

CONTESTED HISTORIES

The Israel-Palestine Conflict

2nd edition

Neil Caplan

WILEY Blackwell



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Contesting the Past

The volumes in this series select some of the most controversial episodes in history and consider their divergent, even starkly incompatible representations. The aim is not merely to demonstrate that history is “argument without end,” but to show that study even of contradictory conceptions can be fruitful: that the jettisoning of one thesis or presentation leaves behind something of value.

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*Dedicated with deep sadness to the many victims of this
and other conflicts*

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Preface to the First Edition

The June 1967 war in the Middle East marked my personal awakening, as a graduate student searching for an area of doctoral research, to the complexities of the Arab–Israeli conflict. My first impulse was a problem-solving one, flowing naturally from local experience as my own country, Canada, was celebrating its centennial and engaging in lively public debates about how the English and French nations could continue living harmoniously under a single federal régime. But a year of exploratory reading and study in London unexpectedly sparked in me a fascination with the historical origins and development of the Arab–Israeli conflict, totally shifting my focus from the future to the past.

Since that time I have been researching, writing, and teaching almost exclusively about the history, diplomacy, and psychology of this dispute. Digging in archives through primary sources and writing articles and monographs for a scholarly audience are the activities I have enjoyed best as I became a self-trained historian. At the same time I also developed a deep interest in and respect for the psycho-social complexities of this protracted conflict.

Very little about the dispute and the attitudes of the various parties is simple and straightforward, making it especially difficult to summarize events and issues succinctly while doing justice to the complexities involved. To create this volume for Wiley-Blackwell's *Contesting the Past* series I have combined lecture notes from introductory courses taught at various universities with some critical reflections about how the conflict is portrayed in academic and other writing. This book situates itself among several overview histories already available, but goes beyond the mere retelling of what happened to focus on a series of core arguments that seem to deadlock protagonists and historians alike.

One of the challenges in producing this book has been to choose an appropriate level of detail in setting out the history of the conflict. I have chosen to use the main text to provide a basic overview, while referring readers to sometimes lengthy endnotes for additional details, nuances, and contrary interpretations that could be consulted in accordance with each person's wish or need to know more.

Finally, a word about perceptions and bias. One of the hazards of writing on this subject is the near certainty that there will always be someone who will react to a word or phrase as being an oversimplification or a distortion of events or people's motivations. I have done my best to anticipate such reactions by carefully choosing my language with sensitivity to the subtleties of wording and tone. Readers, I hope, will appreciate my attempts to allow each of the contested versions of the history of this dispute to receive a fair hearing alongside its rivals.

I am grateful to have a number of colleagues and friends who have generously helped me by answering queries and by critiquing draft chapters. Several are bound to disagree with some aspects of my presentation of the history or the historians, so I will spare them the embarrassment of naming them here and instead have conveyed my thanks privately. Most generous of all, my wife Mara provided much-needed emotional support and sacrifices that allowed me optimal conditions for long days of writing.

Originally written December 2008, with slight modifications

Preface to the Second Edition

This new edition seeks, first, to update the timeline of events to include a number of significant developments that have taken place during the 10 years since publication of the first edition. To this end, the original concluding chapter of Part II (“Histories in Contention”) has been replaced by two new chapters.

Secondly, academic scholarship on the subject continues to grow, along with more popular presentations of the conflict. Accordingly, I have expanded endnote references to include selected new publications.

I was pleased to notice that two of the central concepts or threads used in the first edition have been replicated and further developed by other authors: viz., the focus on a mutual sense of *victimhood* of the main protagonists, and the treatment of the conflict as one based on *competing narratives*. The popularity of the latter approach is reflected in a variety of new studies¹ as well as international pedagogical initiatives, as will be mentioned in [Chapter 13](#).

During the last few years the Israel–Palestine conflict has marked a number of historic anniversaries. These have sparked not only specialized academic conferences but also public declarations by governments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), along with an outpouring of new books, magazine articles, and radio and TV documentaries serving to refocus public attention on this unresolved conflict.

In 2017 alone there were no fewer than three major milestones to commemorate: 100 years since the Balfour Declaration, 70 years since the historic United Nations (UN) Partition plan, and 50 years since the June 1967 war and Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The year 2018 offered four additional milestones: the 70th anniversary of Israel’s independence and of the Palestinian *Nakba*, 40 years since the 1978 Egypt–Israel talks at Camp David, and 25 years since the signing of

the 1993 Oslo Accords. These anniversaries were accompanied by either celebration or denunciation, in accordance with the positions of those marking the historical events. This revised edition of *The Israel–Palestine Conflict* was in preparation precisely while these special commemorations and retrospective reviews were circulating and generating critical reflections about strategic missteps or missed opportunities.

The decade between the first and second editions has seen several fresh attempts at resolving the conflict – none of them successful. The period has sadly witnessed new eruptions of violence and bloodshed, a notable decrease in trust between Israelis and Palestinians, and a corresponding deterioration of the quality of debate and discussion both among the parties on the ground and those observing it via the news media or academic institutions. Reflecting this downward spiral, the tone of many of my original concluding observations has been modified toward more pessimistic assessments (e.g. the title of the final chapter changed from “*Overcoming*” to merely “*Grappling with the Obstacles*”). Not only has the conflict come no closer to resolution in recent years; for many participants and observers in 2019, things are worse than ever.

Montréal, Québec, Canada
April 2019

Note

- [1](#) See e.g. Haas, P. (2008). Moral visions in conflict: Israeli and Palestinian ethics. In: *Anguished Hope: Holocaust Scholars Confront the Palestinian–Israeli Conflict* (ed. L. Grob and J.K. Roth), 14–29. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Golani, M. and Manna, A. (2011). *Two Sides of the Coin: Independence and Nakba, 1948: Two Narratives of the 1948 War and Its Outcome*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Republic of Letters, for the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation; Adwan, S., Bar-On, D., and Naveh, E., PRIME. (2012). *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of*

Israel-Palestine. New York: The New Press; O'Malley, P. (2015). *The Two-State Delusion: Israel and Palestine – A Tale of Two Narratives*, chs. 1–2. New York: Viking; Roberts, J. (2013). *Contested Land, Contested Memory: Israel's Jews and Arabs and the Ghosts of Catastrophe*. Toronto: Dundurn; Black, I. (2017). *Enemies and Neighbours: Arabs and Jews in Palestine and Israel, 1917–2017*. London: Penguin/New York: Grove Atlantic. For critiques of the dueling narratives approach, see White, B. (2016, 18 August). Why we must see Israeli policies as a form of settler colonialism. *MEMO: Middle East Monitor*, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160818-why-we-must-see-israeli-policies-as-a-form-of-settler-colonialism> (accessed 16 September 2018); Parsons, L. (2018). Separate but unequal. *Times Literary Supplement*.

Abbreviations

AACI

Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry

ALA

Arab Liberation Army

API

Arab Peace Initiative

BDS

Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions

CZA

Central Zionist Archives

DFLP

Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

DOP

Declaration of Principles

DP

Displaced person

ETZEL

Irgun Zvai Leumi

GAA

General Armistice Agreements

HMG

His Majesty's Government (UK)

IDF

Israel Defense Forces

LEHI

Lohamei Herut Israel (aka Stern Gang)

MAC

Mixed Armistice Commission

MK

Member of the Knesset

NGO

Non-Governmental Organization

NSU

Negotiations Support Unit

OPT

Occupied Palestinian Territories

PCC

(UN) Conciliation Commission for Palestine

PFLP

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

PIPA

*The Palestinian–Israeli Peace Agreement: A
Documentary Record*

PLO

Palestine Liberation Organization

PNA

Palestine National Authority

PNC

Palestine National Council

UN

United Nations

UNEF

United Nations Emergency Force

UNGA

United Nations General Assembly

UNRWA

United Nations Relief and Works Agency

UNSC

United Nations Security Council

UNSCOP

United Nations Special Committee on Palestine

UNTSO

United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization

Note on Sources

Wherever they can be found, I give preference to citing *primary* sources and first-person accounts, ahead of what historians classify as *secondary* sources. The former are the original, unvarnished building blocks needed to create any historical narrative: texts of public pronouncements, official or private correspondence, memoranda of conversations, minutes of meetings, personal diaries – generally, accounts of what happened given by people who were actually present when it happened. Many of these primary sources are conveniently available in documentary collections, notably:

- *The Israel–Arab Reader*, edited by Walter Laqueur and Dan Schueftan,¹ and
- *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, edited by Yehuda Lukacs.²

Given the frequency of such references, they are given in short citation form in the endnotes. I also frequently refer readers to primary documents available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.ca>, a collection of over 125 documents created to accompany *Negotiating Arab–Israeli Peace*, a book that I co-authored with Laura Zittrain Eisenberg.³

Historians and other writers use such primary documents as raw material to craft their own treatments of the events, creating secondary works (articles, books) based on their own particular selection and organization of the materials and offering their personal interpretations of the events and protagonists. There is more on this in [Chapter 12](#), “Writing about the Conflict.”

As English-speakers we are foreigners vis-à-vis the main protagonists to this conflict. Their main languages of communication and publication are Arabic and Hebrew. Despite this linguistic barrier, we are nonetheless well

supplied with a good sampling of works by Arabs and Israelis in English translation. Assuming that the bulk of my readers are not able to easily access materials in Arabic or Hebrew, I have cited English-language sources almost exclusively. But, as my colleagues in the region rightly caution, on some issues – and especially the historians’ debates ([Chapter 12](#)) – we outsiders get to see only the tip of the iceberg via translations. We miss out on detailed discussions and the rich variety of ideas that continue to circulate in Arabic and Hebrew academic literature, memoirs, fiction, and films.

While recognizing the greatly expanding use of web-based resources, my endnote citations reflect my enduring belief that a full and proper study of this subject requires heavy reliance on old-fashioned printed materials (books, journals, pamphlets, magazines) available on library shelves.

Notes

- [1](#) Laqueur, W. and Schueftan, D. (eds.) (2016). *The Israel–Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict*, 8e. New York: Penguin – to be cited simply by its short title through this book. Earlier editions of this valuable work were co-edited by Laqueur and the late Barry Rubin.
- [2](#) Lukacs, Y. (ed.) (1992). *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3](#) Eisenberg, L.Z. and Caplan, N. (2010). *Negotiating Arab–Israeli Peace: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities*, 2e. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Part I

Introduction

1

Problems in Defining the Conflict

If ever there was a contemporary conflict that deserved to be included in a series of historical works entitled “Contesting the Past,” it is surely the Arab–Israeli or Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Perhaps exaggerating, one scholar considers it “the single most bitterly contentious communal struggle on earth today.”¹ Any attempt to simply recount its main events in chronological order is bound to be contested by someone – even if that account is deliberately neutral in intent, purged of any overt editorializing, and without judgments on motives, causes, or effects. Of course, such bare chronologizing is of very limited use to anyone, and the study of history is a much more complicated affair.

In a letter to US president Harry S. Truman in December 1945, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organization, wrote: “Palestine, for its size, is probably the most investigated country in the world.”² More than 50 years later, a French intellectual and one-time associate of Cuban revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara, agreed: “No conflict in the world,” wrote Régis Debray, “is as well documented, mapped and recorded.”³ Juxtapositions and contrasts such as these occur frequently and provide ironic relief to those engaged in researching this enduring and perplexing dispute.

Not surprisingly, there exists a wide variety of ways of understanding and representing the Israeli–Arab or Palestinian–Israeli conflict. These efforts at explanation, whether in the realm of politics, lobbying, media, academe, or the general public, are often reflections of the highly contentious conflict itself, including its bitterness and complexity. A familiar pattern is the presentation of one side’s “true” account as against the other party’s “lies,” “myths,” or “propaganda.” Less simplistic and more useful are the scholars, journalists, and analysts who acknowledge and discuss the parties’

competing “narratives” of the conflict – the different stories, versions, perceptions, or viewpoints adopted by those people most intimately involved.

In Part II of this book we outline the history of 140 years of the interrelated Israeli–Palestinian and Arab–Israeli disputes from their early local origins to conflicts of regional and global dimensions. Reflecting – and respectful of – the clash of narratives, we highlight 11 “core arguments” that have emerged between Israelis and Palestinians and that contribute to the unhappy fact that the conflict is still today unresolved and very resistant to resolution. My intentions are modest, yet challenging enough: to explore this conflict with all its paradoxes and complexities, if possible to demystify some of its features, and to offer some understanding about why the histories of Palestine and Israel – the narratives held dear by Palestinians and Israelis – are so contested.

What’s in a Name?

A number of problems stem from the complexities that flow from the very act of naming the conflict and its main protagonists. In naming the conflict and defining what it is about, one is immediately, if unwillingly, taking a position that will surely be disputed by someone holding a different view. The conflict analyzed in these pages has been described variously as the “Jewish–Arab” conflict, the “Zionist–Arab” conflict, the “Arab–Israeli” conflict, and the “Israeli–Palestinian” conflict.

