

3. The War of Independence

This is the third 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 the war, the Allies' policy was to force all refugees, including 250,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors, to return to their countries of origin. However, many of the German and Austrian Jewish survivors did not wish to live among the murderers of their families. Many Jews from Eastern Europe found that their properties had been seized and the new occupiers were violently opposed to their return. Many did not want to go and live under Stalinist rule. Over a thousand Polish Jews who did try to return home were massacred in anti-Semitic riots in several Polish cities. At least one, in **Kielce**, was inspired by a classic anti-Semitic blood-libel (that The Jews were kidnapping Christian children in order to drain their blood). Furthermore, a high proportion of Jewish survivors had become committed Zionists, and wanted to go to Palestine to help build a Jewish state. All Jews who refused to return to their countries of origin were detained by the Allies in camps in Germany and Austria. Those who were caught trying to make their way to Palestine were imprisoned in Cyprus.

In 1945 the League of Arab States (or Arab League) was formed, and as one of its first acts, declared a boycott of all Jewish businesses in Palestine.

When it became clear that Britain was not going to reverse its White Paper policy, the Haganah became a Jewish independence movement. They ceased their former close cooperation with the British authorities in capturing Irgun and Lehi members, and instead formed an alliance with those organisations on condition that they follow the orders of a joint United Resistance Movement. They continued collecting, and began manufacturing, weapons. They continued clandestine military training, even inside the detention camps in Europe. They attacked immigration offices and other property – on one occasion destroying ten of the eleven bridges over the river Jordan – and sought out and killed individual Arabs who had murdered Jews.

The United States put pressure on Britain to allow 100,000 Jews to

leave the camps and enter Palestine for humanitarian reasons. Britain refused. But it announced that it would withdraw from its Mandate (now a United Nations Mandate) in 1948. The United Nations proposed a partition plan for the aftermath [MAP]. It allocated the Jews more territory than the Peel Commission had, mainly by including most of the virtually empty (and, at that time, virtually uninhabitable) Negev desert. However, this territory did not include most of the Jewish historic or holy sites, nor many Jewish settlements, nor Jerusalem; moreover it was not defensible militarily. This plan was a bitter prospect for the Zionists, but they accepted it. The Arabs refused.

When the British left, the Jews of Palestine declared their new State of Israel in the territory allotted to them by the United Nations. The Chairman of the Jewish Agency and the Zionist movement, David Ben-Gurion, was named Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of Israel. The Haganah was renamed the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). The first two countries to recognise Israel were the United States and the Soviet Union. Most other countries, but no Arab ones, followed suit. The first act of the provisional government was to abolish all restrictions on Jewish immigration. Jewish refugees began pouring into Israel.

Despite the fact that a new state in the Arab portion of Palestine would likewise have been immediately recognised by the nations of the world, including Israel, *the Arabs of Palestine did not declare a new state in their portion*. Instead, Palestine was invaded by the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, plus a token contingent from Saudi Arabia [MAP].

The PLO was not founded until seventeen years later, but large numbers of Arab irregulars from Palestine and abroad had already been staging murderous attacks on a scale that dwarfed anything the country had yet seen: 1,200 Jews, and even larger numbers of Arabs, were killed in those attacks and in the open fighting that broke out as a result, during the few months before the Declaration of Independence. The departing British had made only sporadic attempts to halt this violence or to defend the borders and Jewish population of Palestine from incursions by the Jordanian army and by irregulars.

The Arab armies had initial success: the IDF was outnumbered and greatly outgunned – having at the outset no heavy artillery, few armoured vehicles, no military aircraft, and no navy (all of which the Arab armies had) – and was defending impossibly vulnerable territory. Though the IDF was better trained, and many of its members were veterans of the British army in the Second World War, the Jordanian Army in particular had been well trained and armed by Britain and had many British officers including its commander, Colonel John Glubb. The local Arabs also inherited most of the fortifications (except in Jerusalem, where the Jews seized them) and weapons left behind by the British.

