

ISRAEL

A HISTORY

7 THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE, 1947-1949



The night of November 29, 1947, following the United Nations General Assembly vote partitioning Palestine, was marked by a spontaneous outpouring of joy. Crowds danced in the streets, the Hallel prayer of praise was offered up in synagogues opened specially in the middle of the night, and children garlanded sinister British armored vehicles with flowers. One who did not take part in the universal celebrations was David Ben-Gurion. Always the realist, he was aware of the bloody toll that the establishment of the Jewish state would exact. A year earlier, at the Twenty-second Zionist Congress, he had told the Yishuv's security leadership that the Jewish forces must be held in check and confrontation with the British avoided, since the state would soon be declared and this would entail war not only with the Arabs of Palestine but also with the regular forces of the Arab states.

At that time the member states of the Arab League, which had been created toward the end of World War Two to form a joint Arab front, were still a long way from passing any kind of resolution on military intervention in Palestine. Ben-Gurion's assessment was based not on solid information but rather on an appreciation of the existing dynamics in Palestine and the Arab states, which would ultimately result in the latter invading Palestine. In July 1945 that same insight had led him to convene a conference of wealthy and distinguished Jews in New York and persuade them to make available to the Zionist Executive the funds necessary to purchase arms-manufacturing machinery from US Army surplus, which was being sold as scrap. The struggle in Palestine, he told them, would no longer be waged solely against Arab gangs but against Arab armies, and it was therefore crucial to establish a Jewish arms industry in Palestine.

Jewish enthusiasm over the UN resolution derived from the fact that the nations of the world had recognized the Jewish people's right to a sovereign state in Palestine. But beyond that there was the feeling that "a great miracle happened here," as the Hanukkah story says. This sense of a miracle, later extended to cover all the events of 1948—"the year of miracles"—prevailed because, contrary to British and Arab expectations, both Eastern and Western blocs supported the draft resolution. As we have seen, the Soviet Union and the Comintern virulently opposed Zionism and were hostile toward Jewish nationalism. In February 1947, when the British decided to leave Palestine, they assumed that the United Nations would not achieve a binding resolution on Palestine, which required a two-thirds

majority, because of Soviet opposition. But the Soviets instead seized this opportunity to undermine Great Britain's standing in the Middle East and expedite its removal from Palestine by supporting the establishment of a Jewish state.

In April 1947 Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet permanent representative to the United Nations, delivered a speech supporting a resolution of the Palestine issue that would recognize the rights of the Jews, as well as the catastrophe that had befallen them in World War Two. Although he expressed a preference for a single binational state, he described the Jews as a nation worthy of a state of its own, and raised the possibility of partitioning Palestine and establishing two states in it, one Jewish, the other Arab. This speech heralded the change in the USSR's position, and on November 29 the USSR and its satellites voted in favor of partition. This was the "great miracle" that stunned allies and enemies alike. The Jews were disposed to explain the change in the Soviet position as a consequence of the Holocaust; some even said that Stalin had apparently expressed his intention of supporting a Jewish state as reparation for what the Jews had endured during the war. Historical research has rejected this explanation. Neither moral principle nor historical justice motivated the Great Powers to vote for the partition resolution. Each was motivated by its own interests.

What appeared to the Jews as a divine miracle, a sign that a global system of justice existed, was perceived by the Arabs as a flagrant wrong, a miscarriage of justice, and an act of coercion. They were being called upon to consent to the partitioning of a country that only thirty years earlier had been considered Arab, and to the establishment of a Jewish state in it. To them recognition of the Jews' national rights in Palestine was insufferable, and the only possible response was armed resistance.

Beneath these differing perceptions lay the seed that later germinated into the opposing Jewish and Palestinian narratives of the 1948 war. The names given the war reflect this stark contrast. Ben-Gurion called it "Milkhemet Hakommehut," a phrase that literally translates as "the War of Sovereignty" but whose actual meaning is somewhat vague and difficult to render. The closest phrase in English is "the War of Independence," which expresses the most important change that resulted from it—the achievement of Jewish sovereignty. The fighters of the Palmach—the precursor and spearhead of the new Israeli army—called it "the War of Liberation," as if it were another anticolonial war leading to liberation from the yoke of a foreign ruler, in this case the British. However, the war was not waged against the British, but against the Arabs. It was not a war of liberation, but a war between two peoples striving for control over the same piece of land. For their part the Arabs referred to the war with the neutral phrase "1948 war," implying that it was just one in a series that had been and would be waged. They focused less on the war itself, its causes and course, which from their point of view were

problematic, than on its outcomes—the loss of Palestine as a state and the exile of some 700,000 Palestinians. For them it was the Nakba (a catastrophe).

The players in the War of Independence drama naturally did not know what we know today. Their insights and reactions, along with their actions and failures to act, occurred in a situation of partial intelligence at best, and lack of intelligence at worst. Decisions were made based on groundless assumptions. Thus, for instance, the Jews did not believe that the British really and truly intended to evacuate Palestine. Some did not believe it at all and found *prima facie* evidence of a covert British conspiracy to destroy the Yishuv, while others wavered between total and partial belief. This mistaken assumption also fed the view that the British sought to engineer a situation in which the defeated Jews would beg them to return and resume governing in Palestine without having to make any concessions to the Jews or support a national home. In fact British policy in Palestine between November 29, 1947, and May 15, 1948, during what is known as “the intercommunity conflict,” was influenced above all by the need to safeguard their withdrawal routes in Palestine and the gradual dismantling of their military and civil infrastructures. After the invasion by the Arab states, the Jews did not believe Britain’s claim that it had actually imposed an embargo on arms shipments to the Middle East. They were unaware that the British government had rejected all its officers’ entreaties to bypass the embargo and that the Arab Legion, the Jews’ main military adversary on the central front, had run out of ammunition and was in desperate straits.

Another example of the disjunction between the intelligence the Jews had at the time and our knowledge today involves the relative strength of the Jewish and Arab forces. The Arab population west of the River Jordan was twice the size of the Jewish population. Although the British diligently guarded the coastline and prevented arms or fighters from reaching the country’s shores, their army could not block its land borders, and the Arabs were able to effortlessly smuggle both arms and fighters overland from the Arab states. The Arab League’s “Arab Liberation Army,” led by Fawzi al-Kaukji, crossed the border even before British rule in Palestine had ended. The resolve and self-assurance (not to say boastfulness) of the Arab media and the Palestinian national movement spokespeople gave the impression that they possessed real military capability, which aroused concern.