If we choose to call it the “Jewish–Arab” conflict, we are pitting the Jewish people as a whole against the Arab people as a whole. Is this an appropriate or accurate definition? As we will see below ([Chapter 2](#)), the designations Jews and Arabs refer to wide groups extending beyond those directly contesting the land of Palestine/Israel. Although some writers do refer to the “Arab–Jewish conflict,” in these pages we avoid this designation because it is too broad and may lend itself to confusion and misleading interpretations.

What is missing from such a wide definition are the specifically *political*, *national*, and *territorial* aspects of the conflict that exists today. By using the term “Zionist” rather than “Jewish,” we supply these missing components for one of the protagonists. Zionists believe in and support the quest by Jews to “return to Zion” (i.e. Jerusalem and the Holy Land); in the modern period, this implied also support for the creation of a Jewish state in the area. Applying this definition, it would be accurate to say that, prior to the creation of the Israeli state in 1948, we were dealing largely with a “Zionist–Arab” and a “Zionist–Palestinian” conflict.

Who, then, are the Arabs? Not really a symmetrical designation to Jews, Arabs may be defined as an ethno-national group sharing a common history, the Arabic language, and cultural roots emanating from ancient tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. The “Arab–Israeli” conflict – perhaps the most commonly used of all these various titles – is in many ways an apt name for the territorial and political dispute since 1948 between the state of Israel, on the one hand, and the 20 or so states that consider themselves to be Arab, on the other.

Still, even this preferred designation carries with it a number of drawbacks. As we have noted, it may lead to the erroneous notion that the conflict began in 1948 with the creation of Israel, ignoring at least half a century of a pre-existing Zionist–Arab and Zionist–Palestinian dispute. Also misleading is the notion that the Arab world is a single entity that displays uniform attitudes and policies vis-à-vis Jews, Zionism, and/or Israel. In effect, historical experiences, policies, and attitudes vary among individual Arab peoples and states, with the result that it is misleading to suggest that the Arabs, as a single unit, constitute one of the two antagonists in the Arab–Israeli conflict.⁴

A further potential drawback of this definition of the conflict is that the broad term “Arab” can sometimes overlook or understate the existence of the specific struggle between Zionists (pre-1948) and Israelis (since 1948), on the one hand, and the Arabs of *Palestine* (or

Palestinians), on the other. Thus, for example, while most discussions from 1948 to 1973 accurately speak of a wider *Arab–Israeli* conflict, in the period since 1973, and more so since 1993, many people came to see the conflict as being at its core a narrower *Israeli–Palestinian* conflict for sovereignty and self-determination on the same territory – albeit one with broader Arab dimensions.

In this book we retain the latter two ways of naming the conflict, using the common and convenient “Arab–Israeli conflict” to denote and include its wider regional dimensions, while referring to the “Palestinian–Israeli conflict” when focusing on its core and its two main protagonists. This way of defining the conflict and its protagonists, it should be pointed out, is hotly challenged by some, especially right-wing Israelis and Zionists.⁵

Loaded Terminology

As with discussions of other conflicts, terminology can deliberately or unintentionally favor one side over the other, and betray the biased perspective or partisan support of the writer or speaker. These dangers can be amply illustrated for the Arab–Israeli conflict with regard to general descriptors, the naming of the protagonists, the naming of events, and the labeling of maps.

As in all accounts of conflict and war, terminology is enlisted to help separate the heroes from the villains. The commitments and feelings of the writer or observer are reflected in the choice to be made between terms with pejorative connotations (e.g. “terrorist”) and those that put the actor in a more favorable light (e.g. “freedom-fighter”). With both sides claiming virtue and nobility, observers end up taking sides by choosing when to speak of acts of “aggression” and when to refer to acts of “resistance” against that aggression.

In the naming of the main protagonists, there are, for some people, automatic connotations to be adopted, or avoided. The word “Zionist,” for example, can be

associated with the antisemitic pamphlet *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a forgery that purports to provide evidence that Jews are members of a treacherous cabal plotting to take over the world. In the eyes of Palestinian Arabs who struggled against Zionism for control over Palestine/*Eretz-Israel* (Hebrew: “land of Israel”), the term “Zionists” will understandably be viewed negatively as signifying those who took over lands and the country they claim as theirs. Indeed, the mythological powers supposedly available to world Jewry have played their part in engendering fear, and sometimes respect, among the opponents of Zionism.

Some international campaigns on behalf of Palestinian rights have resulted in further vilification of the term “Zionist” by virtue of a resolution equating Zionism with racism adopted by the United Nations General Assembly [UNGA] in 1975 (rescinded in 1991).⁶ While recognizing the existence of these pejorative connotations, our use of the word in these pages will more often reflect the usage of those who, historically, have self-identified as Zionists, i.e. adherents of ideological and political movements seeking to create a national home or state for the Jewish people in the land of Palestine/*Eretz-Israel*.

Some readers who reject the legitimacy of the Jewish state may take offense at this book’s references to “Israel” and “Israelis,” preferring to designate the latter as “Zionist invaders” or “occupiers” and the former as “the Zionist entity” or “Occupied Palestine.” Likewise, other readers may have difficulty with my frequent references to “the Palestinians,” preferring instead to refer to these people as “Arabs,” consistent with their belief that there is no such thing as a separate Palestinian people who are entitled to a separate Palestinian political state.

Similar concerns exist about the naming of events and episodes in the history of Arab–Zionist relations before 1948 and Israeli–Arab relations after that date. Outbreaks of violence that occurred during the period of British rule (1917–1948) have been given different names, with sometimes strikingly different connotations.

Calling them “disturbances” seems an exercise in understatement, while the terms “riots” or “rioting” suggest primitive and criminal behavior on the part of the population, usually referring to the Arabs but sometimes also the Jews. Some Palestinian and Arab nationalists prefer to designate these events as “protest demonstrations” (that turned violent), or acts of “resistance” against British occupation and Zionist colonization of their land.

Perhaps the most famous case of differences over the naming of events is the 1948 war (more accurately, the fighting that broke out in December 1947 and ended in January 1949). For Israelis it is their “War of Liberation” or “War of Independence” (in Hebrew, *milhemet ha-atzma’ut*) full of the joys and overtones of deliverance and redemption. For Palestinians, it is *al-Nakba*, translated as “The Catastrophe” and including in its scope the destruction of their society and the expulsion and flight of some 700 000 refugees.

Subsequent Arab–Israeli wars are also subject to disputes over naming. From an Israeli viewpoint, the 1956 war between Israel and Egypt is the “Sinai Campaign” or “Operation Kadesh,” from the Israel Defense Forces’ [IDF] battle plan. From an Egyptian and Arab perspective, however, it is known as the “Tripartite Aggression,” highlighting the collusion between the invading Israeli army and the subsequent Anglo–French military operations in the Suez Canal Zone under the pretext of protecting the Canal from the two warring parties. More neutral ways of referring to this war would be to call it the “Suez War” or the “1956 war.” For some, referring to the June 1967 as the “Six Day War” highlights and glorifies the swiftness and apparent ease of the Israeli victory, thereby perhaps offending the Arabs in their loss. Similarly, to use the name “Yom Kippur War” to refer to the October 1973 attack by Egypt and Syria against Israeli forces along the Suez Canal and on the Golan Heights would be to present the war as seen from an Israeli perspective that underlines the ruthlessness of an enemy who chose Judaism’s holiest day to launch a surprise attack. Generally, the best way

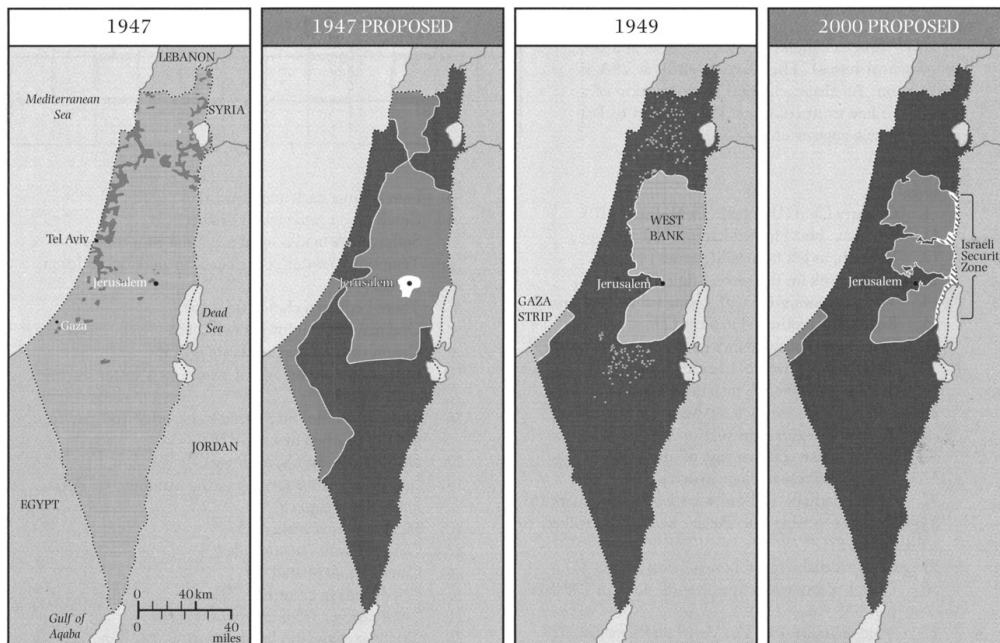
to approach neutrality in such naming is to refer to wars by their calendar dates.

Maps

Finally, another contested aspect of the Arab–Israel conflict is the geographic nomenclature on maps.⁷ Maps in Arabic will normally designate the entire contested territory as *Filastin* (Palestine), without reference to a country named “Israel” – a political act of non-recognition. By contrast, most world and regional maps published in English and European languages between 1949 and 1967 indicated no “Palestine” (which disappeared as a distinct legal entity following the 1947–1949 war) but rather the new state of “Israel” within its 1949 armistice boundaries (see [Map 6.2](#)).

Many maps in Hebrew since 1967 have shown Israel without clearly demarcating the Palestinian territories captured by Israel from Jordan (the West Bank), Egypt (the Gaza Strip), and Syria (the Golan Heights) in the June war of that year; others retain the 1949 armistice borders, also known as “the green line.” Maps published by the settlers’ movement in Israel will ignore the green line and indicate the Palestinian territories captured in 1967 by their Biblical Hebrew names, *Yehuda ve-Shomron* (Judaea and Samaria) – emphasizing their inclusion in the Biblically promised *Eretz-Israel* (Land of Israel) and the intention that they be part of the modern Israeli state. These latter territories have become known generally and almost universally as “the West Bank” (i.e. of the Jordan River). Along with the Gaza Strip, these territories have been designated variously as “administered territories” or “disputed territories” (in mainstream official Israeli publications), or “liberated territories” (in publications promoting a “Greater Land of Israel” beyond the 1949 frontiers). General international usage will use the terms “occupied territories” or “occupied Palestinian territories” (“OPT”) – see [Maps 7.1, 11.1](#).

Juxtaposition and labeling of maps can also be highly politicized as a way of suggesting aggressive motives or registering a claim. Thus, for example, both Palestinians and Zionists utilize maps to illustrate how their people have lost territory – whether actually inhabited or promised. A negative portrayal of Israel as an aggressive and expansionist state is frequently achieved by placing maps in sequence showing the growth of Israeli-assigned or -held territory from the 1947 United Nations [UN] partition proposal to the 1949 armistice lines to the new map following Israel’s victory in the 1967 war (Maps 6.1 and 6.2). A typical example can be found in a 1999 volume of collected conference papers entitled *The Future of Palestine and Israel: From Colonial Roots to Postcolonial Realities*, which includes in its introduction a series of maps entitled “Palestinian loss of land, 1946–1999.” Each of four maps indicates the changing shape and size of “Palestinian land” and “Jewish land,” with the use of the word “stage” signaling nefarious intent on Israel’s part.⁸ [Map 1.1](#) is an American magazine’s illustration making the same point.



After Britain takes control in 1920, the Jewish portion of Palestine's population grows from one tenth to one third by 1947, when Jews own almost 7 percent of the land—mostly in the north and west—with the rest living in cities.

A U.N. plan offers 53 percent of the land for a Jewish state and 47 percent for an independent Arab state, with Jerusalem declared an "international" city. The fate of Arab towns remaining within the Jewish state is not explicitly addressed.

By war's end, 418 Arab towns have been depopulated, and Israel controls 78 percent of the land (where some Arab towns remain), with the West Bank left to Jordan to prevent a Palestinian state there, and Egypt in control of the Gaza Strip.

Israel's plan for a Palestinian state includes isolated Arab pockets of Jerusalem and a network of Jewish settlement roads (not shown) dividing the West Bank into 29 pieces, its eastern edge under Israeli control without formal annexation.

