversive activities in Syria.

This agreement was the culmination of a protracted bond; not the beginning of a new conspiracy as Shlaim portrays it. Since the mid-1930s, Abdullah appeared to the Jewish leaders to be the only alternative to the intransigent Palestinian opposition to the Zionist enterprise, backed by the rest of the Arab world. For his part, the King (then Amir) needed Jewish support to accomplish his territorial ambitions in Arab Palestine and fulfill his dream to become king of Greater Syria.

Until 1948, Jewish help was the only encouragement Abdullah had for attaining his goals in Palestine. Most Palestinians opposed his ambition to rule over them and even his own followers in Palestine objected to the King's contacts with the Jews. All Arab states were likely to disapprove of Transjordan's aggrandizement: Saudi Arabia viewed Abdullah as a dynastic rival. Egypt — in the apex of its anti-colonial struggle to oust the British from the Suez Canal and Sudan — regarded the king as a puppet of Britain. Syria and Lebanon were hostile to the king's dream of Greater Syria. Even Iraq competed with Transjordan for leadership of the Hashemite House: Abdullah was senior, but Iraq was the stronger and larger state and would not admit his seniority or accept his hegemony.

Familiar with the king's inability and aware of the attitude of most other Arabs towards Abdullah, the British refused to endorse his expansionist ambitions. Abdullah's advisers, the ambassador Sir Alek Kirkbride and the Arab Legion's commanding officer, General John Glubb, were the only exception to the general refusal that was shared by all other diplomats in the Middle East and officials in Whitehall. Since the summer of 1946, both Kirkbride and Glubb had recommended a policy based on extending the king's rule to Arab Palestine.

On November 17, 1947, twelve days before the vote on the UNSCOP report, Abdullah met with Golda Meyerson (Meir), deputy head of the Jewish Agency's political department and two of her aides, Elias Sasson and Ezra Danin. The anticipated report reshuffled the cards by recommending the creation of a Palestinian state and avoiding the issue of annexing the Arab part of Palestine to Transjordan. The conferees discussed the new situation, reaffirmed their commitment to the agreement of summer 1946 and contemplated means of bypassing the part of the pending UN resolution that was incompatible with the king's ambitions. Golda Meyerson carefully refrained from any explicit commitment to assist Abdullah in annexing Arab Palestine and suggested that the king mobilize popular support among the Palestinians for such a merger in preparation for a plebiscite that would represent it as a voluntary Palestinian decision. Both sides pledged to maintain regular contacts and meet again when circumstances clarified.

## **Israel and Jordan in War and Negotiations**

The pace of events after the vote in the UN was faster than the parties had foreseen. In the face of the rapid spread of hostilities in Palestine, Abdullah faltered in fulfilling his part of the understanding. Intermediaries maintained contacts between Amman and Jerusalem, but no high-level parley took place. The king's inability to prevent the invasion of Palestine by the ALA via Transjordan in January 1948 shook the Jews' confidence in Abdullah and strengthened the hands of the skeptics who had distrusted him from the beginning.

The breakup of contacts between the Jewish Agency and Abdullah was mutual. Since February 1948, Abdullah appeared less dependent on Jewish support. During the visit of Premier Tawfiq Abu al-Huda to London, the king obtained a tacit British approval of his plan to occupy the Arab part of Palestine upon the end of the mandate. His army was already in the country as part of the British garrison, though its involvement in combat was still marginal. To help Abdullah prepare the ground for his takeover of what later came to be known as the [West Bank](#), the British stationed Legion companies in the main Arab towns.

Despite its position as a member of the UN Security Council, Britain consciously assisted Abdullah's efforts to frustrate the UN resolution on partition as far as it concerned the establishment of a Palestinian state. In view of the Palestinians' recalcitrance to accept partition and their inability to take over the administration of their own sector from the mandatory regime, the British could not devise a better alternative for the Arab parts of the country than Transjordanian occupation and, later, annexation.

The defeats of the Palestinians and the ALA in April 1948 enhanced the king's status as the only feasible savior of Arab Palestine. Trepidation among the Palestinians grew as termination of the mandate approached and with it, an end to British protection. This prompted more Palestinians to view Abdullah and his Legion as their last hope. Delegations of notables — that included also old rivals of the king — went to Amman to ask Transjordan to intervene. This time their appeals appeared genuine.

The collapse of Palestinian society in the last six weeks of the mandate weakened any potential resistance on the part of the Palestinians to the king's ambitions, and increased their dependence on the Arab Legion's protection. After the defeats of the Arab Liberation Army, the Arab League reconciled itself to the idea of the Legion's occupation of the major part of Arab Palestine. All the other Arab states could do was to restrict Abdullah's political freedom of action in the occupied regions by adopting resolutions on the Palestinians' right to determine their own future when the war was over.