The fighting was intense and bitter. Some Jewish villages put up astonishing resistance with grossly inferior and makeshift weapons. Some managed to hold out for weeks in epic sieges, but many were

overrun by Arab armoured columns. In some of those, the inhabitants were massacred; from some, they were taken into captivity; from most, they were merely expelled, or fled. In no location that had been captured by Arabs were any Jewish inhabitants allowed to continue living in their homes. Jerusalem was cut off and besieged. Its Jewish inhabitants began to go hungry and were bombarded continuously by artillery. The Arab armies advanced towards the Israeli population centres on the coast from the east, south and north. The Egyptian Air force bombed Tel Aviv and the Egyptian Navy began a blockade of Israel's ports and landed troops from the sea.

The IDF managed to halt all the Arab advances before they reached the main Israeli population centres, except the Old City of Jerusalem with its ancient Jewish Quarter, where the Jews surrendered and were expelled.

The United States had imposed an arms embargo on both sides, and kept it in place after the Arab armies attacked. Britain continued to supply the Arab armies. Because of a fortuitous quirk of Cold War politics, Israel was briefly able to buy weapons from communist Czechoslovakia. When these began to arrive, the IDF began to take the initiative.

They captured several key towns, and territory to connect their populated areas. They broke through to Jerusalem, relieved the siege but failed to recapture the Old City, which was then annexed by Jordan; Israel held the newer, western part of Jerusalem, and the city remained partitioned from then until 1967.

Jordan also annexed the other Palestinian territory it had captured, called it 'the West Bank' – forbidding the use of the term 'Palestine' on official documents referring to that territory – and expelled all its Jews. Egypt expelled all the Jews from the Palestinian territory it had captured (the Gaza Strip), and remained in occupation there until 1967. During the following few years, about 800,000 Jews remaining in Arab countries were either forced or 'allowed' to leave on condition that they leave their property behind, and nearly all of them came to Israel.

During the war, about 725,000 Arabs living in the territories allocated to or captured by Israel moved to the Arab-controlled area of Palestine or to neighbouring countries, and about 30,000 to locations within Israel. There were diverse reasons for this: some were fleeing the fighting; some were combatants; some heeded radio broadcasts by Arab authorities, urging them to get out of the way of the invading armies and of imminent bombing by Arab air forces; some, such as the inhabitants of villages overlooking the Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem road, were expelled by the IDF for military reasons. Some were expelled in acts of spite, revenge or callousness.

There was one massacre of Arabs by Jews: During the campaign to relieve the siege of Jerusalem, the Irgun offered, and was authorized, to help the IDF by capturing an Arab village, Deir

Yassin. At the end of the battle, they murdered some of the

villagers. The circumstances of the deaths, and the number killed, remain bitterly disputed to this day. In 1987 a study by Bir Zeit University (a Palestinian Arab university on the West Bank) concluded that the number murdered was between 107 and 120.

The worst example of expulsion occurred at the Arab towns of Lydda and Ramla. These were astride the country's main north-south and east-west roads and railway, and the IDF needed to capture them during a desperate battle to defend Tel Aviv from the main strength of the approaching Jordanian army, while also holding off the Syrian army which had crossed the river Jordan in the north and was using its superior artillery and air superiority to advance from its bridgehead. Ben-Gurion took the decision to force all 45,000 inhabitants of the two towns to leave, partly to allow the IDF to fight there (about 250 civilians had already been killed in Lydda in the crossfire of the previous day's battle with the Jordanians), but partly to impede the Jordanians' advance and increase the logistical burden on them. Some of the refugees were carried to the edge of Jordanian-held territory in buses driven by the Palmach, but most had to walk, and in the end some 335 of them died of dehydration and exhaustion on the way. The tactic worked – the Jordanians were delayed for long enough – but it caused moral revulsion and a fierce debate among the Israeli leadership, and was not used again.

Probably the most common single reason why Arabs left was that they feared that they would be harmed if the Jews won the war. In the event, the 160,000 who remained in Israel fared incomparably better than those who left. The latter were not permitted by any of the Arab governments into whose jurisdiction they came (including their 'own' Jordanian government on the West Bank) to lead normal lives. On the contrary, they were herded into refugee camps where they were systematically prevented from rehabilitating themselves or integrating into the local populations or (except in Jordan) acquiring citizenship of the host country. Today, over half a century later, although a proportion of refugees have been integrated, the basic policy of intentional misery remains in effect: the camps, including those in the areas now administered by the Palestinian Authority, are still occupied.