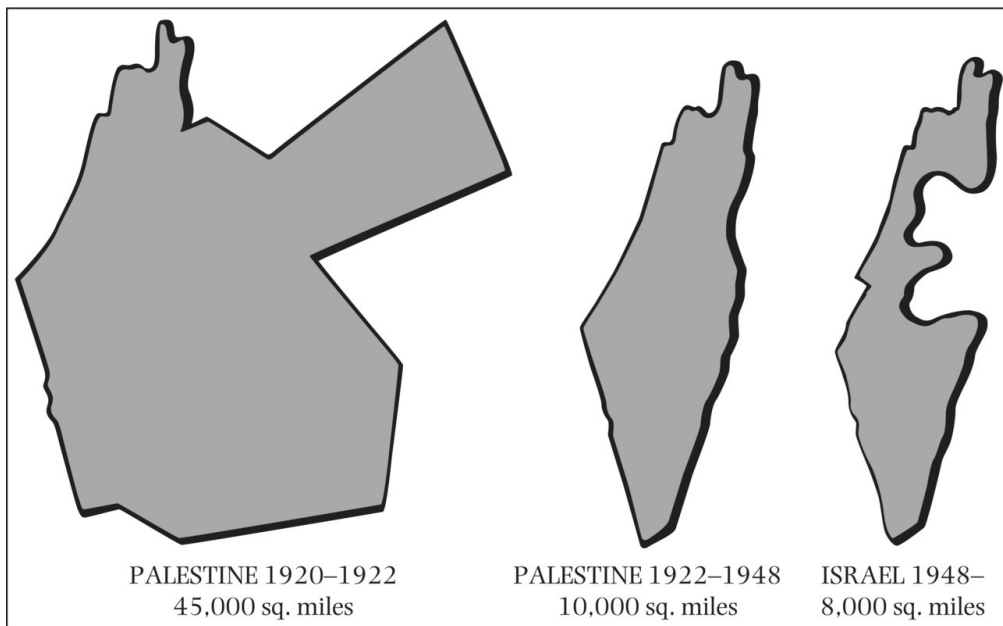
| POPULATIONS | Palestinian | Jewish | Israeli |
|--------------------|-------------|--------|---------|
| Under foreign rule | ■ | ■ | |
| Self-rule | ■ | | ■ |

Map 1.1 Palestine Losing Ground.

Source: Seth Ackerman, "Losing Ground," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2001, 88. Art by XPLANE (www.xplane.com). Used with permission.

For Zionists and Israelis, equivalent maps would record instead the cumulative gains and achievements of "Jewish land acquisition" or "Jewish land purchase," without mention of Palestinian losses.

Seen from a Zionist or Israeli perspective, the extensive "promised land" of Biblical days and the area offered by the 1917 Balfour Declaration for the creation of a Jewish national home (see [Chapter 4](#)) have both been whittled down over time by Britain and other outsiders. This is vividly illustrated by three juxtaposed maps of pre-Mandate Palestine in 1920–1922, the official Mandated territory during 1922–1948 showing Transjordan removed, and Israel 1948 (armistice lines after the war), in [Map 1.2](#).⁹



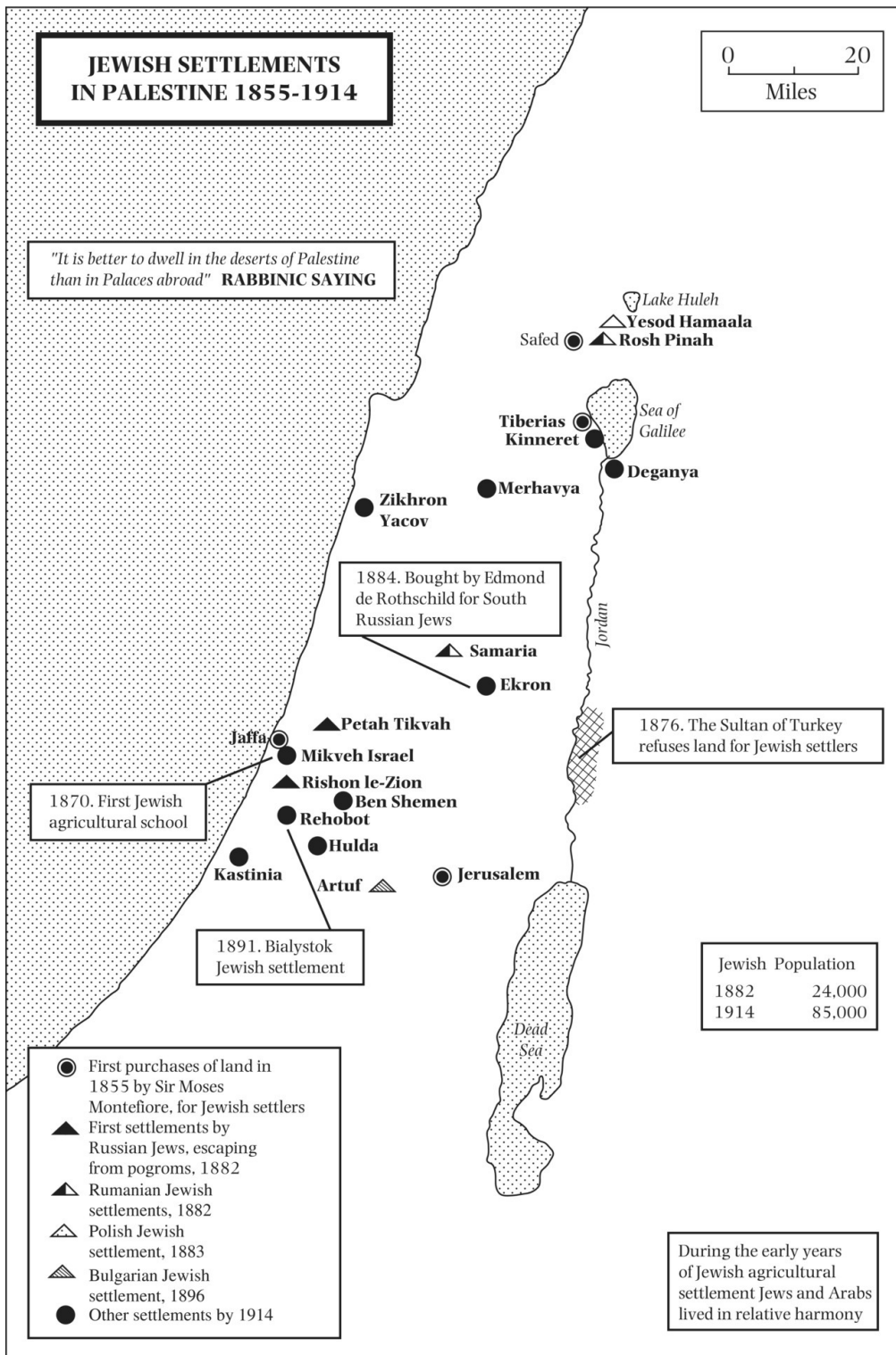
Map 1.2 Shrinking Jewish National Home: Palestine 1922, 1948, and Israel 1948.

Source: Israel's Struggle for Peace, New York: Israel Office of Information, 1960, p. 8.

Another visual impact can be had by framing Israel surrounded by Arab countries stretching from Morocco in the west to the Gulf States in the east and Sudan in the south; on such maps, the Jewish state appears tiny and endangered.¹⁰ Similarly, in Martin Gilbert's annotated historical maps, Israel's various wars from 1948 onwards are depicted in ways that underscore the Jewish state's vulnerability as a country encircled by hostile and aggressive neighbors of overwhelming size and/or armed might.¹¹

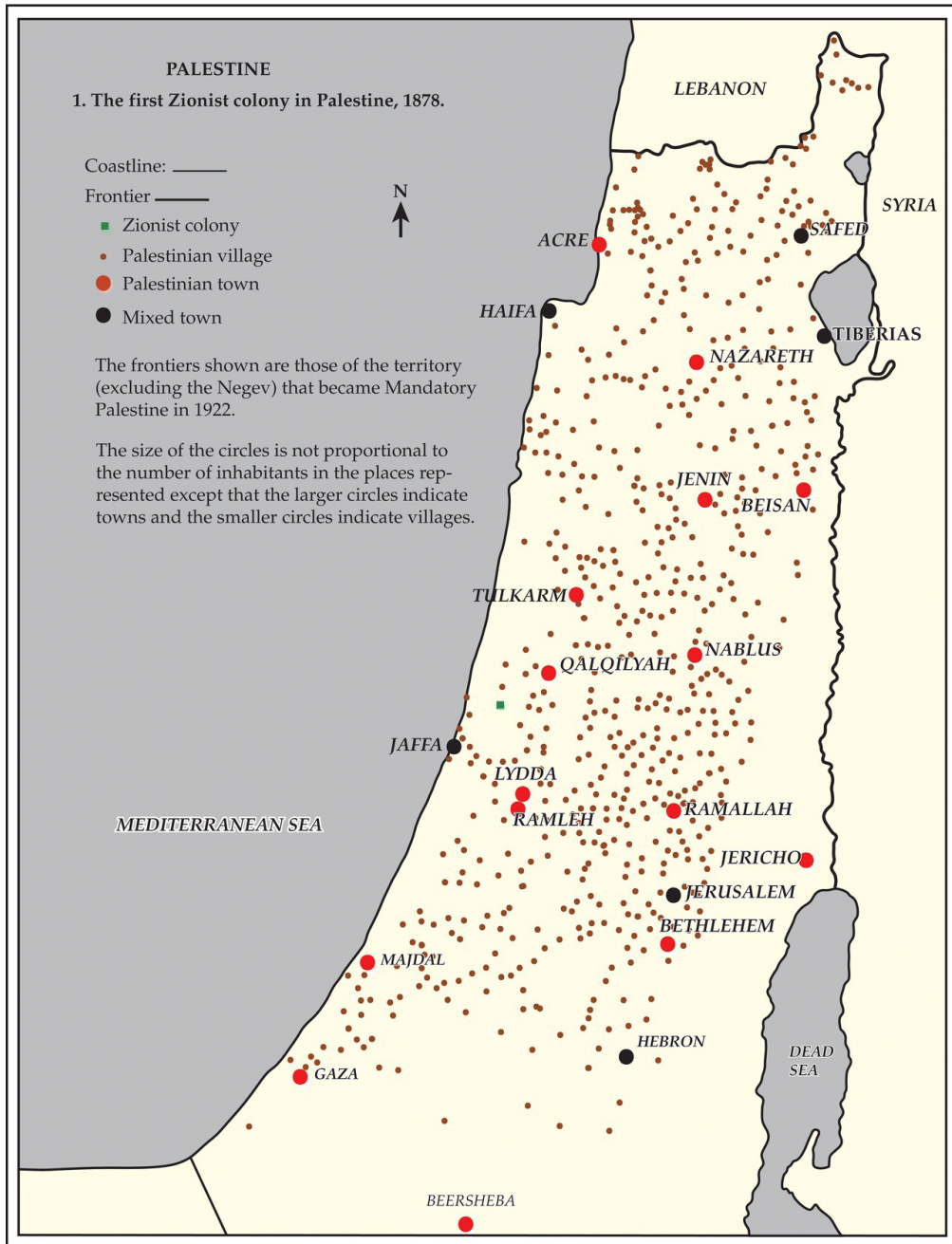
A comparison of maps about the early days of Zionism offers some insight into the "mental maps" of rival Zionists and Palestinians. The first edition of Martin Gilbert's classic *Jewish History Atlas* (1969) contained a map entitled: "Jewish settlements in Palestine 1855–1914" (see [Map 1.3](#)), which was reproduced in Walter Laqueur's popular *History of Zionism*.¹² It shows some 15 black dots and triangles, but no Palestinian towns or villages – all the white space suggesting an empty land ready to receive newcomers and reflecting a Eurocentric, colonialist view of providing "a land without a people for

a people without land.”¹³ By contrast, Walid Khalidi’s *Before Their Diaspora* offers a map entitled, “The first Zionist colony in Palestine, 1878” (see [Map 1.4](#)), which shows Palestinian towns, villages, and mixed towns – clusters of gray dots, six large black dots, along with one barely visible, small, unnamed square dot indicating the new colony of Petah Tikvah.¹⁴



Map 1.3 Jewish Settlements in Palestine, 1855–1914.

Source: Martin Gilbert, *The Jewish History Atlas*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969, p. 79. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK. © Sir Martin Gilbert. (<http://martingilbert.com>).



Map 1.4 The First Zionist Colony in Palestine, 1878.

Source: Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians, 1876–1948*, Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1984, 34 (modified for grayscale). Used with permission.