At the end of April 1948, the Arab League prevailed on the king to interfere immediately in the fighting. Abd al-Rahman Azzam, the League's secretary general, urged Abdullah to save the Palestinians and restrain their panicked mass flight. Abdullah specified several military and political conditions. When the Arab states decided reluctantly to invade Palestine upon the end of the mandate, they practically removed their objections to the conquest of the West bank by the Legion. They did not, however, consent to any political design of the king in the occupied area.

The Jews contributed their share to the mutual disengagement by erroneously underestimating Abdullah's significance throughout the early months of the war. During that period the *Yishuv* was fighting the Palestinians and the Arab League's army and thus neglected Transjordan and the Legion. Indirect contacts with the king through go-betweens ceased in the end of January 1948.

The Jewish Agency was unaware of Britain's unstated support for Abdullah's designs in regard to Arab Palestine and even later did not grasp its true essence. When efforts to resume the broken contacts with the king commenced at the beginning of May, it was too late to turn the tide — Abdullah had meanwhile become the spearhead of the invading coalition and it was unthinkable that he would quit at the last moment.

Having secured British, Arab and Palestinian compliance with his Legion's occupation of the West Bank, Abdullah no longer needed the Jews to advance his objectives in Palestine. A last ditch effort by the Jewish Agency to resume direct communication with the king and dissuade him from joining the invading Arab coalition failed. Fuelled by the new circumstances, the king explained to [Golda Meyerson](#) in a meeting in Amman on the eve of the invasion, that Transjordan was part of a wider alliance and he could not make separate bargains or adhere to previous understandings.

Upon the end of the British mandate, Israel and Transjordan fought each other. They had no secret deals that limited their military activities. The agreement of 1946 was void. At the end of the war Israel refused to accept it as a starting point for negotiations. The Israel-Transjordan campaign of May–July 1948 was inconclusive, but far from a feigned confrontation. Military exigencies compelled Abdullah to hand over large parts of Arab Palestine to Egyptian and Iraqi military administration. At the beginning of the second truce, the king realized his inability to retain his conquests by force and began to seek a political solution to secure his grip of the West Bank. He sent envoys to conduct secret talks with Sasson in Paris, but the British pressurized him to delay his contacts with Israel and told him he could get more from the plan devised by Count Bernadotte – the Swedish mediator on behalf of the Security Council. The assassination of the mediator and the vanishing of his plan into oblivion, the creation of the “All Palestine” government in Gaza under the auspices of the Arab

League and the growing friction with Egypt over Transjordan's intentions in Palestine helped Abdullah to overcome his hesitations and resume direct contacts with the Jews.

Nonetheless, the war was not a temporary interruption between two phases of the same dialogue. It was the end of the old bond between the Jews and Abdullah and the beginning of a new attempt to resolve the Palestine problem between Israel and Jordan. In the resumed negotiations, the point of departure was the military situation after the defeat of the Egyptian army in the fall of 1948. Abdullah's main concern was preventing his Legion from an encounter with the IDF.

Ben-Gurion arrived at the negotiations table after having realized that the Arab population would not flee the West Bank. Ben-Gurion still wavered between Transjordan and the Palestinians. An armistice was feasible only with Transjordan. The prospect of peace, however, presented different problems and drove Israel to reconsider the Jordanian option *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian one. In the following years, Israel fluctuated between the opposing poles of negotiating comprehensive peace with Jordan and an escalating border war against the Palestinians under Jordanian rule in the West Bank and under Egyptian rule in the Gaza Strip.

### **The Legacy**

All reservations notwithstanding, the war of Independence was, at least in certain respects, Israel's most successful campaign against the Arabs. It was the only contest in which Israel succeeded in translating a military victory into a political settlement; one that survived for 18 years. At first, Israel regarded the armistice agreements of 1949 as an interim phase that would lead to a permanent peace settlement. These hopes did not materialize. The armistice regime persisted until 1967 and a permanent settlement is still remote.

Following the war, from 1949 to 1967, the Palestinians receded from the scene. Those who remained became [Israeli citizens](#). The indigenous Palestinians in the West Bank and the refugees on both banks were incorporated into Jordan and became Jordanian citizens. There were "Egyptian" Palestinians in the Gaza Strip as well as "Syrian" and "Lebanese" Palestinians in refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon, though they remained without citizenship. The concept "Palestinian" vanished, unless it was linked to the word "refugee."

Only in the wake of the Six-Day War did the Palestinians return to the political arena under their own banner and begin to reshape and revise their own narrative of the war. Because Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip but did not annex these territories, their inhabitants ceased to be "Jordanian" and "Egyptian" but did not

become “Israeli.” They reappeared as simply “Palestinians” — a term that had been forgotten for 18 years.

The war of 1948 left four open issues that so far have curtailed all ventures to reconcile the Arab world, excluding Egypt and Jordan, with Israel. These issues still constitute a hindrance to any permanent peace agreement.