On November 30, 1947, the Arabs initiated clashes that ignited the war between the two national communities: a mass riot in Jerusalem’s new commercial center, with burning and looting of Jewish shops. The Haganah’s weak response did not bode well for the future. Roads linking Jewish settlements all over the country suddenly became dangerous, since they passed through Arab villages. The only one that did not was the Tel Aviv–Haifa road. Isolated settlements came under siege. The road to Jerusalem was blocked by Palestinian irregulars. In the

first month of the fighting, some 250 Jews were killed—about half of all the Jewish casualties during the three years of the Arab Revolt (1936–1939). The Arabs’ fighting capacity appeared serious and their military resources limitless.

What we know today is that with the opening of hostilities, Palestinian Arab society started to disintegrate. The ruling elites were unable to impose either civil or military authority. The Arab militias were not formed into an army. The country was in a state of chaos, and the wealthy rushed to depart for the neighboring Arab states. As anarchy increased in the cities following the collapse of civil authority, middle class people sought to follow the upper class and leave Palestine, or at least move to the hilly, Arab-populated areas. As the Jews went on the offensive and fighting intensified, panic ensued, and everyone able to flee took to their heels.

Certainly the Arab nations, with tens of millions of inhabitants, appeared to have vast military potential. Their propaganda machine asserted their intention of driving the Jews into the sea—in other words, total war. In fact, however, no more than a few tens of thousands of ill-equipped, partially trained soldiers took part in the invasion of Palestine. Their command was outdated, with each army driven by its own interests. As a result, there was no coordination and no central command. Until July 1948 the invading armies had a numerical advantage, but thereafter the fledgling Israel Defense Forces (IDF) managed to organize itself and throw enough troops into battle to outnumber the invaders. At the time no one could have known that the Palestinian society would collapse, that the British would not intervene, that the Arab armies possessed only limited fighting capacity, and that there was a huge discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality. Israeli intelligence was still in its infancy, field intelligence was primitive at best, and situation assessments were based more on tough talk than analysis of the facts on the ground. Consequently the war is etched in contemporary Jewish memory as a war to the finish, fought for the nation’s very existence, whose success was due to total mobilization, endless sacrifice and risk of life, and very many casualties.

This longest and most difficult of all Israel’s wars lasted from December 1947 to March 1949. Six thousand Israelis were killed, almost 1 percent of the Jewish population. Fourteen Jewish settlements were destroyed and abandoned, and a few more were occupied and then destroyed. The high command’s “Tel Hai order” stated that no settlements should be abandoned, and that women and children would only be evacuated on the orders of the local commander. However, these instructions were not always followed, due to the press of events. Some 60,000 Jewish refugees left their homes. About one third of Jerusalem’s Jewish population left the city despite orders to the contrary issued by the Hagana and the city’s military governor. Thousands of people who lived on the

margins between Jewish and Arab neighborhoods chose to move to safer locations. Public buildings in Tel Aviv, as well as the entrances and roofs of private buildings, were crowded with thousands of refugees who had fled the city's southern neighborhoods, which were on the front line facing Arab villages and the city of Jaffa. Some wealthy Jews left the country during the fighting, giving many and varied excuses. Nevertheless Jewish society and its elites displayed the needed resolve in withstanding the pressures of the protracted war. Zipporah Borowsky (Porath) wrote to her parents in New York, "There is an overpowering sense of belonging, of being needed and of being wanted. A commitment you cannot reject."¹

Although there were difficulties merging the Haganah and the underground organizations, the authority of the state over all the Jews was accepted, and one army under a single command was formed (see chapter 8). Municipal government functioned well and assisted the population through difficult times, such as the bombing of Tel Aviv, the shelling of Jerusalem, and incidents involving mass casualties. Through tremendous difficulties the communications system, the press, and the economic and financial systems all continued to function. Supplies of vital foodstuffs reached the cities. In addition to fighting, consolidating the society, and setting up state institutions, the country took in more than 100,000 new immigrants during the first year of the war. Some were conscripted into the army, while others settled in abandoned Arab towns.

The first months of the war took place under a shadow of uncertainty regarding the British position. After November 29, 1947, they had allowed both Jews and Arabs to maintain a sort of autonomy within their own areas, but as long as they governed the country the British did not allow Arabs to take over Jewish localities, or vice versa. During the first months of fighting, the Jews were on the defensive, either due to concern about acting forcefully while the British still ruled or because they had not formulated an appropriate response to the new situation, which was unlike their previous experience in clashes with the Arabs. The Jews displayed an initial military weakness, with high casualty figures. For example, in January 1948 thirty-five soldiers sent to reinforce the Etzion Bloc were all killed in a battle with Arab villagers on their way there; one of the dead was Moshe Perlstein, a student from the United States. There were doubts in the international arena about the Jews' ability to survive. On March 19, 1948, the US State Department proposed an amendment to the UN resolution of November 29: withdrawal of the partition plan in favor of a temporary UN trusteeship in Palestine, a sort of mandate without the limitations of the national home.

The main focus in the first phase of the fighting was protecting civilian localities and ensuring safety on the roads. To protect road traffic the Jews organized convoys with armed escorts. The Arabs swiftly learned to attack the con-

voys by calling upon hundreds of residents of villages near the road to help the attackers. At the end of March 1948 the situation reached crisis point, when several large convoys ended in disaster. The Nebi Daniel Convoy, carrying supplies to the Etzion Bloc on the Hebron-Jerusalem road, was delayed on its way back, enabling the attackers to organize. The convoy drove into an ambush and suffered heavy losses; the Jewish soldiers were rescued only through British mediation. In return for being safely evacuated, the fighters had to hand over their weapons and armored vehicles, which were then turned over to the Arabs. A big convoy from Hulda to Jerusalem failed to get through and was forced to return. In the north the Arabs laid an ambush for a convoy on its way to the isolated Kibbutz Yechiam. Nearly fifty fighters fell in the ensuing battle, and the convoy was looted.

Given the convoys' failures to break through to Jerusalem, the city's 100,000 Jews seemed to be cut off and under siege. "Any way you look at it, the picture is already grim," Zipporah Borowsky wrote to her parents. "There have been no convoys out of the city for a week and, worse yet, none have arrived in Jerusalem. Food and water supplies are getting critically low and our worst nightmare, isolation from the Jewish state, may ensue."² This was one of the most difficult moments of the war, causing universal dejection.

Clearly the war had to be waged differently, and April 1948 saw the first attempt at a large-scale Jewish offensive. Operation Nachshon, a military operation on the road to Jerusalem that included taking and destroying villages on both sides of the road, marked a new phase of Haganah action. For the first time an entire brigade of 1,500 was fielded. Until then only relatively small units no larger than a battalion had been deployed. On this occasion, under pressure from Ben-Gurion, the Chief of the General Staff organized a large force to break through to Jerusalem. The year 1948 was distinguished by a sense of trailblazing, since so many things happened for the first time. Operation Nachshon's breakthrough to Jerusalem was a fine example, for it initiated a new phase in the way the Haganah functioned.