Finally, those inclined to interpret the Bible literally as a roadmap for the present would cite references to God’s promises to Moses and Joshua that the ancient Hebrews would receive the land stretching “from the wilderness and the Lebanon to the Great River [the Nile?], the River Euphrates – the whole Hittite country – and up to the Great [Mediterranean] Sea on the west.” Today’s Arabs

and Muslims would fear and object to this use of Jewish religious texts as a master-plan for modern Israeli conquest of parts of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, while Orthodox Jews would regard them literally as a deed of entitlement.¹⁵

Dates and Periodization

A more complex historiographical issue is one's choice of a starting date of the conflict, the selection of its major turning points, and its periodization. Some may wish to start with the Biblical antecedents of the conflict (Isaac and Ishmael, sons of Abraham, as progenitors of today's Israel and the Arabs) – reflecting a belief that we are dealing with a primordial and eternal clash, with supernatural overtones. In the pages that follow, we choose instead to begin our examination of the evolving dispute with the first modern Zionist immigrants to and settlements in Ottoman Palestine in 1882 – reflecting the altogether different view that this dispute is a product of political, economic, and social forces that were unleashed in a particular place and at a particular time in human history. Although some critics argue that choosing 1882 as starting point unduly accentuates the antagonism between the parties by ignoring centuries of earlier Jewish–Muslim and Arab–Jewish amity and collaboration,¹⁶ this is the timeframe adopted by most historians of the conflict, and Part II of this book will unfurl the events of the last 140 years.

An Ongoing Conflict: Tractable or Intractable?

Other problems arise because we are studying and attempting to understand an ongoing conflict that has not yet been resolved – one that continues to produce new victims and casualties almost daily, fueling and being fueled by feelings of bitterness, hatred, and revenge already many generations deep. Analyzing the historical roots and patterns of this conflict is therefore

not merely of theoretical or academic interest. How we approach and analyze the past is often, consciously or unconsciously, driven by what continues to happen in Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East as the conflict either festers or rages. And how we portray the past can have implications for how we approach current questions brought up by the unresolved conflict. This case amply illustrates the dictum that “All history is contemporary history.”

Another overriding question is almost impossible to answer: To what extent is the Arab–Israel conflict intractable – one that is inherently incapable of ever being solved?¹⁷ Readers will be invited to form their own evidence-based conclusions. Against the common wisdom that all conflicts are somehow and ultimately resolvable, some leading figures on both sides have depicted the conflict they were living as being indeed intractable. While awaiting the final verdict of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference to be applied in the Middle East, David Ben-Gurion, then a labor-Zionist spokesman and future Israeli prime minister, exhorted his fellow delegates at a *yishuv* (Palestinian–Jewish community) council meeting to view the problem of their relations with the area’s Arabs without illusions:

Everybody [he said] sees a difficulty in the question of relations between Arabs and Jews. But not everybody sees that there is no solution to this question. No solution! There is a gulf, and nothing can fill that gulf. It is possible to resolve the conflict between Jewish and Arab interests [only] by sophistry. I do not know what Arab will agree that Palestine should belong to the Jews—even if the Jews learn Arabic [as was being recommended during those debates by an advocate of Jewish–Arab rapprochement]. And we must recognize this situation ... [and not] try to come up with “remedies” ... We, as a nation, want this country to be *ours*; the Arabs, as a nation, want this country to be *theirs*. The decision has been referred to the Peace Conference.¹⁸

A near mirror-image view was ventured in early 1932 by Awni Abd al-Hadi, a Palestinian lawyer, leader of the pan-Arab Istiqlal Party and former aide to Faysal Ibn Husayn (later King Faysal I of Iraq) at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. In a private conversation with Dr. Haim Arlosoroff, head of the Jewish Agency's Political Department in Jerusalem, Awni responded negatively to feelers about the chances of an Arab–Zionist agreement, reportedly stating:

Some time ago he had come to the definite conclusion that there was no point whatever in negotiations or attempts to reach a mutual understanding. The goal of the Jews was to rule the country, and the aim of the Arabs was to fight against this rule. He understood the Zionists quite well, and respected them, but their interests were fundamentally opposed to Arab interests, and he saw no possibility of an agreement.¹⁹

It is important to acknowledge and factor into our analysis such blunt, pessimistic, and authentic views expressed by leading protagonists. One reason for doing so is to counteract the perils of wishful thinking about would-be solutions to this conflict. In our final chapter we will again return to the question: Is there a solution to this conflict?

Conflict Resolution or Conflict Management?

The resistance of the Arab–Israeli conflict to over a century of attempts to resolve it seriously challenges the tenability and inherent optimism of the assumption that all conflicts are ultimately resolvable. As will be evident from our survey of the conflict in Part II, both Israelis and Palestinians have defined national goals and expressed beliefs which appear, even in their most moderate expression, mutually incompatible when set down side by side. To date, there have been only a few rare moments – “windows of opportunity” – when all parties seemed simultaneously ready and able to concede

some of what the other parties claimed they needed for the sake of agreeing to a compromise agreement. Both main parties seem, by and large, prepared to endure more bloodshed and future wars until ultimate victory, on their terms, is one day theirs.

This forces us to consider the possibility that this conflict may not be resolved in the commonly accepted format of an agreed international treaty, or on the pattern of a compromise formula settling, once and for all, all outstanding claims and grievances. Rather, we may have here a conflict that can only be managed or contained, at best, in the form of an unresolved low-level, or low-intensity, dispute. This notion draws on an elementary international relations distinction between conflict *resolution* and conflict *management*.²⁰

In the pages that follow, readers may find themselves uneasily oscillating between (a) a natural inclination to hope and presume that the conflict can one day be ended, or *resolved*, and (b) a more realistic appraisal that it can be (at best) only *managed* – i.e. kept from exploding into its most violent and destructive expressions.²¹ While not clear-cut, or intellectually or emotionally satisfying, living with such an inconsistency is, in my view, both an accurate reflection of reality and a necessary component to any effort to understand the history and future of this conflict.

The “Other” Arab–Israeli Conflict

Another problem in defining this conflict is the complication caused by the superimposition of additional layers upon the local Arab–Israeli conflict in Israel, Palestine, and the neighboring lands. Because each party has also been waging a long-term battle with a view to winning sympathizers outside the region, their quarrel has taken on its own special features in the form of lobbying of politicians in world capitals and intense battles for favorable public opinion through the media. American political scientist Steven Spiegel titled his seminal study of the lobbying of US presidents and

congressmen, *The Other Arab–Israeli Conflict*.²² In similar fashion, the League of Nations and its successor United Nations, along with their various organs and agencies, have served as extended battlegrounds for the claims and counterclaims of Zionists, Arabs, Israelis, Palestinians, and their networks of supporters around the globe.²³

Another parallel arena in which the Arab–Israeli conflict continues to be played out is the courtroom – both metaphorical and actual. As we shall see when we examine several of the core arguments, international lawyers and human-rights experts have become involved in the prosecution or defense of one party or the other in publications, lecture halls, media appearances, films, or actual courts of law. The latter activity has spawned a novel form of conflict known as “lawfare” – the use of law and courts (both domestic and international) as a substitute for other means to achieve political or other, not purely legal, objectives.²⁴

In [Chapters 12](#) and [13](#), we will see in greater detail how the conflict on the ground is mirrored in yet another sphere: academia, especially but not exclusively by historians who more often than not do their readers and students a disservice. By viewing the conflict through any of these external, superimposed prisms we risk developing distorted perceptions, rather than an accurate reflection, of the real conflict on the ground.

Advocacy and Censure

A final, related consideration that complicates our attempts to define the Arab–Israeli and Israel–Palestine conflicts is the widespread tendency by authors and observers to allocate blame or engage in advocacy. In the course of discussing how the conflict started and why it continues, it is difficult to avoid censuring the parties one holds responsible for past errors that created or aggravated the conflict, and criticizing those parties who, by their behavior and/or policies, appear to be blocking the way to a resolution or peaceful coexistence.

It is almost impossible for analysts to focus on this conflict's events or issues in a totally neutral way, uninfluenced by their sense of justice or by their quest for the truth. Both Palestinians and Israelis often frame their claims and grievances in terms of their concepts of justice and/or truth – and the other party's corresponding disrespect thereof. In the pages that follow, I will try to reflect the parties' own views without embracing any party's cause, and without singling out any party for special blame. I will return to the issue of advocacy again briefly at the end of [Chapter 2](#), and more fully in [Chapters 12](#) and [13](#), when we look at academics and their ways of presenting the conflict.

This book joins others that have come before in wrestling with a deceptively simple question: What is the Arab–Israeli conflict *really* about? Partly because of its longevity and complexity, the elements of this dispute “are neither easily definable nor are they static” – as Haim Shaked noted when attempting to outline the conflict's main characteristics several decades ago.²⁵ Partisans of one side or the other will already have their diametrically opposing answers to this basic question.

But how can a non-partisan student or observer navigate between what one party calls truth and the other side's propaganda, between the claims and counterclaims of the competing parties, between the contested narratives of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs? Such are the challenges and the difficulties facing students of this conflict. In [Chapter 2](#) I attempt to sketch out some useful ways of defining the conflict and understanding some of its special qualities.

Notes

- [1](#) Wheatcroft, G. (2008). Zion story. *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February.
- [2](#) Chaim Weizmann to Harry S. Truman, 12 December 1945, Heller, J. (ed.) (1979). *Letters and Papers of*

Chaim Weizmann, vol. 22, 78. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University/Transaction Books.

- 3 Debray, R. (2007). Palestine: A policy of deliberate blindness. *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Eng. ed.), p. 5.
- 4 For a convincing treatment of this subject, see Tessler, M. (2006). Narratives and myths about Arab intransigence toward Israel. In: *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix* (ed. R.I. Rotberg), 174–193. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- 5 See e.g. Shamir, Y. (1982). Israel's role in a changing Middle East. *Foreign Affairs* 60 (4): 790–793; Netanyahu, B. (2000). *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place among the Nations* (rev. ed.). New York: Warner Books, ch. 3 (“The Theory of Palestinian Centrality”); Karsh, E. (2014). *The Myth of Palestinian Centrality*. Ramat Gan: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University. Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 108, at <https://besacenter.org/mideast-security-and-policy-studies/myth-palestinian-centrality/> (accessed 17 June 2018).
- 6 UNGA Resolution 3379, adopted 10 November 1975 by a vote of 72 to 35 (with 32 abstentions); UNGA Resolution 4686, adopted 16 December 1991, by a vote of 111 to 25 (with 13 abstentions).
- 7 See Benvenisti, M. (1986). *Conflicts and Contradictions*, 191–202. New York: Villard Books (2000), and *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (transl. M. Kaufman-Lacusta). Berkeley/London: University of California Press (2000); Pappé, I. (2014). *The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge*, 24–26. London/New York: Verso. On the special challenges facing Israelis, see Collins-Kreiner, N., Mansfeld, Y., and Kliot, N. (2006). The reflection of a political conflict in mapping: The case of Israel's borders and frontiers. *Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (3): 381–408;

Miles, W.F.S. (2011). Border pedagogy in Israel. *Middle East Journal* 65 (2): 253–277.

- [8](#) Farouk-Alli, A. (2007). The poetics of justice and the politics of oppression. In: *The Future of Palestine and Israel: From Colonial Roots to Postcolonial Realities* (ed. A. Farouk-Alli), 5–7. Midrand, South Africa: Institute for Global Dialogue.
- [9](#) See e.g. Curtis, M., Neyer, J., Waxman, C.I., and Pollack, A. (eds.) (1975). *The Palestinians: People, History, Politics*, 252–253. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books [prepared under the auspices of the American Academic Association for Peace in the Middle East].
- [10](#) See e.g. Curtis, M. et al. *The Palestinians*, 251; Gilbert, M. (2012). *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 10e, 34, 60–61. London/New York: Routledge.
- [11](#) Gilbert, M. *Routledge Atlas*, 37 (Immediate response to the UN Partition plan), 38–39 (Arab attacks and the Jewish reaction), 40–42, 44 (Israel: prelude to independence), 43–4 (Battle for the Jerusalem roads), 52 (Israel’s sense of insecurity, 1949–1967), 53 (Central Israel and the Jordan border, 1949–1967), 58 (Terrorist raids into Israel, 1951–1956), 60–61 (Changing balance of power in the Arab world, 1953–1973). Perhaps the best known and most often reproduced is the map on p. 45, entitled “The Arab invasion of the State of Israel, 15 May 1948.”
- [12](#) Laqueur, W.Z. (1972). *A History of Zionism*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, reissued New York: Schocken Books, 1989, 41. See a similar map in Sachar, H.M. (1976). *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, 87. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, accessed online 2 May 2018 at <http://www.passia.org/maps/view/3>.
- [13](#) On the origins and use of this phrase, see Garfinkle, A.M. (1991). On the origin, meaning, use and abuse of a phrase. *Middle Eastern Studies* 27 (4): 539–550;

Muir, D. (2008). A land without a people for a people without a land. *Middle East Quarterly* 15 (2), accessed online 2 October 2018 at <https://www.meforum.org/articles/2008/a-land-without-a-people-for-a-people-without-a-land>. For an extended application of the “phenomenon of the ‘white patches’ on the mental maps carried around in the heads of the Jews and Arabs of Palestine/*Eretz Israel*, which cover the habitat of ‘the other’,” see Benvenisti’s *Sacred Landscape* (quotation from p. 1).