The first issue has been territorial. Israel inherited [Mandatory Palestine](#)’s international borders with the adjacent Arab states. The Arab armies violated these lines, but Israel accepted them. The IDF withdrew from Egyptian and Lebanese territories that had been occupied in the last phases of the war in preparation for or in the wake of the armistice negotiations.

Israel’s border with Syria has posed a different problem. Syria has never recognized its international border with Palestine and has claimed “the water line”, equally dividing the Jordan River and Lake Kinneret between the parties. The most crucial territorial problem, however, has been the border between Israelis and Palestinians. The armistice lines demarcated Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Jordan on the other. From a Palestinian standpoint, these lines — now called “the 1967 borderlines” — are meaningless. Continuous infiltration into Israel throughout the 1950s and 1960s demonstrated this reality. The only internationally recognized line that separates Israelis from Palestinians has been the 1947 partition line. The Arabs also linked the claim for Israel’s withdrawal to the partition lines with the refugee issue. They maintained that the more territory Israel ceded, the less would be the scope of the remaining refugee problem after the return of Palestinians to the vacated area.

The second issue, that of the Palestinian refugees, seems to be the most critical. Several other major refugee problems have emerged in the second half of the 20th century including Germany, Poland, the Balkans, India and Pakistan, Vietnam and various countries in Africa. Most have found their solution long ago. Only the Palestinian refugee problem has endured. More than any other single factor of the Israeli–Arab conflict, the refugee problem manifests its unique features as a confrontation between opposing civilizations, extending beyond the ordinary national or religious level of other historical encounters.

Blaming the Arab League for the refugees' suffering, Israel expected the Arab governments to resettle them in their countries as Germany had absorbed *Volksdeutsche* after the Second World War and Israel itself absorbed Jewish refugee-immigrants from the Arab countries. Israel’s efforts to convince the Palestinians, the Arab states and the entire world that this problem should be solved by resettlement have been sincere, but out of context. The Arab world has insisted on the refugees' "right of return" as a precondition for any reconciliation with

Israel. Sixty years after the end of the war, the Arab states — with the exception of Jordan — have not absorbed the refugees. While individual refugees settled to begin life anew in and outside the region, the majority barely mixed with their hosts — neither in the West Bank and Gaza Strip nor in the Arab countries. They have remained aloof from the indigenous population; living in separate camps and expecting their return.

In the wake of the war, Israeli diplomacy successfully neutralized the refugee problem's explosive political potential and turned it into a humanitarian problem of aid that the UN undertook to provide. The Great Powers acquiesced to this change, but the Arab world refused to follow in their footsteps. The Arabs rejected forthwith the Israeli approach to the problem and Israel's proposals to resolve it. The implied message has been unequivocal: First, the Palestinian refugees are Israel's creation and responsibility and Israel should not expect the Arab world to solve the problem or share the responsibility for their ultimate fate. Secondly, the Arabs have not been able to crush Jewish statehood, but Israel should not expect them to comply with its alien code of conduct.

Unlike Europe, the pattern in the Middle East has been that war refugees do not resettle but return to their homes when hostilities end and hostilities do not end until their homecoming. Israel has to reckon with this twofold message and it is difficult to foresee how the problem can be solved.

A third focal issue has been the status of Jerusalem. In Palestinian eyes, Jerusalem embodies the entire conflict. Apart from its religious and historical significance, the fate of the holy city also concerns the territorial and refugee issues. Although Jerusalem has maintained a Jewish majority since the middle of the 19th century, the town was also the seat of the Arab elite in Palestine and the traditional center of Arab political life.

In the eyes of the Jews, Jerusalem is primarily the historical capital of the Jewish people, the holy city and for generations the focal point of the yearnings for a return to Zion. The town's fate in 1948 symbolized the UN's failure to implement the partition plan. Israel therefore preferred sharing the city with Jordan to internationalization and both states cooperated in frustrating UN attempts to revive internationalization after the war.

The fourth key issue concerns Arab recognition of and reconciliation with Israel. After their defeat in 1948, the Arab states adopted the same UN resolutions — 181 and 194 — to which they had vehemently objected prior to their military debacle, as the cornerstone of their case against Israel. While insisting on strict fulfillment of these resolutions, the Arab states refused to commit themselves to recognition of and

peaceful relations with their new neighbor. Political and economic relations with Israel, Arab leaders maintained, were the Arabs' own business and should not be linked to implementing UN resolutions.

This attitude persisted until [Anwar Sadat](#)'s visit to Jerusalem in 1977. Since that historical breakthrough, parts of the Arab world have changed their attitude toward Israel; although genuine acceptance of its legitimacy remains fundamentally unresolved. The cardinal issues concerning Israeli–Palestinian relations have not yet been tackled and continue to cast a shadow on Israel's relations with the Arab states as well.

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