The night before the operation an aircraft brought in an arms shipment from Czechoslovakia, which was immediately issued to the fighters. For the first time every soldier had a personal weapon. Operation Nachshon's success owed to actions taken at both ends of the road to Jerusalem, hitting two vital Palestinian units: the headquarters of Hassan Salame near Ramla and the forces commanded by Abdel Khader al-Husseini on the Castel (a strategic hill dominating the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem road). The Castel peak changed hands and al-Husseini was killed, hurting both the operation and the morale of the Palestinian militias. They never recovered from these two blows. The road to Jerusalem would be blocked

again, but in the meantime large supply convoys got through, enabling the city to keep its head above water.

Another drama was unfolding at the same time in the approaches to Haifa. Al-Kaukji's Liberation Army attempted to take Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'emek, with the goal of joining up with the Arab villages on Mount Carmel and outflanking Haifa. A bitter battle ensued, and in a spirited counterattack the Haganah forces defeated al-Kaukji, forcing his retreat from the areas assigned to the Jewish state.

It was now possible to implement Plan Dalet (Plan D) in preparation for the expected invasion by the Arab states. Brigade commanders were instructed to occupy their respective areas, which were all within the general area defined by the partition plan as the Jewish state, but also to defend Jewish settlement blocs outside the partition borders—Jerusalem, for example, which according to the 1947 map was to be under international rule. Pro-Palestinian researchers present Plan D as the draft of a preplanned, total population transfer of the Arabs of Palestine. But as the plan text shows, while it did order commanders to destroy villages and expel the inhabitants if they resisted, it also instructed commanders to leave them where they were if they did not resist, while ensuring Jewish control of the village. There is a great difference between an order for total expulsion and a selective order, which assumes that Arab villages will be able to live in peace in the Jewish state. Tiberias was the first mixed-population city to fall to the Jews. Its Arab inhabitants, who lived in the lower town, were evacuated with the help of the British, who offered evacuation assistance to the weaker side in every such city. The Jews later entered deserted neighborhoods whose inhabitants had left. Haifa fell to the Jews the same week; the Arab residents chose to leave the city and not remain under Jewish rule. Attempts by their Jewish neighbors to persuade them to stay failed. Golda Meyerson (Meir) reported to the Jewish Agency Executive on her visit to the city on May 6, 1948: "It is a dreadful thing to see the dead city. Next to the port I found children, women, the old, waiting for a way to leave. I entered the houses, there were houses where the coffee and pita bread were left on the table, and I could not avoid thinking that this, indeed, had been the picture in many Jewish towns [i.e., in Europe, during World War Two]."³ The British, who now ruled only the Haifa port enclave, did not oppose the Jews' taking control of the city and perhaps even assisted them. According to the partition plan, Tiberias and Haifa were within the borders of the Jewish state. That same month Eastern Galilee and Safed fell into Jewish hands. In Safed the opposite of what happened in Tiberias took place. The British offered to evacuate the Jewish minority in the city, which was also within the borders of the Jewish state, but the Jews rejected the offer. After fierce fighting the Palmach conquered the city, and its Arab inhabitants fled.

The Jewish leadership was astounded by the ghost neighborhoods in these mixed-population cities and, a short time later, in an Arab enclave in Jaffa conquered by the Jews on May 15. How could an entire population just get up and leave? Various contemporary explanations have been proposed. They include fear of the war and fear of the Jews, particularly after the Deir Yassin massacre in early April, in which Jewish fighters attacked an Arab village. Propaganda disseminated both by the Etzel, which was the main actor in the attack, and by the Palestinians magnified this event to dimensions of terror and atrocity far beyond what actually happened, which was bad enough. The prevailing version has it that there were 240 dead. However, updated studies by Palestinian researchers report that the number of dead was closer to 100 and refute the stories of rape that circulated.

Other explanations for the Arabs' wholesale departure include the assumption that the evacuation was only temporary and they would return to their homes when the Arab states' armies were victorious. Another explanation circulated among the Jews, which in time became part of the Israeli narrative: that the Palestinians were ordered to leave Palestine by their leaders in order to facilitate Arab military operations against the Jews. This explanation, based on isolated Arab sources, is baseless. Even at this stage of the war, both the Palestinian leadership and the leaders of the Arab states tried to persuade the population to stay put and not flee the country. But the collapse of Palestinian society and its governance led to mass flight, which according to accepted estimates had reached about 300,000 before May 15, 1948.

THE ARAB INVASION

As the sheer magnitude of the Palestinian Arabs' defeat emerged, and as the horror stories of the Jews' alleged brutality spread throughout the Arab world, the pressure exerted by public opinion on the Arab states to come to the aid of their Palestinian brethren intensified. Despite difficulties arranging a unified military command, as well as mutual suspicion regarding each other's objectives in Palestine, on April 30 the Arab states decided to invade.

The best-trained and best-equipped Arab army was the Arab Legion, which was under the overall command of King Abdullah of Transjordan, with a command echelon that was British. Since the 1930s Abdullah and the Jews had held talks on various occasions, based on their common hostility toward Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini. The king sought to annex to his kingdom those parts of Western Palestine destined for the Palestinian state, a plan that had British government blessing and that the Zionist leadership was prepared to accept. However, public opinion in the kingdom forced Abdullah into the war. Although Jerusalem was supposed to be under international rule, it was the object of clashes between

the Jews and Transjordan. The Jews controlled the western part of the city, the Arabs controlled the eastern part, and each tried to extend its control over the entire city. Abdullah proposed that the Jews accept autonomy within an Arab state on both sides of the River Jordan that he would rule, but they were not enthusiastic about this idea.

On the eve of Israel's Declaration of Independence, Golda Meir made a last-minute visit to the king, who explained that the tremendous pressure he was under was forcing him to renege on the understandings he had with the Jews. Now that he was a member of an alliance, he had to act within its framework. Both sides understood that they were entering a war in which they would make every effort to achieve as many of their objectives as possible with whatever means they had at their disposal (*à la guerre comme à la guerre*). Nevertheless Abdullah hinted that friendly relations between him and the Jews could be resumed after the fighting. The Egyptians were also reluctant to go to war and wavered until the last minute, but they too were swept up by the wave of nationalism engulfing their country. The Iraqis and the Syrians joined in as well. All wanted to thwart Abdullah's expansionist plans. In addition to the Arab states' regular forces, the Arab League Liberation Army's irregulars were active in Central Galilee, which was under Arab control.