14. Khalidi, W. (1984). *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians, 1876–1948*, 34. Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies. See also the ironic juxtaposition of maps of (1) “The land without a people,” showing Palestinian villages and towns and (2) “The people without a land,” showing the first Zionist colonies, in *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948* (ed. and introduced by Walid Khalidi), 94–95. Beirut, 1971; 2nd printing, Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987.
15. Joshua 1:3–4 (v. 3 begins: “Every spot on which your foot treads I give to you, as I promised Moses”). Translation as given in *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, 337. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, (1985). See also Numbers 34:1–12 (translation as given in *Tanakh*, 267–268). For a typical example of Arab fears, see “From the Nile to the Euphrates,” *The Facts about the Palestine Problem*, Beirut: Arab Women’s Information Committee, May 1968.
16. E.g. Kark, R., in *Shared Histories*, 13–22; Kaufman, E. and Hassassian, M. (2008). Understanding our Israeli/Palestinian conflict and searching for its resolution. In: *Regional and Ethnic Conflicts: Perspectives from the Front Lines* (ed. J. Carter, G.E. Irani, and V.D. Volkan), 87–129. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall; Klein, M. (2014). *Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and*

Hebron. Oxford University Press. On the “golden age” of harmonious relations between Jews and Arabs (or between Jews and Muslims), see Goitein, S.D. (1974). *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages*, 3e. New York: Schocken; Patai, R. (1976). *The Seed of Abraham: Jews and Arabs in Contact and Conflict*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

- [17](#) Crocker, C.A., Hampson, F.O., and Aall, P. (eds.) (2005). *Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict*, 343–372. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press (essays by Stephen Cohen and Shibley Telhami).
- [18](#) Speech to the Vaad Zmani [Provisional Council of the Jews of Palestine/*Eretz-Israel*], 10 June 1919, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem [CZA], J1/8777, my translation from the Hebrew. Cf. Caplan, N. (2015). *Futile Diplomacy, vol. I: Early Arab–Zionist Negotiation Attempts, 1913–1931*, 7. London: [Frank Cass, 1983] Routledge RLE.
- [19](#) Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), Report of talk between Haim Arlosoroff and Awni Abd al-Hadi, 12 February 1932, CZA, S25/3051, my translation from the Hebrew. Caplan, N. *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. I, 7–8.
- [20](#) See, e.g. Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. (ed.) (2007). *The Israel-Palestinian Conflict: From Conflict Resolution to Conflict Management*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [21](#) For an incisive Israeli presentation of this argument, see Susser, A. (2012). *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative*, 217–223. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.
- [22](#) Spiegel, S.L. (1985). *The Other Arab–Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy from Truman to Reagan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Cf. Mearsheimer, J.J. and Walt, S.M. (2007). *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Ross, D. (2015). *Doomed to*

Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

- 23** E.g. Kattan, V. (2009). *From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1891–1949*. London: Pluto Press; Quigley, J. (2016). *The International Diplomacy of Israel’s Founders: Deception at the United Nations in the Quest for Palestine*. New York: Cambridge University Press; United Nations. The Question of Palestine, at <https://www.un.org/unispal/> (accessed 17 June 2018); Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs: International Organizations at <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/InternatlOrgs/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed 17 June 2018); UN Watch: Monitoring the UN, Promoting Human Rights at <https://www.unwatch.org/en/> (accessed 17 June 2018).
- 24** Herzberg, A. (2010). *NGO “Lawfare”: Exploitation of Courts in the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 2e. Jerusalem: NGO Monitor, downloaded 28 April 2018 from <https://www.ngo-monitor.org/data/images/File/lawfare-monograph.pdf>; Susser, *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine*, 215, 222. See also the Israel-advocacy “Lawfare Project” website at <https://thelawfareproject.org/> (not to be confused with the “Lawfare Blog” site at <https://lawfareblog.com/about-lawfare-brief-history-term-and-site> which devotes itself to wider issues).
- 25** Shaked, H. (1991). Continuity and change: an overview. In: *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: Perspectives*, 2e (ed. Z. Alvin), 197. Rubinstein, NY: Harper Collins. The first edition was published by Praeger in 1984.

2

Defining the Conflict, Nevertheless

Who Are the Conflicting Parties?

One way of framing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is to pose two parallel, and heavily loaded, questions about the protagonists: Are the Jews a people (nation), entitled to lay claim to a national-state on the territory they call *Eretz-Israel* (the Land of Israel) – or a non-political, world religious community with no special territorial rights, claims, or aspirations? Are the Palestinians a people with distinct national and political rights and aspirations, or a part of the Arab people with no legitimate claim to separate statehood specifically in Palestine?

Let us begin this chapter by going a bit further in attempting to define the terms Jew, Zionist, Israeli, Arab, Palestinian, and Muslim, and place them in context. While it is common practice to allow every group to define itself, others – both from within and outside the defined group – are free to, and will, disagree. In the contemporary Arab–Israel and Israeli–Palestinian disputes, each party does indeed find reasons to challenge the other’s self-definition, providing an important dimension to the contested nature of their conflict.

Jews may be defined as a people comprising many ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups, but deriving a common identity from

- a. a belief in Judaism, a monotheistic faith harking back to the Biblical land of Israel (which is generally accepted as corresponding geographically to today’s state of Israel and the territories under the Palestine National Authority),
- b. biological lineage, i.e. being born to a Jewish mother, and/or

- c. a unifying sociocultural sentiment of sharing a common ancestry, traditions, customs, heritage, and future.

Given these complexities, it is no wonder that no one, not even the Israeli Knesset (Parliament), has ever been able to establish a universally accepted simple definition of who is a Jew. At the end of 2016, there were an estimated 14.5 million Jews in the world, of whom 6.5 million lived in Israel, 5.7 million in the USA, and just over 1 million in Europe.¹

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a growing number of Jews have chosen to define themselves as a people whose identity included *national-political* and *territorial* components, in addition to traditional and personal spiritual connections and a sense of belonging to a worldwide religious community. These Jews became adherents to, or supporters of, a movement known as Zionism. There are, of course, non-Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews who reject this collective definition and who see themselves uniquely as belonging to a religious group. But the numbers of non- and anti-Zionist Jews have declined, particularly since the rise of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s.

Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians may well look back at centuries of harmonious interaction with Jews in their midst, and insist that these Jews have always been (and should still be seen as) mainly a religious community, i.e. without political claims or aspirations. Article 20 of the National Charter of the Palestine Liberation Organization solemnly declares that

Claims of historical or religious ties of Jews with Palestine are incompatible with the facts of history and the true conception of what constitutes statehood. Judaism, being a religion, is not an independent nationality. Nor do Jews constitute a single nation with an identity of its own; they are citizens of the states to which they belong.²

But such declarations or externally imposed definitions cannot dispose of the fact – objectionable or inconvenient

as it may be – that many Jews, both inside and outside the present-day state of Israel, do indeed see themselves as part of a nation or people whose heart (if not body) is, territorially speaking, in *Eretz-Israel*, the land of Israel.

We use the term *Zionists* to denote people (mainly, but not exclusively, Jews) who believe in and support the quest by Jews to “return to Zion” from the lands to which they were last dispersed by the Roman conquerors of Palestine. This aspiration, dormant for centuries but kept alive through religious ritual, began to find overt political expression in the mid- and late nineteenth century. For the next half century, a unified Zionist movement used the organizational apparatus of the World Zionist Organization (and its offshoot, the Jewish Agency for Palestine) to promote “the ingathering of the Exiles,” i.e. the migration of Jews to Palestine/*Eretz-Israel*. This migration was part of a larger effort to establish the infrastructure of a future “national home” on that territory, which passed from Ottoman to British rule in 1917, and which was to be partitioned in accordance with a United Nations (UN) resolution in 1947. When the British left Palestine in mid-May 1948, a war erupted; at the end of the fighting, the state of Israel, the chief fulfillment of Zionism, was born and accepted as a member-state of the UN in May 1949. Citizens of this new state are called *Israelis* – not to be confused with “Israelites” or the “children of Israel” mentioned in the Bible. By late 2016 there were just over 8.6 million Israelis, 6.4 million of whom were Jews and 1.8 million Palestinian or Arab citizens of the state of Israel.

Who, then, are *Arabs*? As mentioned in [Chapter 1](#), the Arabs may be defined as an ethno-national group with common cultural and linguistic roots emanating from ancient tribes in the Arabian Peninsula (today’s Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Gulf states). There are today over 420 million Arabs living in 22 countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Of these, four – Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt – share borders with the state of Israel and are sometimes consequently labeled the “confrontation states” in this conflict.

Apart from these independent Arab countries, there is also a *Palestinian* Arab people not (yet) controlling an internationally recognized state – although Palestine is an accredited member of the League of Arab States. In 2016–2017 there were more than 9 million Palestinians spread out across the region:

- a. 1.9 million in Gaza (of whom 1.3 million are registered refugees),
- b. 2.9 million in the West Bank (of whom 801 000 are registered refugees).

Together, these constitute the population of the “Palestine Authority,” or “Palestine National Authority” (PNA), in a still uncompleted transition from Israeli occupation to recognized status as an independent state – although its official website and publications now read “State of Palestine.” Further, there are

- a. 3 152 000 million refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), living in 31 camps in Lebanon (450 000), Syria (527 000), Jordan (2.2 million) and also dispersed throughout the cities of the Middle East,
- b. 1.8 million Arab citizens of the state of Israel, descendants of those Palestinians who had remained in the areas that became the Jewish state in 1948.³

As in the case of Arab objections to Jewish national redefinition, no amount of argumentation coming from people outside the Palestinian and Arab world can alter the fact – objectionable or inconvenient as it may be to them – that, since the waning of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century, an increasing number of Arabic-speaking residents of the Middle East have devoted their political activity toward the eventual creation of an independent Arab state or confederation of states in the region. The fact that this vision of unity has not materialized during a century of periodic attempts has

been a source of great frustration to those who espoused this pan-Arab national dream.

The same applies to those who define themselves as Palestinians. As we shall see in [Chapter 4](#) those Arabs living in the area designated as British Mandatory Palestine identified, at an early stage, with local leaders and formed their own nationalist organizations whose immediate aim was to resist Zionism and create an independent Arab state there. The majority of the Palestinian inhabitants of this area saw themselves as an endangered community whose rights and status were being threatened by an influx of Jewish immigrants whose numbers and growing economic infrastructure, they believed, would result in their country coming under Jewish or Zionist rule. No amount of doubt raised as to the genuineness of the Palestinians' expressed fears, or about their self-identification as a people wishing to have nothing to do with Britain's "Jewish national home" policies (see [Chapter 4](#)), can dispose of these facts.

Finally, it is important to appreciate that there are, for many people, religious dimensions to being Arab or Jewish. Since the advent of the Prophet Muhammad and the rise of the faith community (*umma*) of Islam in the seventh century CE and its subsequent spread around the globe, a majority of the world's Arabs are also practicing *Muslims*. Longstanding Christian communities exist in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan, but Islamic history, culture, values, and identity have become an integral part of being Arab and living in those societies. The number of Muslims worldwide extends far beyond the Arab world and exceeds 1.8 billion.

The fact that the protagonists in this conflict also happen to be Muslims, Christians, or Jews adds a further complication to sorting out and defining the parties to the conflict. Although varying proportions of each community have become secularized, there are still significant numbers who identify strongly with their religious faith and community. In the minds of these people, what we are treating as the Arab–Israeli or Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a subset of a larger clash between religious groups and civilizations. Fundamentalist Christians,

Muslims, and Jews alike tend to view the national or territorial struggle for sovereignty or supremacy over the *Holy Land* as part of a deeper and wider war between God's "chosen" people (however defined), the faithful, the believers, on the one hand, and God's "despised" people (however defined), the faithless, the unbelievers, on the other.

This religious dimension of the contest over Palestine/Israel emerges periodically when violence is perpetrated in the name of protection against perceived threats to the Holy Places, as happened in 1928–1929 (see [Chapter 4](#)). Competing mythical and religious associations with the holy city of Jerusalem also came into play as recently as 2000 to torpedo Israeli–Palestinian negotiations and helping to trigger the violent outbreak known as the "al-Aqsa *Intifada*," taking its name from the holy al-Aqsa mosque (see [Chapter 11](#)). This dimension can ignite passions at any time, and most parties are aware of the dangers (and opportunities) of exciting deeply held religious sensitivities.

But even if we do not accept this apocalyptic view of the conflict, there are other important implications of the injection of religion into what in these pages we treat essentially as a clash between two rival national movements and communities. The presence of this religious dimension aggravates and embitters an already difficult dispute by adding a layer of righteousness, accompanied by the further certainty of ultimate triumph over one's enemies. In everyday human terms, such otherworldly overtones only prolong the conflict and make it more intractable by further dehumanizing and delegitimizing the enemy, by offering hope to those who steadfastly refuse to consider any compromise with the other side, and by promising rewards to those who would commit acts of violence or revenge in response to perceived divine injunctions. Indeed, as we have seen in recent years, the fusion of nationalism and religion has produced a steady stream of dedicated idealists ready to do harm to the enemy (including those who would martyr themselves in the process) at the behest of zealot preachers and in defiance of the many teachings of non-

violence contained in the mainstream understanding of their faiths.⁴

What Are the Main Issues in Contention among the Parties to the Conflict?

