

#### 4. Independence, But No Peace

This is the fourth part of our series, "A Short History of Israel". If you wish to read the preceding parts, see the **Table of Contents** for links to them. We welcome comments and criticisms. Do tell us what you think.

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After many months of fighting, Israel had succeeded in surviving, defeating the Arab armies and consolidating its now larger territory. But over 6,000 Jews – about one percent of the Jewish population of Palestine – had been killed. Many more were wounded or made homeless. The survivors had been traumatised, and their economy and agriculture were devastated.

Jewish immigration was prodigious, especially from the refugee camps of Europe and from Arab countries where the Jews were being forced out. Within about four years the immigrants who had arrived after independence already outnumbered the 'pioneers', but their successful absorption was only one of the achievements of which the builders of the new state became proud. Israelis soon began to make world class contributions to science, technology, the arts and agriculture. Israel is a free and prosperous nation with a distinctive, diverse and tolerant culture, exceeding many of the most optimistic expectations of its founders. Of the approximately 100 new independent states that have been created since 1945, Israel is the only one of which that is true. And it has remained a haven for Jews fleeing persecution, or simply seeking a better life, from anywhere else.

Theodor Herzl had said of the First Zionist Congress in 1897: "In Basle I founded the Jewish state. Maybe in five years, certainly in fifty, everyone will realise it." He was proved right, almost to the year. Had he lived, he would have been 88 years old at the time of Israel's Declaration of Independence.

The Israeli War of Independence formally ended in 1949 with armistice treaties between Israel and its four neighbours: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. (Iraq assigned the territory it had captured to Jordan and withdrew without signing an agreement.) Under the treaties, Israel agreed to withdraw from all Egyptian and Lebanese territory it had captured, and the Arab countries agreed to withdraw

from all territory they had captured inside Palestine, other than

Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

The treaties also required the parties to resolve their differences peacefully in future. This was not to be. The Arab countries stressed that they remained at war with Israel. So as Israel struggled to rebuild its economy, absorb vast numbers of destitute immigrants and build the institutions of a modern society, its people were under constant attack. Arab soldiers and civilians frequently murdered Israelis venturing within rifle range of the border. Arab artillery would shell Israeli towns. Every few days, Arab terrorists (known at that time as 'fedayeen') would cross the border and murder Jews. Israeli farmers would plough their fields in armoured tractors to protect themselves from snipers. In border towns, people slept routinely in underground shelters.

Israel annexed all the territory that it had captured in Palestine. Most Israelis considered this to be the legal and justified action of a victim of an aggressive war. Having just sustained heavy casualties in defending indefensible borders in such a war, they felt morally obliged not to return to them, especially as their enemies were still committed to Israel's complete destruction regardless of borders.

Israel refused to allow back or compensate the Arabs who had fled during the war. The Israeli government believed that a settlement of Arab refugees' claims should form part of a peace treaty, along with the claims of Jewish refugees who had been expelled from Arab-held parts of Palestine, and other grievances arising out of the same war. Israeli attitudes on this issue hardened further during the following few years, when hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees arrived from Arab countries, most of them having been dispossessed.

Israel adopted a single-chamber Parliament (the Knesset) elected by proportional representation. This caused a proliferation of political parties and shifting coalitions, but one can classify the parties into three main groups, namely:

- The successors of the mainstream Zionist movement. This group, whose largest member today is the Labour Party, was dominant in every ruling coalition in the Knesset until 1977.
- The successors of the Revised Zionist movement. The largest member of this group today is the Likud party, which has since 1977 alternated with the Labour Party in being the main party in government.
- The religious parties. The largest, the National Religious Party, was the main party representing religious Jews who supported Zionism. Other religious Jews were still suspicious of Zionism. A small proportion still considered the State of Israel sacrilegious and actively opposed it. Because of the proportional-representation system, religious parties have frequently held the balance of power in shaky coalition governments, and have often won concessions in return for their support even though all of them combined have never gained enough votes to lead the opposition, let alone the government.

The religious parties (of all kinds) had three main items on their

political agenda. First, they wanted state funding for their own activities, especially religious schools; second, they wanted special privileges for orthodox Jews, such as exemption from military service; and third, they wanted certain restrictions on the lives of all Israelis, such as a prohibition on shops opening on the Sabbath. Many secular Jews (who have always been the overwhelming majority in Israel) felt anger and contempt for the non-Zionist religious factions because, during the 1930s, many European rabbis had discouraged their parishioners from fleeing while it would still have been possible. At the time of the UN partition plan in 1947, ultra-orthodox groups within Palestine had petitioned the UN not to allow secular Jews to rule over them.

The first act of the Provisional Government of Israel in 1948 had been to abolish all restrictions on the immigration of Jews. In 1950 this was formalised in the Law of Return, which stated that on reaching Israel any Jew (with certain exceptions such as criminals fleeing justice) must be allowed entry. A companion law granted such immigrants immediate citizenship. The exact definition of 'Jew' did not matter much at first, but within a few years a struggle developed between the Zionistic interpretation laid down by Ben-Gurion (which defined a Jew for the purposes of the Law of Return as "anyone who **declares in good faith that he is a Jew**") and religious definitions. The present definition is a compromise: Law-of-Return privileges are granted to Jews according to the religious definition (including converts to, but not from, Judaism), and to their spouses, children and grandchildren, and also to Righteous Gentiles (non-Jews who have risked their lives to save Jews from persecution) and their spouses, children and grandchildren. In parallel with the Law of Return, Israel has a normal immigration policy resembling that of other Western countries: over the years it has accepted many non-Jewish immigrants and asylum-seekers, from Vietnamese boat people to Muslim refugees from **Bosnia** and Kosovo, as well as people whom the secular authorities deem to be Jews but who are not in any of the above categories. The combination of all these arrangements has ensured that very few, if any, people satisfying Ben-Gurion's definition have ever been denied entry to Israel (or citizenship, eventually) and large numbers of people not satisfying it have also been welcomed and have become citizens.

Jordan failed to comply with the Armistice Treaty provision for free access to holy places for worshippers.

In 1951, King Abdullah of Jordan was assassinated at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, for allegedly wanting to make peace with Israel. He was succeeded by his grandson, King Hussein.

The few Jews remaining in Arab countries continued to be persecuted in the traditional ways, but now in addition they were often charged, individually or collectively, with spying for Israel, and punished accordingly. Blood libels and other incitements to anti-Semitic hatred were encouraged by Arab governments, becoming part of the curriculum of schools and the vernacular of academics, politicians, writers, journalists and diplomats. By the time of the Suez war in 1956 (see below), the standard-issue equipment of all

Egyptian officers included a copy of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, translated into Arabic.

Arab leaders issued incessant threats of war, mass expulsion of Jews from Palestine, and sometimes genocide.

## Part 5: **The Suez Crisis**

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