On May 12 the Jewish People's Council, a sort of provisional government comprising representatives from the Zionist Executive and the Yishuv political parties that functioned as a parliament, held a decisive meeting. Moshe Sharett, the foreign minister of the nascent state, back from New York, reported that the Americans had proposed a ceasefire and a delay in the declaration of independence. He said that Secretary of State George C. Marshall, a former US Army chief of staff, had warned him not to trust the assurances of generals drunk with victory over the Haganah's successes in April and to make no hasty decisions about declaring the state. At the meeting Yigael Yadin and Israel Galili, the heads of the Haganah, were asked to provide their assessment of the Yishuv's chances of withstanding the Arab attack. Yadin thought the chances were fifty-fifty. The fighters were exhausted from months of continuous fighting, he said, and this had to be taken into account. The Etzion Bloc was about to fall, and its shadow hung over the meeting. The discussion was protracted, the main question being whether to declare or to postpone. In the end the decision was six to four to declare statehood, with Ben-Gurion putting all his weight behind it. The council members were taking a tremendous gamble on the future of the Yishuv.

On Friday afternoon May 14, the members of the People's Council convened at the modest Tel Aviv Museum building on Rothschild Boulevard to hear Ben-Gurion proclaim the Declaration of Independence: "We [. . .] hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Yisrael, to be known as the State of

Israel.” The declaration ceremony was held in Tel Aviv since Jerusalem was under siege, and it was impossible to bring the council members from there to sign the declaration. Thus the young city Tel Aviv had the honor of hosting the signing of the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel. Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: “In the country there is celebration and profound joy—and once again I am a mourner among the celebrants, as I was on November 29.” That evening he began a new diary notebook, which he opened with a dry, understated comment that concealed the fact that he was holding his breath: “At four o’clock in the afternoon, the state was established. Its fate is in the hands of the security forces.”⁴

Although the high command assumed that the Arabs would indeed invade, no solid intelligence backed this up and, of course, the Arab war plans, the size of their forces, and any real information on what to expect were all unknown. These war plans were changed several times on the eve of the invasion, and historians find it difficult to reconstruct them. It is hardly surprising, then, that the dominant feeling at the time among the leaders of the one-day-old state was helplessness in the face of an expected attack from an unknown direction and with unknown force. There were reports that Arab Legion, Iraqi, and Syrian motorized columns with armored vehicles and artillery were on the move from Transjordan toward Western Palestine. Egyptian columns were advancing northward along the coast road and along the ‘Uja–Beersheba road toward the Hebron hills. Egyptian aircraft attacked Tel Aviv, and Arab Legion artillery shelled Jerusalem. Facing them at the beginning of the “Month of Fighting” (May 15 to June 11) were forces armed only with light weapons, since the heavy armaments purchased in Europe and the United States were still on their way to Palestine. Thus there was no way to respond to the shelling or air attacks. Defense was the only option until the scope of the Arab offensive became clear and until the arrival of the artillery, tanks, and aircraft—which could now be brought into the independent state.

The Month of Fighting that occurred between the Arab invasion and the first ceasefire imposed on both sides by the UN was the most difficult and dangerous of the entire war. During that month some 1,600 Jews were killed, about one quarter of all the war’s fatalities. The Syrians swept from the Golan Heights down to the Jordan Valley, advancing through Zemakh, and invaded the heartland of Jewish settlement in the Jordan Valley—an incursion that was deadly for the Jews. The Syrians were halted thanks to the sacrifices made by the inhabitants, a few field cannons that provided mainly moral support, and their own weakness, since they ran out of steam and were forced onto the defensive after encountering resistance. The Iraqi force penetrated south of the Syrian one into the Beit She’an Valley; after failing to take Kibbutz Gesher, it moved into Samaria. Together with the Liberation Army, which had penetrated Central Galilee,

it attempted to take Sejera, the key to Lower Galilee, with the aim of connecting it with Central Galilee and threatening Haifa. This attempt, too, ended in failure, and from that point on the Iraqis confined their action to Samaria, which had been assigned to the Arab state.

The Arab Legion's goal had been to take control of areas designated as part of the Arab state, and as far as possible avoid clashing with the Jews. But it was unable to ignore requests for help from the Palestinians in Jerusalem, who felt threatened after the loss of the Arab neighborhoods in the western part of the city to the Haganah, and especially after the Jews attempted to break in to the Old City, where the Jewish Quarter was under siege. Colonel David Marcus (who used the nom de guerre Mickey Stone), an American Jew who volunteered to help the nascent Jewish army, analyzed the Jews' chances as follows. The Arab Legion had two choices: One, move into Samaria and attempt to cut the Jewish state in half near Netanya. Two, try to take Jerusalem. If the Arabs made the first choice, the Jews would face a life-threatening challenge. But if they tried to take Jerusalem, the state would be saved, since the Legion's advantages as a regular army would disappear in house-to-house combat.

In the event, the Legion went for Jerusalem. It shelled the Jewish part of the city, and once it had taken Latrun, which commanded the road to Jerusalem, it was able to close the road. Bitter fighting ensued between the IDF forces and the Legion. All the IDF's weaknesses were exposed in these clashes with the relatively modern Arab army and its experienced British commanders. The IDF mounted five assaults on Latrun and its emplacements but was unable to overcome the Legion's forces. What became evident in the first two assaults, Operations Bin-Nun A and B, were inexperience, lack of equipment, unfamiliarity with the terrain, lack of intelligence, and hasty organization. These battles became the focus of disagreements between graduates of different military schools of thought—the British Army, the Haganah, and the Palmach—who voiced their mutual resentment. The disagreements within the army were fed by arguments between the head of the operations branch, Yigael Yadin, and Minister of Defense David Ben-Gurion over Latrun and Jerusalem. Yadin believed that Jerusalem was not about to collapse, so there was no need to divert forces that were required elsewhere to take Latrun. Ben-Gurion, however, saw Jerusalem as the heart of the Zionist enterprise, as well as a population center and the country's strategic center. He was gravely concerned about the city's fate and insisted on addressing its cries for help.

The recurring failures to take Latrun and the great losses sustained there (168 dead, most in the first two battles) gave rise to mutual accusations that became the basis of the myth of Latrun as the place where the blood of Holocaust survivors—new immigrants who had been sent into battle untrained—was spilt. The

myth of Latrun did not appear until much later, and became part of Israeli culture, but the actual events it was based on occurred at this period. On the margins of the battle, a few Arab villages south of the road were taken. It turned out that an alternative route to Jerusalem could be opened through them. Thus “the Burma Road” (named after the famous World War Two Allied supply route into China that bypassed the Japanese), a makeshift dirt road, was used to transport equipment and supplies into the city. As a result, when the ceasefire came into force, the Israelis controlled a road into Jerusalem.