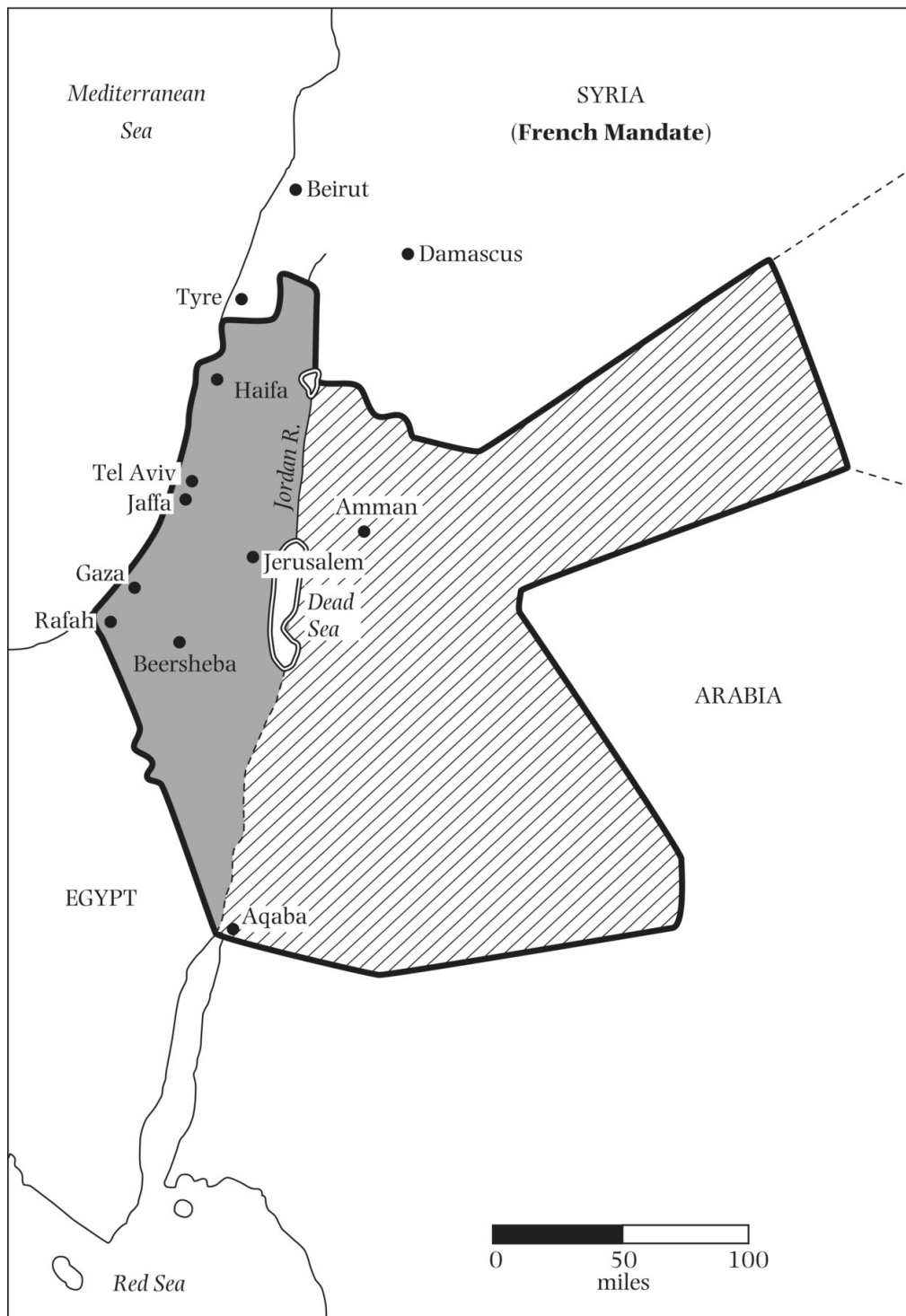
A useful distinction can be made between tangible and intangible issues in dispute. Under the former, we include concrete, definable assets over which the parties are fighting. The intangibles are, by contrast, those psychological and existential issues that are reflected in the often contradictory historical narratives of each party.

The list of tangible issues in contention between Arabs/Palestinians and Zionists/Israelis will be brought up in historical context in Part II of this volume. For purposes of our introduction, let us summarize them under three headings: (i) Sovereignty over the land, (ii) Demography, land purchase, and migration, and (iii) Borders.

1 Sovereignty over the land

Both parties claim original ownership of and entitlement to inhabit and exercise sovereignty (national self-determination) over the same piece of land. The actual boundaries of the territory in dispute (see also the subsection “Borders”) are somewhat fuzzy. Several Israelite kingdoms existed in the tenth and eighth centuries BCE, but the area was for centuries under the rule of various empires.⁵ There was no distinct political entity called “Palestine” between ancient times and the early twentieth century. “Even as an administrative unit, it did not exist before the British arrived at the end of the First World War.”⁶ *Faute de mieux*, the Palestine Liberation Organization officially defines Palestine as the territory within the boundaries established under the British Mandate, from 1922.⁷ Religious Zionists define the boundaries of “*Eretz-Israel*” in accordance with biblical references (see [Chapter 1](#)), while the Zionist Organization

in 1919 submitted a map proposing a Jewish national home within a Palestine whose boundaries went farther north and east beyond the frontiers that the British ultimately set for the Jewish national home project.⁸ Despite these ambiguities, after 1920 both Palestinian Arabs and Zionists would be aspiring to sovereignty over essentially the same territory west of the Jordan River that was to be governed under a British Mandate from 1922 until 1948 (see [Map 2.1](#)).



 Area incorporated by Great Britain in the Palestine Mandate as the autonomous Amirate of Transjordan.

Map 2.1 Palestine under British Mandate, 1923.

Aside from ambiguities over precise boundaries, one of the most sharply contested arguments between the parties is “Whose (Promised) Land is it?” – an argument that necessarily takes us back into ancient history. This I

will propose in [Chapter 3](#) as the first of a series of 11 “core arguments” that cumulatively shape the contested histories of Arabs, Palestinians, Jews, and Israelis. Related to this is the question “Whose land is it (actually)?” Looking at continuous residence and majority status, the indigenous population of Palestine was Muslim and Christian in large majority when the first waves of Zionist pioneers and settlers arrived in the 1880s. At the time, the contested territory appeared on maps as districts belonging to the Ottoman Empire.⁹ Such was still the case in 1917 when the British arrived and simultaneously issued the Balfour Declaration which promised support for the creation “in Palestine of a Jewish national home.” This innovation would have necessarily resulted in the granting of special privileges to a minority of the country’s inhabitants, making the Declaration historic in several ways and sowing the seeds of future conflict (see [Chapter 4](#)).

When the British announced their intention of abandoning the Mandate thirty years later, the new United Nations Organization adopted the report of a Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to partition the country into an Arab and a Jewish state, with an international enclave to include Jerusalem. Palestinian Arabs and the leaders of the Arab states rejected this plan not only because they were unhappy with the proposed boundaries of the projected Arab state, but also because they did not recognize the legitimacy of the UN to render a decision that went against the wishes of the majority of the country’s inhabitants. In the fighting and warfare that ensued in 1947–1949, the independent state of Israel was created while other parts of former Mandatory Palestine were annexed to Transjordan (the West Bank) and administered by Egypt (the Gaza Strip) (see [Map 6.2](#)).

In terms of two peoples claiming the right to national self-determination on the same territory, we see that, by 1949, one of these peoples (thereafter called “Israelis”) had successfully established its national state. What remains in contention today is whether the other people, the Palestinians, will achieve sovereignty over designated

parts (or all) of the territories they claim as their rightful homeland.

2 Demography, land purchase, and migration¹⁰

Demography, land purchase,¹¹ and migration are inexorably linked here. Territorial sovereignty and the creation of boundaries between modern nation-states are built on the principle of respecting the majority will of national, ethnic, linguistic, and/or religious communities that inhabit a given swath of territory. In the case of the Ottoman districts that later became Palestine under the British Mandate, the territory contained a preponderant majority of Muslim Arabs for most of recent history, until 1948.

Jewish immigration, land purchase, and the creation of settlements were the essence of “practical Zionism” that sought to establish facts on the ground, a critical mass of Jewish people working the land – conditions for an eventual Jewish state in the areas defined by Jewish presence and population density. In theory, the creation of a Jewish majority through gradual but sustained immigration – known in Hebrew as *aliya*, with overtones from the verb “to rise” or “ascend” – and the purchase of lands would have resulted in the creation of radically new demographic, social, economic, and territorial facts on the ground, conditions for ultimately achieving Jewish statehood.

At first, very few Zionist or British observers foresaw insurmountable difficulties emanating from the possible objections of Palestinian Arabs who would, according to this plan, be made to pass from majority to minority status as the country moved toward acquiring its Jewish demographic majority. As Dr. Chaim Weizmann informed the American Secretary of State at the Versailles Peace Conference in February 1919, Zionists sought the creation of an administration in Palestine “which would arise out of the natural conditions of the country—always safeguarding the interests of non-Jews of the country—with the hope that by Jewish immigration Palestine would ultimately become as Jewish as England is English.”¹²

The flow of Jewish immigration into Palestine was light in some years, heavier in others (see [Table 2.1](#)). Especially after a dramatic increase in immigration from Germany in the years 1933, 1934, and 1935, Palestinians came to fear that the day would soon come when they would be outnumbered by the recently arrived Jews. While this was indeed the goal of Zionism, it is interesting to note that at about this time only a few leading Zionists cast doubt on the viability of plans for a gradual, peaceful population build-up through immigration to Palestine. One, labor-Zionist leader Dr. Haim Arlosoroff, concluded pessimistically that the goal of changing the Arab majority into a minority might never be achievable by gradualist methods and without resorting to force and violence.¹³ During the 1930s a few other individuals felt forced to conclude that the Zionist dream of creating a Jewish state in the area might not be achievable after all; these people sought solutions through formulae such as a binational state, cantons, or federal arrangements.¹⁴

Table 2.1 *Jewish immigration to Palestine: selected years as recorded by the British Mandatory administration.*

Source: Palestine Blue Book (London: HMSO, annual); Survey of Palestine, I: 185, III: 17. The above figures are for recorded legal immigration. British estimates of illegal Jewish immigration are 30 000–40 000 prior to April 1939 and an additional 30 000–35 000 between April 1939 and December 1946. Survey of Palestine, III: 23.

| Year | Immigration | Emigration | Net migration |
|-------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1922 | 7 844 | 1 503 | 6 341 |
| 1924 | 12 856 | 2 073 | 10 783 |
| 1925 | 33 801 | 2 151 | 29 650 |
| 1927 | 2 713 | 5 071 | –3 358 |
| 1928 | 2 178 | 2 168 | 10 |
| 1929 | 5 249 | 1 746 | 3 503 |
| 1932 | 9 553 | n.a. | |
| 1933 | 30 327 | n.a. | |
| 1934 | 42 757 | n.a. | |
| 1935 | 61 854 | 396 | 61 458 |
| 1936 | 29 727 | 773 | 28 954 |
| 1937 | 10 536 | 889 | 9 647 |
| 1939 | 16 405 | 1 019 | 15 386 |
| 1940 | 4 547 | n.a. | |
| 1943 | 8 507 | n.a. | |
| 1944 | 14 464 | n.a. | |
| 1945 | 12 751 | n.a. | |
| 1946 | 7 851 ^a | n.a. | |
| 1947 | n.a. ^a | n.a. | |

^a According to various Israeli sources, the figure for 1946 should be 17 760 or 18 760, and that for 1947 21 542 or 22 098.

Table 2.2 shows annual figures for recorded Jewish immigration and its impact on the population balance between Arabs and Jews prior to the creation of the Israeli state. By 1947, there were between 600 000 and 650 000 Jews in the country, representing a 10-fold

increase from the pre-World War I total. The *yishuv* now formed a critical mass, impossible to ignore. But the Arabs, whose numbers had dramatically (albeit less strikingly than the Jews) doubled to 1 300 000 during the same three decades, still constituted a two-thirds majority when the United Nations was called upon to recommend a plan for the future of the contested land. When the 1948–1949 war ended with the creation of the State of Israel, the “demographic battle” continued in new forms.