In contrast, the Arabs who remained in Israel became full citizens of the new state, and those who were internally displaced were resettled and integrated. They became, and they and their descendants remain to this day¹, the only Arabs in the Middle East who elect representatives to a democratic parliament, or live under the rule of law, or enjoy full human rights in the Western sense of the term. The only exception to their legal equality was that they were not allowed to join the IDF and were exempted from conscription. However, two small ethnic groups, the Druse and the Circassians, later asked for, and were granted, exemption from this exemption. In addition, Bedouins were granted the right to join the IDF voluntarily, and traditionally do so, and so were Christian Arabs².

When the United Nations envoy Count Folke Bernadotte proposed a

new partition plan which, among other things, again did not assign Jerusalem to Israel, he was assassinated by Lehi. Ben-Gurion ordered: "Arrest all Stern Gang [Lehi] leaders. Surround all Stern bases. Confiscate all arms. Kill any who resist." Virtually all Lehi members were indeed arrested and Lehi ceased to exist.

Ben-Gurion then demanded that the Irgun be dissolved. Any members of the Irgun who unconditionally handed over their weapons and joined the IDF, would receive amnesty for their previous crimes. Otherwise they would be treated as criminals. The Irgun, in a bitter statement in which they said that they evidently valued the lives of IDF soldiers more than the Israeli government did, complied, and its members joined the IDF.

On October 1, 1948, four and a half months after the termination of the Mandate and Israel's simultaneous Declaration of Independence, a council of prominent Palestinian Arabs met in Gaza and declared themselves to be the 'Provisional Government of All Palestine', electing the former Grand Mufti (al-Husseini) as its President. This claim was briefly recognised by most Arab states but by no other state, but was angrily rejected by King Abdullah of Jordan. A rival group of dignitaries in Jericho voted for union with Jordan and declared Abdullah King of all Palestine. Both claims were soon forgotten: Egypt did not permit the 'Provisional Government' to meet again, and Jordan reluctantly gave up its territorial claims beyond the West Bank when Britain threatened to cut off arms supplies.

But the Arab nations and people still insisted on the principle of Arab rule over the whole of Palestine, and would continue to fight and kill for this principle for decades to come.

1. Note added 2005-02-03: This was written before the Iraqi election on 2005-01-30.

2. Note added 2005-01-21: Since the 1990s, Muslim Arab Israelis not from those groups have also been allowed to **join the IDF**, and a few do so each year.

Part 4: Independence, But No Peace

Thu, 05/15/2003 - 00:45 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

Bias

Up until this point I have found this document to be free of bias and generally factually accurate, and remarkably so for this is sensitive material. However in this account, virtually every paragraph is colored by bias, half-truths, and stilted language. Every Arab attack is "murderous" where the Jewish attacks are "disputed" or put in the context of military necessity.

Furthermore I can tell you that as an Arab-Israeli, your remarks about our status are typical, by which I mean fatally flawed. While it is true that the framework for democratic participation exists, in practice this is not the case. A quick example-- while there are only

a few laws against the transfer of land, the reality is that every Arab-Israeli town is surrounded by land owned by the JNF-- which specifically prohibits the selling of land to Arabs. This is why Arab towns in Israel experience overcrowding and artificially high land prices. I could also get into state-sponsored efforts to ensure there is no united Arab political party in Israel, institutional racism in the biggest state industries, detention of citizens without charge, the land confiscations that continue to this day, and the murder of peaceful protestors but I would need more space.

The bottom line is that this document was fair in parts I and II, but dives utterly towards couched language, ignorance of facts, and willful distortion in this section. I suggest that your readings of history are incomplete and that you also are purposefully distorting the facts in a fairly obvious manner, a simple analysis of the language you employ when discussing Arab and Jewish massacres should be your first clue that you have allowed passion to overwhelm reason.

by a reader on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 19:18 | [reply](#)

How should we write it?