Another front that seemed extremely dangerous was in the south. Although the partition plan had assigned the Negev to Israel, the Jewish population there was very sparse. New kibbutzim, most settled in 1946, were spread over a wide desert area between Bedouin tribes and Arab villages. The only Jewish defense forces in the area, they were subsequently reinforced with two Negev Brigade battalions. The Egyptian forces, comprising an infantry brigade (two battalions), an auxiliary battalion with medium weapons, an artillery battalion, an armored battalion, and antiaircraft, antitank, engineering, and auxiliary units, appeared to the Israelis to be a well-equipped and well-armed army. They invaded Palestine in two columns. One advanced northward through the Negev, parallel to the coast. Several kibbutzim stood in the column’s way, and it stopped its advance to mop up these nests of resistance. Each day that the column halted gave the defending forces time to regroup, rearm, and mobilize additional personnel. After taking Kibbutz Yad Mordechai, the column continued to advance slowly, with the road north open before it.

Meanwhile the second Egyptian column turned eastward to join up with volunteer and Muslim Brotherhood forces that had moved through Beersheba to the Hebron hills and attacked Jerusalem from the south. Kibbutz Negba, which sat on the east-west road between Majdal and Beit Jubrin, disrupted communications between the two arms of the Egyptian army. The kibbutz resisted desperately under heavy shelling, and the Egyptians were unable to overcome it. The Egyptian column moving up the coast road advanced slowly and reached Isdud (Ashdod) on May 29. The Givati Brigade was deployed in a heroic effort to block its advance on Tel Aviv. The column was halted at a bridge, which went down in history as the Ad Halom (lit., this far) Bridge. It was either attacked by the Israeli Air Force’s first aircraft, stopped by Givati, or simply was not strong enough to reach the centers of Jewish settlement on the coastal plain, and had never intended to do so.

Even though Israeli attempts to counterattack (at Jenin, Isdud, and Latrun) were unsuccessful, no Jewish settlements within the territory assigned to the Jewish state fell into Arab hands, with two exceptions. The Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem, supposed to be under international rule, fell to the Arab Legion on May

29, and the Mishmar Hayarden moshava on the west bank of the River Jordan was conquered by the Syrians on the eve of the ceasefire. Thirteen Jewish settlements in the area assigned to the Arab state were taken by the Arabs and completely destroyed. The State of Israel managed to halt the invading forces and even take control of Western Galilee, assigned to the Arab state. But a month of incessant fighting had left the Israeli army depleted. It had had to learn warfare in combat situations: mobilizing an army, deploying large forces, air-ground coordination, field intelligence, supply transport, and so forth. The soldiers were exhausted after long months of fighting, and they complained about equipment that was late in arriving and the lack of headgear, water canteens, and personal weapons. Still they withstood this existential test and emerged with the satisfaction of knowing that they had halted the Arab armies. “Just be happy for me that I have been fortunate enough to be here at this time to help give life to this long-yearned-for state,” wrote Zipporah Borowsky at the end of a letter to her parents describing the physical hardships she had endured during the siege of Jerusalem.⁵

A four-week truce was agreed on, and a UN mediator appointed—Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte—who was to propose solutions for the Palestine issue. His mission was a total failure. The Arabs would not accept any proposal whatsoever that meant *de facto* recognition of the existence of the State of Israel. The Israelis rejected any proposal that offered less territory and sovereignty than the November 29, 1947, resolution had given them. Both sides violated the ceasefire. The Israelis brought military equipment into the country, mainly aircraft and armor, while the Iraqis poured additional irregular forces from the Arab states into Palestine.

The fighting resumed on June 9, 1948, and continued for ten days. The main thrust of the Israeli effort was against the Arab Legion forces on the central front. The presence of a strong Arab force threatening the centers of Jewish settlement on the coastal plain on the one hand, and Jerusalem on the other, seemed extremely dangerous. The Jews were unaware that the Legion, short of ammunition, had been forced onto the defensive. They interpreted its deployment in the center of the country as preparation for an attack. Operation Danny, the main operation in the battles of those ten days, was planned to conquer Lydda (Lod), Ramla, Latrun, and Ramallah, but managed to take only the first two and the international airport. It also extended the corridor to Jerusalem southward, making it possible to lay the “Road of Valor” and a wide-diameter water pipe that ensured a water supply to Jerusalem. At the same time, Operation Dekel was mounted and conquered Central Galilee and its main city, Nazareth.

It was during Operation Danny that the expulsion of the 50,000 inhabitants of Lydda and Ramla took place. Believing that the Arab Legion was rushing to their aid, the inhabitants of Lydda rose up against the occupying army. The Legion did

not arrive, but the uprising demonstrated to the occupiers the great risk of leaving a large, hostile population in the rear of the advancing army. There was also the strategic consideration of having a large Arab population in the center of the country, close to the airport and on the Tel Aviv–Jerusalem road. The expulsion of this civilian population by the military was evidently approved by the political leadership. It was also the only case of organized removal of entire cities on Jewish initiative. The Ramla exiles were bused to the Arab Legion lines. Those from Lydda walked to the same lines. It was not a particularly long walk (some fifteen kilometers), but it was hot, the people were loaded down with their possessions, and the shock both of the defeat and of being forced into exile was great.

After the Arab invasion Israeli policy toward the Palestinians had hardened. The bitter fighting and high casualty rates caused resentment and anger. The Jews perceived the Arabs of Palestine as guilty of warmongering and bringing the invaders into the country. They were seen as a fifth column that collaborated with the invaders, so it was dangerous to leave them in the army's rear. In most cases the Palestinian civilian population fled as the army approached, but the army also took the initiative, driving out inhabitants and destroying their villages so that they would not return. At the same time, the inhabitants of Nazareth, who had waved white flags, remained where they were, and Ben-Gurion forbade their expulsion. The residents of Abu Ghosh were returned to their village after their expulsion on the initiative of a local commander. Policy regarding the Palestinians was inconsistent—each commander acted as he deemed fit based on local circumstances.

A second truce was declared on July 19, 1948. The Arab governments, and especially the Arab Legion command, were in favor of it. But since the press in the Arab states portrayed the fighting in Palestine as crowned with victories, the public was angered by the ceasefire, which they saw as surrendering to the dictates of the Western powers, thus enabling the Zionists to regroup and strengthen their forces.