Table 2.2 *Palestine population, 1930–1946.*

Source: Adapted from: Tables “Population of Palestine by Religions,” and “Number of Immigrants Annually by Race,” in *A Survey of Palestine*, prepared in December 1945 and January 1946 for the Information of the Anglo–American Committee of Inquiry, London: HMSO, 1946; reprinted by the Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991, vol. I: 141, 185, and revised (1944–1946) in the Supplement, vol. III: 10–11, 17.

| Year | Total including nomads | Arabs^a | Jews | Jewish immigrants | Jews as percentage of total |
|-------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1930 | 992 559 | 818 135 | 164 796 | 4 944 | 16.6% |
| 1931 | 1 033 314 | 848 607 | 174 606 | 4 075 | 16.9% |
| 1932 | 1 073 827 | 871 323 | 192 137 | 9 553 | 17.9% |
| 1933 | 1 140 941 | 895 297 | 234 967 | 30 327 | 20.6% |
| 1934 | 1 210 554 | 916 786 | 282 975 | 42 359 | 23.4% |
| 1935 | 1 308 112 | 941 924 | 355 157 | 61 854 | 27.2% |
| 1936 | 1 366 692 | 971 236 | 384 078 | 29 727 | 28.1% |
| 1937 | 1 401 794 | 994 315 | 395 836 | 10 536 | 28.2% |
| 1938 | 1 435 285 | 1 012 224 | 411 222 | 12 868 | 28.7% |
| 1939 | 1 501 698 | 1 044 091 | 445 457 | 16 405 | 29.7% |
| 1940 | 1 544 530 | 1 068 433 | 463 535 | 4 547 | 30.0% |
| 1941 | 1 585 500 | 1 098 517 | 474 102 | 3 647 | 29.9% |
| 1942 | 1 620 005 | 1 122 476 | 484 408 | 2 194 | 29.9% |
| 1943 | 1 676 571 | 1 159 996 | 502 912 | 8 507 | 30.0% |

| Year | Total including nomads | Arabs^a | Jews | Jewish immigrants | Jews as percentage of total |
|-------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1944 | 1 764 522 | 1 196 824 | 553 600 | 14 464 | 31.4% |
| 1945 | 1 834 935 | 1 240 850 | 579 227 | 12 751 | 31.6% |
| 1946 | 1 912 112 | 1 288 399 | 608 225 | 7 851 | 31.8% |

^a British population data record “Moslems,” “Christians,” and “others” – but not “Arabs.” The “Arab” figures shown here represent the combined British figures for “Moslems” and “Christians.”

Just as immigration continued to be the main engine for increasing the Jewish population, “out-migration” during and after the war sharply reduced the proportion of Palestinians living in the contested land. A substantial number of Palestinians were displaced – some claim as a result of “ethnic cleansing” – and became refugees. Forced into exile, they claimed the right to return to, or be compensated for, the homes they had been forced to abandon during the fighting – a claim endorsed by UN General Assembly Resolution 194 passed in December 1948.¹⁵ Over the years this population of refugees registered with UNRWA has grown from 760 000 in 1949 to the current number of 5 million. In addition, there may be up to 2.5 million non-registered refugees.¹⁶

The disposition of this refugee population and its claims – especially the questions of how many would actually return to live in Israel, how many to Palestinian territories, and how many would be compensated and resettled elsewhere – constitutes an essential element in all potential negotiations toward both an Israeli–Palestinian final accord and a comprehensive settlement between Israel and the Arab states, where most of the Palestinian refugees have lived in camps administered by UNRWA.

The continued growth of Israel’s Jewish population was promoted through sustained efforts to encourage Jews to “make *aliya*,” i.e. move from their diaspora homes to

establish new lives in the Jewish state. The Jewish population of Israel grew from just over 1 million in 1949 to almost 6.5 million by 2016. A huge and sudden influx of Jews expelled or fleeing from Iraq, Yemen, and other Arab countries occurred between 1949 and 1951, contributing over 250 000 refugee-immigrants to a doubling of Israel's Jewish population from 760 000 in late 1948 to 1.4 million by late 1951.¹⁷

Another demographic consideration involves the Arab-Palestinians living within Israel. In 1948 the newly created state of Israel found itself ruling over a population of 160 000 Palestinians within its new borders. In their own words, these people found themselves “a minority living in our historic homeland,” experiencing a complex reality that “isolated [them] from the rest of the Palestinian People and the Arab world” as they “were forced to become citizens of Israel.”¹⁸ For a time described by Israel and Western observers as “Arab Israelis,” these Palestinian citizens of Israel have since 1948 constituted between 15% and 20% of the country's population, exceeding 1.8 million people (21%) out of a total 8.6 million by 2016.¹⁹ Majority–minority relations within Israel have always been problematic, fueled by unresolved grievances and accusations of discrimination and anti-Arab racism. There have also been several crises and clashes, most seriously in October 2000 during rallies and rioting in solidarity with Palestinians across the “green line.”²⁰

The Palestinian community's relations with Jewish Israelis are a complicated subject that goes beyond the scope of this study, which will focus mainly on Palestinians living *outside* the state of Israel. But we may note here that, by their very presence, the Palestinian citizens of Israel constitute a national minority that challenges the state's declared Jewish and democratic character, putting to the test the pledges of “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex” and “freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture” enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence.²¹

Some Jewish Israelis have come to consider the increasingly assertive Palestinian minority a threat to the Zionist essence of their state, even entertaining suspicions as to the loyalty of their Palestinian fellow-citizens.²²

A final demographic consideration involves the West Bank (which some Israelis call “Judaea and Samaria”) and the Gaza Strip. With Israel’s occupation of these territories during the June 1967 war, the number of Palestinian Arabs under Israeli rule skyrocketed from 1 052 000 to 2.9 million by 1997 and almost 4.8 million in 2017. Many decades have passed without these territories, in whole or in part, being returned to Jordan or Egypt, or granted to Palestinian self-rule in the context of a peace treaty. Since 1967, hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews – in violation of most interpretations of the Fourth Geneva Convention²³ (see [Chapter 7](#)) – have established suburbs and settlements in the lands conquered during the June 1967 war.

After 1993, portions of these territories were returned to Palestinian self-rule as Israeli forces redeployed, with the disposition of many Jewish settlements still to be decided. In the summer of 2005, Israel evacuated all 8000–9000 Jewish settlers from 21 settlements in the Gaza Strip, leaving the almost 2 million Palestinians to govern themselves, but still surrounded and blockaded by Israel and Egypt. In 2018, about 2.4 million Palestinians lived in the West Bank, along with about 126 Jewish settlements whose population reached some 405 000 (more than 610 000 if we include Jewish suburbs created in the Jerusalem area since 1967).²⁴

A large minority of Israelis firmly believes that all lands conquered during the 1967 war should remain under Israeli jurisdiction, whether for security reasons (absence of peace, untrustworthiness of the enemy) or because of Biblical injunctions and promises. But many Israelis oppose annexation, some in order to avoid the demographic implications of becoming a Jewish minority living among a Palestinian Arab majority population, and others to be rid of the burden of controlling and

administering an unwilling and resentful occupied population. We will return to this question in [Chapter 13](#).

3 Borders

Sovereignty and demographics are also inextricably linked with the question of where to draw the boundaries. In certain ways, since 1948 Israel and the Arab states, and (to a lesser extent) Palestinians and Israelis, may be seen as fighting over borders. Military encounters during the first Palestine war of 1947–1949 were terminated by means of four armistice agreements signed between Israel and Egypt (February 1949), Jordan (March 1949), Lebanon (July 1949), and Syria (July 1949). But these armistice agreements were never transformed into peace treaties, leaving supposedly temporary ceasefire lines between the combatants in place for decades rather than agreed-upon and recognized international frontiers.

This “unfinished business” of borders after the 1948 war became one of the factors contributing to the outbreaks of subsequent cross-border skirmishes and raids, culminating also in major wars in October 1956 (Israel versus Egypt), June 1967 (Israel versus Egypt, Jordan, and Syria) and October 1973 (Egypt and Syria versus Israel). Although treaties signed in 1979 and 1994 have resolved Israel–Egypt and Jordan–Israel border disputes, there are still contested boundaries to be settled whenever Israel, Lebanon, and Syria sit down to negotiate peace treaties.

Border issues have also become part of the Israeli–Palestinian impasse since 1993, when the two sides were supposed to implement interim arrangements for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 and the transition to Palestinian self-government over defined territories as the nucleus of a future independent state. Borders were, under the framework of an Israeli–Palestinian framework for peace agreed at Oslo in 1993, one of the “permanent status” issues to be resolved en route to a two-state solution to the conflict. During the unconsummated 2000–2001 negotiations at Camp David and Taba, and later during the Annapolis process of

2007–2008, Palestinian and Israeli negotiators drew maps and argued over the extent of Israeli withdrawals from territories captured in 1967 and land swaps so as to draw agreed boundaries between Israel and the future Palestinian state.

Competing Narratives: Right versus Right, Victim versus Victim

By and large, competing claims and counterclaims of the tangible type outlined above have the merit of being considered in terms of *interests* over which compromises are possible, in the classic dynamics of bargaining situations. Intangible issues involving psychology, myths, stereo-typing, and contested narratives²⁵ are of a different quality. These often existential issues involve the fulfillment of demanded rights or the rectification of alleged injustices, rather than claims to concrete assets that can, theoretically at least, be settled via sharing, compensation, trade-offs, or clever formulae. These, as we shall argue further in [Chapter 13](#), are the issues that are the most difficult to resolve.

In order to understand the depth and longevity of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it is ultimately of greater importance for us to focus on myths, symbols, and stereotypes than on so-called “objective facts.” In [Chapter 12](#) we shall examine the issues of bias and objectivity as they affect the ways historians treat the conflict. Here we should note how each side, with dreadful predictability, will interpret all the facts of its historical experience as reinforcing its own deep sense of grievance and victimhood at the hands of the other. As evidenced in the apt title of Benny Morris’s detailed historical survey of the conflict since 1881, each side sincerely and righteously believes that it is the victim of the other side’s aggression and evil intentions.²⁶

In Part II, as we review the unfolding of the history of the conflict through its various stages, we will be reminded of how these parallel but mutually exclusive perceptions of victimhood express themselves. Such self-perceptions

constitute perhaps the most serious obstacle to each party's ability to enter into negotiation, and also to its ability to acknowledge the legitimacy, rights, and humanity of the other side.

Ways of Visualizing the Conflict

Historians and political scientists have offered different suggestions for visualizing this conflict. A common approach among historians is *linear*, e.g. a time-line with an agreed starting date and important turning points such as wars and peace talks. Some have shown how, over time, additional players and new layers of complexity have been added to what started out as a dispute of simpler dimensions. For example, Alan Dowty has recently suggested that we view the conflict as having evolved through four stages:

1. 1882–1948 – a conflict between two national communities to control a single land,
2. 1948–1990s – a conflict between Israel and neighboring Arab states, at first eclipsing the Palestinians but gradually witnessing their reassertion as central protagonists,
3. 1990s–2000s – a largely Israel–Palestine confrontation unsuccessfully looking for a formula to share the land between two states, with Arab states less engaged, and
4. 2001–present – a festering, unresolved local conflict with regional and international dimensions, driven increasingly by religious fundamentalists.²⁷

The conflict has also been visualized by some historians and political scientists as a *cyclical* or *spiral* pattern: grievances fester, tensions build up, a spark ignites a war. Fighting ends, but only temporarily and without resolving all the war's original causes. Rekindled and new grievances then build new instability and provide the conditions that will eventually spark the next outbreak of hostilities. The widening of the spiral represents the

escalation of violence and inclusion of new elements, actors, or levels of complication previously absent from the conflict in its earlier forms.

The changing shape of the conflict over time can also be portrayed *geographically*, by presenting and discussing a series of changing maps. As mentioned in [Chapter 1](#), one key consideration before 1948 is the *demographic* change and pattern of Jewish land ownership and settlement over time, and these can be well illustrated by maps – whether as Palestinian losses or as Zionist achievements.²⁸ The changing borders of Palestine and Israel can also be followed through maps redrawn after the wars of 1947–1949, 1967, and 1973, and the agreements of 1979 (Israel–Egypt Treaty), 1994 (Israel–Jordan Treaty), and 1993–1998 (Palestinian–Israeli interim arrangements).

Political scientists have sometimes used other graphics for visualizing the Arab–Israeli conflict, from simple concentric circles illustrating core and periphery to more elaborate flow charts for decision-makers facing periodic crises.²⁹ Drawing on the work of experts in diplomacy and conflict resolution, we can usefully portray this conflict as *operating on multiple levels*. Itamar Rabinovich, historian, ex-ambassador, and former Israeli negotiator with the Syrians, suggests that “there is no single Arab–Israeli dispute” but rather “a cluster of distinct, interrelated conflicts” which he defines as:

1. the core conflict between Israel and the Palestinians – “a classic conflict between two national movements claiming title to and vying for possession of the same land”;
2. a broader dispute between Israel and Arab nationalism – “a national, political, cultural, and increasingly also religious conflict” in which both sides bring with them “their historical and cultural legacies” and broad national narratives;
3. a series of bilateral disputes between Israel and the neighboring Arab states, based on conflicting geostrategic and geopolitical interests;

4. a subset of, or flashpoint for, broader international conflicts – e.g. great power rivalries, colonialism, and resistance to European hegemony.³⁰

In the end, whatever methodology or visualization one chooses, I suggest that there are a minimum of two basic, intertwined layers that make up the Israeli–Palestinian and Arab–Israeli conflicts:

- two peoples seeking fulfillment and self-determination as unique national entities, competing for mastery over the same land (treated in these pages and elsewhere as the core of the conflict); and
- an original, local conflict drawing in outside parties – regional actors, diaspora communities, global powers – with varying degrees of involvement.