Imagine groups A and B. lots of members of group A murder members of group B. group B defends itself sometimes, and sometimes observers make up stories about how group B is the same as group A, but these observers are lying. How would you write the history of that? Would you say the groups are morally equivalent? Wouldn't *that* be the lie? Just because history is on someone's side doesn't make it false/biased.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Thu, 07/03/2003 - 00:41 | [reply](#)

Re: Bias

The issue of whether we have described every Arab attack as murderous and no Jewish attack as murderous can be easily resolved by reading the piece.

We agree that this exercise of comparing the language we actually used with what 'a reader' alleges we used would provide a clue as to who has allowed passion to overwhelm reason.

We also agree with Elliot Temple that a mere numerical imbalance in the number of times that the respective sides' killings are described as murder is no indicator of bias.

by [Editor](#) on Tue, 10/21/2003 - 14:29 | [reply](#)

Re: Bias

As a reader from New Zealand Trying to create a speech upon "the

question of Israel/Palestine", if anyone i should be unbiased. personally i have to side with the first comment on this topic, as i am beginning to suspect a large creep in of bias. there has been no mention so far of the annual \$92 billion in funding provided by the US government aiding Israel yet, or the fact that Israel has invaded and Annexed the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which it claims to be part of Israel as international borders are drawn. what i thought was an unbiased essay is now something that i must recheck my facts upon, in order to cross-reference and get the real truth. i also agree with the statements made that the language used is geared heavily in favour of Israelis.

Yours Sincerely,

Andrew Lynch

by a reader on Wed, 08/25/2004 - 08:13 | [reply](#)

Re: Bias

Yes, you should re-check the facts, among other things.

by [Editor](#) on Thu, 08/26/2004 - 01:12 | [reply](#)

Ignorance Breeds Hatred

It is refreshing to read such a well-written, accurate and concise account of the history of Israel. I teach Argumentation and Debate at the university level and use your site often. It is unfortunate how many college students think that Israel was created in 1948 by a British declaration "stealing land from the peaceful Palestinian shepherds and farmers".

Once the facts of history are presented it is hard not to support the only island of Democracy in a sea of tyranny.

by Paul A. Deis on Thu, 02/03/2005 - 15:30 | [reply](#)

Re Bias

Well, Being fair you did say: "a fortuitous quirk of cold war politics" - which is an introduction of bias in that it supposes it was a good thing that Israel managed to get some better weapons. More appropriate would be "a quirk of cold war politics"

However, I find this a very good, and largely unbiased read. Thank you.

by a reader on Sun, 01/22/2006 - 01:43 | [reply](#)

Fortuitous

Thank you very much for the kind remarks.

Fortuitous in its best-established usage means happening by chance

rather than design. A fortuitous event may or may not be a good thing. A different and originally mistaken usage has been gaining ground, probably through confusion with 'fortunate' or 'felicitous'. See the usage note [here](#).

by [Editor](#) on Sun, 01/22/2006 - 02:17 | [reply](#)

Presentation

I am reading these articles in order and the closer you get to the present it seems you really do get biased. You have to agree that massacres are presented differently.

Most of the things I've read here are fatally omitted from the average History lessons and this seems quite appalling. Restricted immigration, for example, no history teacher ever mentioned that! Anyway, I think it's hard to remain objective when you're trying to write such a thing, you may take sides at a moment without realizing. Just make sure the research you do is not all based on books published by Jewish historians.

by [pauline](#) on Thu, 06/22/2006 - 06:23 | [reply](#)

fortuitous

fortuitous means:

"happening by accident or chance rather than design"

-- Elliot Temple

My Blog

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Thu, 06/22/2006 - 09:22 | [reply](#)

Fair and Balanced?

In a previous chapter you describe Britain's promise to provide a Jewish homeland in Palestine under the Balfour Declaration. Didn't Britain also make the same promise to the Arabs in exchange for their support during WWI?

by [bleacherdave](#) on Mon, 07/17/2006 - 05:32 | [reply](#)

Re: Fair and Balanced?

That's a good point. Thank you very much. Actually it wasn't 'the same promise' (and anyway it did not apply to the territory that is now Israel), nor did we refer to the Balfour Declaration as a promise. But yes, the McMahon letter certainly should have been included in our History, and it will be, shortly.

by [Editor](#) on Sun, 07/23/2006 - 11:22 | [reply](#)