When the second truce—which did not have a specific time limit—was announced, the Arab League Liberation Army was in the Galilee, the Iraqi expeditionary force was in Samaria, and the Negev was cut off, with the Egyptian army controlling the east-west Majdal–Beit Jubrin road, which went as far as Hebron. The Arab Legion was in the central region, but with the opening of the Road of Valor and the laying of the water pipe to Jerusalem, the battle against it had lost urgency. Although there were still clashes in Jerusalem along the line between Arab- and Jewish-controlled areas, in fact the front there had stabilized.

The largest and strongest invading army belonged to the Egyptians, and Egypt was by far the largest Arab state. UN mediator Bernadotte proposed a territorial

exchange: Israel would relinquish the Negev—which was assigned to it by the partition plan, but which it did not hold—in exchange for Western Galilee, which it had conquered (and which was originally assigned to the Arab state). But this was an option that the Israelis would not accept. Ensuring Israeli control of the wide expanses of the Negev, which comprised some 50 percent of the Jewish state, became urgent in view of the possible challenge to its sovereignty there posed by the Bernadotte plan. Yet attacking the Egyptian army and driving it out of Israeli territory would mean breaching the truce and provoking the UN, which Israel was not eager to do. There was also concern that the Iraqis might take advantage of the IDF concentrating its forces in the south and try to cut the state in two from east to west in the area of Netanya. Members within the Israeli government disagreed about what to do. Ben-Gurion decided in favor of the attack and wrote in his diary: “Today the government took the gravest decision since we decided to declare statehood.”⁶

On October 15, Operation Yoav was launched to break through the Egyptian lines and open the way to the Negev. Whereas the previous operations against the Arab Legion had territorial objectives, Operation Yoav was aimed at routing the Egyptian army. It was one of the most difficult operations of the entire war. The Egyptian army displayed fighting ability and resolve, and only after repeated battles did the IDF manage to break through its east-west lines and open the way to the Negev. But the operation had not yet achieved its objective of destroying the Egyptian army—and meanwhile the sand in the hourglass was sifting away. The UN Security Council convened and declared a ceasefire, as the Egyptians remained sitting in Gaza and Beersheba. A last-minute decision by the Israelis diverted forces to take Beersheba, a vital road junction with a biblical name. By October 21, 1948, the IDF held Beersheba.

This operation marked a watershed in the history of the war, for despite its previous failures, the IDF now proved itself capable of overcoming a regular army in a breakthrough battle. Although the Egyptian army remained in the Gaza Strip and the “Fallujah Pocket” on the eastern end of the east-west road, which the Israelis were unable to take, it had spent much of its force and no longer posed a threat. What was more, the Arab coalition was not cohesive, and none of its armies rushed to assist the Egyptians. Finally the concern that the UN would impose sanctions on Israel also turned out to be exaggerated.

At the end of October, Operation Hiram was launched in the north. It gave Israel control of Central and Northern Galilee, as well as territory along the northern border with Lebanon and Syria. The fighting was mainly against the Liberation Army, which fell to pieces. Israel even occupied some Lebanese villages as a bargaining chip for ceasefire negotiations. The entire area from the Jezreel Valley to the international border was now in Israeli hands. However, the

operation did not succeed in returning Mishmar Hayarden, the Syrian bridgehead in Israeli territory, to the Israelis.

Both sides now attempted to improve their positions before the next attack. The Egyptians feared an Israeli attempt to occupy the Gaza Strip, while the Israelis were concerned lest the Egyptians attempt to break out of the Fallujah Pocket and reoccupy Beersheba (whose loss the Egyptians did not acknowledge). The Egyptians refused to enter ceasefire negotiations, demanding that the Israelis first withdraw to the pre-Operation Yoav lines. The Israelis concluded that they had no alternative but to drive the Egyptians out of the country. Operation Horev, at the end of December 1948, demonstrated the tremendous change in the balance of power and in Israel's operational capability since the resolution of November 29, 1947. The IDF fought straight through the Negev, overcame the line of Egyptian strongholds, and destroyed the southern arm of the Egyptian army. IDF forces operated inside the Sinai Peninsula, occupied Abu Ageila, and approached the airfield at El Arish. British and American pressure on Israel led to a withdrawal of Israeli forces to the international border. An Israeli attempt during the withdrawal to occupy Rafah, thus cutting off the Gaza Strip, did not succeed, and the Strip remained in Egyptian hands.

In the wake of Operation Horev, Israel and Egypt negotiated an armistice on the island of Rhodes, with the aid of the American mediator Ralph Bunche. The negotiations were not easy, but on February 24, 1949, an agreement was signed, making Egypt the first Arab state to withdraw from the war. Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: "After the establishment of the state and our victories on the battlefield, this is the greatest event in this year of epic events."⁷

One more objective remained: control of the port city of Eilat on the Red Sea coast. The plan was to use minimal force, deploying two columns to prevent the Transjordanian army, which had occupied outposts in the Arava desert on the Israeli side of the border, from intervening in troop movements. On March 10, 1949, the two columns reached Eilat, and Israeli sovereignty on the shores of the Red Sea was established. This concluded the war's large-scale operations.

Just as the Arab states had invaded separately and had not collaborated in the fighting, so the war was concluded separately with each state. Following the success of the IDF's large-scale operations against the Egyptians, the other Arab states sought a dignified exit from the war. The problem was that an armistice agreement with the Israelis amounted to de facto recognition of the existence of a Jewish state, which was completely unacceptable both to the Palestinians and to the other Arab nations. The armistice with the Egyptians had been achieved under pressure from the Egyptian army, which was encircled in the Fallujah Pocket and had no other way out of the siege. The armistice agreement, which recognized the international border between Israel and Egypt, included an Israeli

concession: the area on both sides of the border around Nitzana (‘Uja) was declared a demilitarized zone and was made the seat of the UN Armistice Commission, which oversaw the implementation of the armistice. The Gaza Strip, with its thousands of refugees from Jaffa and villages in southern Israel, remained under Egyptian rule. It persisted as a constant source of bitterness and of guerilla and terrorist operations against Israel.

Signing the armistice agreement with Egypt opened the way for negotiations with Jordan. These began with a secret agreement on Jerusalem; the Jordanians and Israelis preferred to divide the city between them rather than introduce international rule. Thus this city, which had been the focus of clashes between the Arab Legion and the IDF, became the first item of agreement between the two countries. As we have seen, King Abdullah sought control over the areas that would come to be known as the West Bank, and in this respect he was encouraged by Britain. Israel was prepared to recognize his control over the West Bank as the only reasonable option, preferring it to control by the Palestinians (which in any case was only theoretical, since there was no Palestinian authority or government to which power could be handed over). There were also the previous understandings between the Zionist Executive and the king, which had been suspended due to the war. Now these agreements could be resumed between Israel and Abdullah, who to the Israelis had always been the least hostile of the Arab rulers.

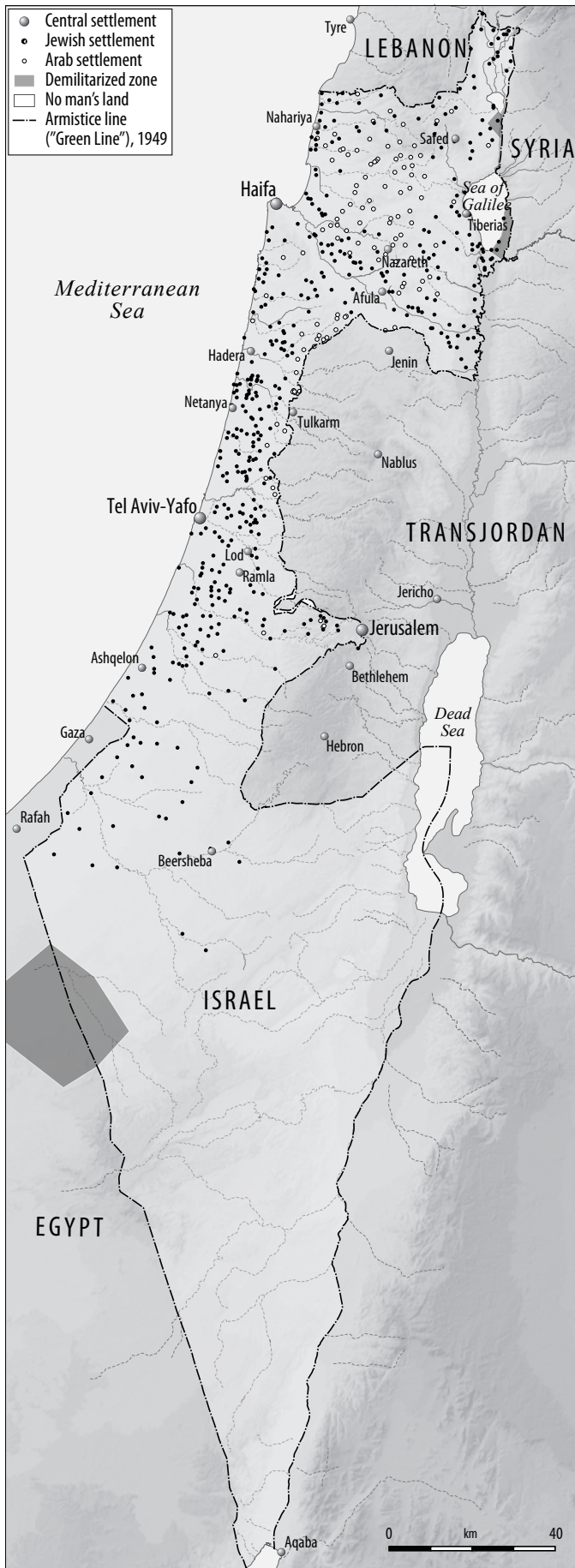
As a condition to the armistice, Israel demanded the hilly ridge dominating Samaria and Wadi ‘Ara, in the area where Israel’s “waist” is narrowest. The Jordanians hesitated, concerned about the reaction of Palestinian public opinion. But preparations for a military operation to occupy Samaria convinced them that an agreement was preferable to another round of fighting. The Arab villages in the area passed into Israeli hands, as did their inhabitants, who preferred to live under Israeli rule rather than as refugees in Jordan. As part of the agreements with Jordan, the Iraqi expeditionary force encamped in Samaria withdrew to Iraq and was replaced by the Arab Legion. Thus Iraq could claim that it had neither recognized the Jewish state nor signed an armistice agreement with it (April 3, 1949). The agreement with Lebanon was the least complex of the armistice agreements. Israel and Lebanon recognized the international border as the frontier between them, and Israel withdrew from the Lebanese villages it had occupied in Operation Hiram. Also as part of these agreements, Syrian army forces close to the border withdrew to the north.

The agreement with Syria of July 20, 1949, was the last to be signed. The Syrians refused to recognize the international border and demanded that the border run north to south down the middle of the Sea of Galilee. The Syrian chief of staff, Husni Za‘im, who had seized power in a military coup, proposed a peace

treaty with Israel that would include the settlement of 250,000 Arab refugees in Syria, if Israel would agree to Syrian control over half of the Sea of Galilee, Israel's main natural reservoir. Syria even agreed to share the River Jordan water sources with Israel. However, these terms were unacceptable to Israel, which ultimately accepted the American mediator's compromise proposal based on the 1947 map. Syria withdrew from its bridgehead at Mishmar Hayarden, and demilitarized zones on both sides of the border along the Hula Valley, the River Jordan, and the Sea of Galilee were defined. These zones became objects of incessant clashes between Syria and Israel, both of which claimed sovereignty over them. The entire Sea of Galilee and a ten-meter strip on its eastern shore were included in Israeli territory. But the Syrians never gave up trying to partially expropriate it from Israel. Husni Za'im did not live to see negotiations on a peace treaty with Israel; he was murdered in a new military coup less than a month after the armistice agreement was signed, and his peace overture was remembered as a thrilling (for the possibility of peace it held out) but marginal episode. Ever since, it has served those seeking to attack Israel for missing an opportunity for peace, since Israel treated this military adventurer with suspicion, trusted neither him nor the stability of his regime, and thus rejected his proposals.

The thunder of the cannons now ceased. Some young generals tried to persuade Ben-Gurion to occupy the entire country to the River Jordan border, but Ben-Gurion was already immersed in the vital mission of bringing in masses of new immigrants and absorbing them. Maintaining a large army imposed a heavy burden on the Israeli economy, and Ben-Gurion wanted to end the war and send the soldiers home so that he could concentrate on building the nation and the state. The armistice agreements had drawn what came to be known as the Green Line demarcating the borders between Israel and its neighboring states. These agreements were seen as an important step toward peace treaties that, it was thought, would soon be signed. At the time, no one even imagined that the armistice agreements would be the only bilateral agreements signed between Israel and Arab states until the peace treaty with Egypt at the end of the 1970s.

The State of Israel emerged from the War of Independence bruised and wounded as a result of the high casualty figures and destruction of settlements and towns. But the state also emerged from the war elated. Israel had been established. It was a reality, and it had successfully overcome its attackers. The inexperienced IDF had emerged as the strongest army in the region. Not only had Israel maintained control of all the areas assigned to it by the 1947 UN resolution, it had actually extended its borders. After the Arab invasion Israel no longer considered itself bound by the partition borders. Before the first truce the balance of power had prevented it from enlarging its territory, but after the "ten days" battles it was able to extend its hold on the center of the country, the Galilee, and the northern Negev



MAP 4.
 THE 1949 ARMISTICE
 AGREEMENT GREEN LINE
 BORDERS. (SEE PLATE 4.)

(see maps 3 and 4). From Ben-Gurion's viewpoint Israel's achievements in the war went far beyond his most optimistic hopes. A courageous yet cautious statesman, he knew the limits of the possible and did not want to provoke the Western powers, which he perceived as Israel's support in the long term. That was why he preferred to reach agreements with Jordan and Syria and avoid the military option.

The war's biggest losers were the Palestinians. By the war's end about 700,000 Palestinians had been exiled from their homeland. In the first stage of the war, the Palestinian exodus from the areas assigned to the Jewish state was a consequence of the collapse of governmental systems in Palestinian society and the anarchy that reigned in their place. In the second stage, following the Arab invasion, there were numerous instances in which the IDF expelled the Arab population and destroyed its villages to prevent its return. The war was a matter of life or death, and the belief that the Palestinians had caused this catastrophe hardened the hearts of officers and men who suffered harsh experiences of loss and displays of abuse by the enemy. An estimate by Arab historian Arif al-Arif put the number of Palestinian dead in the war at 15,000, amounting to more or less the same percentage of the population as the Jewish fallen. Although acts of massacre and brutality were perpetrated by both sides, in Palestine there were no acts of mass slaughter like those witnessed elsewhere in the twentieth century. If we compare this war with the contemporaneous conflict between India and Pakistan following their partition, it appears that Palestine did not see the same level of brutal bloodshed. But this was small consolation for the hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees gathered in the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

The Palestinian flight in the first stage of the war left the Israelis aghast. They were unable to comprehend this phenomenon of an entire population fleeing its home and leaving ghost towns behind. But once they realized what was happening, they saw it as a great miracle that completely changed the nature of Israel. The partition plan had assigned some 400,000 Arab inhabitants to the Jewish state, approximately 40 percent of the total population. About thirty Jewish localities were supposed to come under Arab rule. The discussions and preparations for the establishment of the state had assumed that it would include a large Arab population. Now, given the destruction of all the Jewish settlements on the Arab side, and the Arab evacuation from the Jewish side, a new reality materialized: two ethnically homogeneous states, a mainly Jewish one and a purely Arab one. The conclusion was that the State of Israel could not allow the Arabs to return to their homes. Their flight had become refugeeism. At a meeting of the provisional government on June 16, 1948, Moshe Shertok (Sharett) addressed this issue: "Had any of us said that one day we must get up and expel them all—it would have been considered madness. But if it came about during the upheavals of war, a war declared on us by the Arab nation, and as the Arabs themselves were

fleeing—then it is one of those revolutionary changes after which history does not return to the status quo ante.”⁸

This was a new policy, formulated gradually in response to the difficulties of the war, Arab resistance to Jewish rule, and the slowly dawning perception of a historic, revolutionary change in the demographic balance—an opportunity that should not be missed. From the summer of 1948 on, the army’s orders were to prevent the Arabs from returning to their villages, either by force of arms or by destroying the villages.

In the context of the time, Israeli policy on the refugee issue was not considered out of the ordinary. It was only three years since the end of World War Two, whose *casus belli* had been the presence of German minorities in Poland and Czechoslovakia. The conclusion of that war had involved massive population movements. Fixing the Poland-Germany border along the Oder-Neisse River mandated the expulsion of some eight million Germans to the west. Territories in what had been eastern Poland were transferred to the Russians and became part of Ukraine; the Polish population was either expelled or forced to flee. The Beneš Decrees enacted in Czechoslovakia dispossessed three million Germans in the Sudetenland, who were forced to leave the country. Removing hostile elements who bore guilt for the war and creating ethnic homogeneity in Eastern and Central Europe were considered appropriate responses to a catastrophe perceived to originate from the multiplicity of minorities in the countries of the region. The Israeli leadership saw itself confronting precisely the same situation. The Palestinians had caused the war and they now bore its consequences. Decreasing the Arab minority in Israel was considered a natural outcome of the Palestinians’ open hostility to the state. Moreover, just as Germany had absorbed the German refugees from the east, and Poland had absorbed Polish refugees, there seemed no reason why the Arab states should not absorb the Palestinian refugees.

As it turned out, however, of all the refugees created in the second half of the 1940s, the Palestinians were the only ones not absorbed by the countries where they lived. Thus they became a permanent problem in the Middle East. The demand that they return to their previous homes was impractical from the outset, for the war had erased the reality to which they wanted to return. In UN Security Council Resolution 194 of December 1948, which called upon Israel to allow the refugees to return, the return was made conditional on their willingness to live in peace side by side with the Israelis. Because this resolution called for recognizing the existence of the State of Israel, the Arab states rejected it. The Palestinians later used it as propaganda, while obscuring the context in which it was passed.

The Arabs were not ready to recognize the Jewish state. The shock of defeat and refugeeism did not create a desire for conciliation; it further inflamed the

myth of the return, perpetuating the refugee problem and preventing the refugees from integrating into the countries where they lived. The myth of the return formed part of the expectation that there would be a “second round”—another war that would erase the shame of defeat and bring about the destruction of the Jewish state. The 1948 war was perceived as an accident that would be swiftly rectified, since the demographic balance of power favored the Arab states and would enable them to triumph in the long term. This perception not only perpetuated the refugee problem but also was behind the refusal to make peace with Israel. It was therefore not reality but rhetoric that shaped the Palestinian national memory and consciousness. This rhetoric, fostered by education and propaganda, has fettered the hands of the policy makers and denied them the possibility of conciliation with Israel.

NOTES

1. Porath, *Letters from Jerusalem*, p. 66.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
3. Minutes of the Jewish Agency Executive, Jerusalem, 6.5.1948, Zionist Archive, Jerusalem.
4. David Ben-Gurion, *Yoman milhamah: Milhemet ha'atzma'ut* (War Diary: War of Independence), vol. 1, Gershon Rivlin and Dr. Elchanan Oren (eds.), Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1982, p. 416.
5. Porath, *Letters from Jerusalem*, p. 193.
6. Ben-Gurion, *Yoman milhamah*, vol. 3, 6.10.1948, p. 736.
7. *Ibid.*, 24.2.1949, p. 970.
8. Moshe Shertok at a meeting of the provisional government, 16.6.1948. Cited by Yoav Gelber in *Kommemiut venakba* (Independence and Nakba), Jerusalem: Dvir, 2004, p. 284.

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