Indeed, the organization of this book follows these lines by focusing on the first of these layers in [Chapters 3–6](#) (the period up to 1949), proceeds in [Chapter 7](#) to incorporate important elements from the second layer, and then refocuses in [Chapters 8–11](#) on the original core.

Analogies and Parables

When cold, logical analysis seems to leave important aspects of a conflict unexplained, some writers resort to fables, parables, or analogies. One of the most quoted allegories was popularized by the late Isaac Deutscher, historian of the Russian revolution and biographer of Joseph Stalin. In an interview shortly after the June 1967 war, Deutscher offered the following allegory of a falling man:

A man once jumped from the top floor of a burning house in which many members of his family had already perished. He managed to save his life; but as he was falling he hit a person standing down below and broke that person's legs and arms. The jumping man had no choice; yet to the man with the broken limbs he was the cause of his misfortune. If both behaved rationally, they would not become enemies. The man who escaped from the blazing house, having recovered, would have tried to help and console the other sufferer; and the latter might have realized that he was the victim of circumstances over which neither of them had control.

But look what happens when these people behave irrationally. The injured man blames the other for his misery and swears to make him pay for it. The other, afraid of the crippled man's revenge, insults him, kicks him, and beats him up whenever they meet. The kicked man again swears revenge and is again punched and punished. The bitter enmity, so fortuitous at first, hardens and comes to overshadow the whole existence of both men and to poison their minds.³¹

At first blush this tale appears an insightful snapshot of the conflict as it looked in the aftermath of the lopsided Israeli victory in the June war. It touches upon raw nerves in bringing out the cruel forces of circumstance that pitted Jewish Holocaust survivors in search of a safe haven against indigenous Palestinian Arabs who suffer as a result. Yet, upon careful scrutiny, the analogy is historically flawed and each party will claim that it is being misrepresented in some way by the figures depicted, as we will see in [Chapter 6](#).

Writers with a literary bent – including Amos Oz, S. Yizhar, and Sari Nusseibeh – have also offered engaging parables, such as:

- two fighting men holding each other by the throat, each afraid to be the first to let go;
- two men cast away at sea, struggling to survive by clinging to a single floating plank;

- two wrestlers, each unable to subdue the other because they are both being sucked down into quicksand.³²

Another metaphor portrays Jews and Palestinians as having to share the same house or apartment – either benignly, as renters of separate rooms but sharing common corridors, or violently, with Zionists portrayed as home invaders kicking out the original Palestinian dwellers onto the streets. Also, Amos Oz frequently likened the current impasse to a dysfunctional married couple in dire need of a good divorce settlement.³³

These devices can often bring new insight, but they too are contested and contestable, reminding us of the need to handle them with care so as to avoid the pitfalls of misleading conclusions.

The Conflict in Comparative Perspective: Three Paradigms

Another way to understand a conflict is to ask ourselves to what extent it is just like any other, and in what ways it is unique. Can we better explain or understand the conflict by resorting to comparisons and analogy, or by drawing on perceived similarities from international history and current events? If so, *which* other conflicts can we consider as offering valid parallels?

In efforts to help their audiences better understand the Arab–Israeli conflict, academics and propagandists alike are fond of using paradigms, or parallels with other disputes. The following three have been frequently invoked:

- a. The pre-1948 *yishuv* and later Israel are portrayed as an unwelcome modern-day “crusader” implantation in the Holy Land, bound to disappear in due course.³⁴ From its creation in 1948 Israel is seen as a colonial-settler state, and its motive force (Zionism) as an aggressive colonialist movement whose clear purpose was to populate with foreigners what they

treated as empty territory, taking possession of the land by subjugating, dispossessing, and/or expelling the indigenous population.

- b. Zionism is presented as a national liberation movement, rallying Jews from their vulnerable minority status in dispersion (diaspora) and facilitating their ingathering in their former homeland – but stumbling upon the obstacle of another people already inhabiting the land and seeking its own national liberation in the same territory.³⁵
- c. Zionist and Israeli concern for creating and maintaining a Jewish majority in a Jewish state is seen as a variant of the racism of South African Afrikaner settlers who built a sophisticated discriminatory apartheid régime to exclude and oppress the indigenous majority of Black Africans.³⁶

Indeed, paradigms (a) and (b) are not merely contrasting ways for outsiders to represent and try to understand the conflict; they form the backbone of the very narratives of Palestinians and Israelis, respectively. They will be discussed further in [Chapter 3](#) as constituting one of the 11 “core arguments” treated in this study.

Choosing to view the conflict through one of these lenses rather than another has important consequences for how one weighs and interprets the evidence, facts, and arguments put forth by the protagonists. As one Israeli historian has noted:

In all the models employed to explicate the Arab/Israeli conflict, historical evidence—or its absence—are [sic] crucial. So, too, is the choice of which society in the ancient and modern worlds Palestine and Israel are to be compared with. The stakes involved in making this selection are large and deeply felt. Discriminating between conflicting appeals to histories real and imagined, and even contrived, will likely continue to challenge and aggravate the scholarly world, the public at large, as well as this participant/observer.³⁷

It is not my intention to convince the reader of the correctness of one model over another. Rather, I point here to three currently used paradigms in order to show the varieties of conflicting interpretation that are possible. In the chapters that follow I will outline similar and related contested viewpoints as they arise, in historical context. Readers will be left with the task and the responsibility of making their own choices as to which seem more convincing.

Notes

- 1 Statistical Abstract of Israel. (2017). Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel, accessed online 30 May 2018 at http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnatonenew_site.htm, tables 2.1, 2.11.
- 2 The Palestine National Charter: Resolutions of the Palestine National Council, 1–17 July 1968, available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-20.html>.
- 3 Preliminary Results of the Population, Housing and Establishments Census 2017, February 2018, p.10, downloaded 30 May 2018 at <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2364-1.pdf>; UNWRA web pages accessed 30 May 2018 at <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees> and <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip>.
- 4 Wasserstein, B. (2008). *Israelis and Palestinians: Why Do They Fight? Can They Stop?*, 3e, 165–169. New Haven, CT / London: Yale University Press/London: Profile Books; Eisen, R. (2011). *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press; Hussain, J. (2011). *Islam: Its Law and Society*, 3e. Annandale, NSW: Federation Press, ch. 4.
- 5 See “Maps of the Changing Boundaries of ‘Historic’ Palestine,” Lassner, J. and Troen, S.I. (2007). *Jews and Muslims in the Arab World: Haunted By Pasts*,

Real and Imagined, 353–366. Lanham/Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield.

- 6 Wasserstein, B. *Israelis and Palestinians*, 99.
- 7 Article 2, Palestinian National Charter, available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-20.html>. Cf. Wasserstein, B. *Israelis and Palestinians*, 123.
- 8 Zionist Plan for Palestine, February 1919, Gilbert, M. (2012). *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 10e, 9. London / New York: Routledge; cf. Wasserstein, B. *Israelis and Palestinians*, 103–104; Tessler, M. (2009). *A History of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*, 2e, 163. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- 9 For maps showing Ottoman administrative units, see Gilbert, M. *Routledge Atlas*, 4–5; Tessler, M. *A History of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*, 161.
- 10 For an insightful examination of the demographic aspects of the conflict, see Wasserstein, B. *Israelis and Palestinians*, ch. 1. See e.g. Stein, K.W. (1984). *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917–1939*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; Wasserstein, B. *Israelis and Palestinians*, ch. 2.
- 11 See e.g. Stein, K.W. *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917–1939*. Wasserstein, B. *Israelis and Palestinians*, ch. 2.
- 12 Weizmann, C., (1949) *Trial and Error: The Autobiography of Chaim Weizmann*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 305.
- 13 Arlosoroff to Weizmann, 30 June 1932, Weizmann Archives (Rehovot, Israel). See also *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948* (ed. and introduced by Walid Khalidi), 245–254. Beirut, 1971; 2nd printing, Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987; Caplan, N. (1988). *Zionist visions in the early 1930s*.

In: *Studies in Contemporary Jewry: An Annual*, vol. IV (ed. J. Frankel), 256–259. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Avineri, S. (1985). The Socialist Zionism of Chaim Arlosoroff. *Jerusalem Quarterly* 34: 84–87.

14. Caplan, N. Zionist visions; Caplan, N. (2015). *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. II, *Arab–Zionist Negotiations and the End of the Mandate*. London: [Frank Cass 1986] Routledge RLE, ch. 1.
15. Article 11 of UNGA Resolution 194 (III), 11 December 1948. In: *United Nations Resolutions on Palestine and the Arab–Israeli Conflict, vol. I: 1947–1974* (rev. ed.) (ed. G.J. Tomeh). Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1988, 16; available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-10.html>.
16. <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees> (accessed 30 May 2018).
17. Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel. *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2017*, tables 2.1 and 2.6, available under “Publications & Products” at http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/cw_usr_view_folder?ID=141. As a result, the “Ashkenazic” (or European) character of Israel’s Jewish population declined, with the population balance moving from 75 percent Ashkenazic in 1948 to 55 percent by 1961, making room for an increasing element of “Sephardic” (Oriental and Mediterranean) Jews. For descriptions and a critical overview of the problems and challenges facing Jewish immigrants to Israel from Arab countries at this time, see Sachar, H.M. (1976). *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, 395–409. New York: Alfred A. Knopf; Segev, T. (1986). *1949: The First Israelis* (ed. A.N. Weinstein). New York: Free Press/London: Collier Macmillan, ch. 6 (“Nameless People”).
18. The National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel (2006). *The Future Vision*

of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel, downloaded 3 July 2018 from <http://www.adalah.org/newsletter/eng/dec06/tasawor-mostaqbali.pdf>.

19 *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2017*, table 2.1.

20 Facing an angry demonstration at the Umm al-Fahm junction on 2 October, Israeli police snipers shot and killed 12 protestors, including a 17-year-old member of the “Seeds of Peace” group. The episode caused much bitterness and resulted in a government inquiry under Justice Theodore Or, whose findings exposed deeper problems of inter-communal relations. For the official summary of the Or Commission Report, see <https://www.seedsofpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Or-Commission-Report-Summation-English.pdf>.

21 The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, 14 May 1948, available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2010/08/document-s8.html>.

22 See e.g. Mada al-Carmel. *The Haifa Declaration*, 15 May 2007, accessed online 8 July 2018 at <http://mada-research.org/en/2007/09/12/the-haifa-declaration-arabic-english-hebrew-2007/>; The Vision Documents of Palestinian citizens. *Israel Studies Forum* 23:2 (2008), 3–73 (articles by Amal Jamal, Uriel Abulof, Dov Waxman, and Ilan Peleg); Susser, A. (2012). *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative*, 100–105, 156–164. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Rabinovich, I. (2013). *The Lingering Conflict: Israel, the Arabs, and the Middle East, 1948–2012* (rev. ed.), 238–246. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press; Ghanem, A. (2013). Palestinians in Israel and binationalism: Escape from the impasse. In: *The Failure of the Two-State Solution: The Prospects of One State in the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (ed. H.A. Faris), 257–268. London: I.B. Tauris/New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Waxman, D. (2013). Israel’s other Palestinian problem: The

future vision documents and the demands of the Palestinian minority in Israel. *Israel Affairs* 19 (1): 214–229.

- [23](#) Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 12 August 1949, accessed online 4 June 2018 at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/385ec082b509e76c41256739003e636d/6756482d86146898c125641e004aa3c>; Shafir, G. (2017). *A Half Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine, and the World's Most Intractable Conflict*, 22–27. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- [24](#) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Preliminary Results of the Population, Housing and Establishment Census 2017 (February 2018), downloaded 30 June 2018 from <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2364-1.pdf>; *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2017*, table 2.16; Gorenberg, G. (2006). *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of Settlements, 1967–1977*, 364. New York: Times Books; Zertal, I. and Eldar, A. (2007). *Lords of the Land: The War over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967–2007* (transl. from the Hebrew by Vivian Eden), xiii. New York: Nation Books; Shafir, G. *A Half Century of Occupation*, 68.
- [25](#) For a helpful juxtaposition of competing Israeli and Palestinian narratives of their conflict, see Scham, P. (2005). Introduction to *Shared Histories: A Palestinian–Israeli Dialogue* (ed. P. Scham, W. Salem, and B. Pogrud), 1–12. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- [26](#) Morris, B., (2001). *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist–Arab Conflict, 1881–1999*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- [27](#) Dowty, A. (2017). *Israel/Palestine*, 4e. Malden, MA/Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, esp. 182–183. For other examples of timelines and chronologies, see Rubinstein, A.Z. (ed.) (1991). *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: Perspectives*, 215–222. New York: HarperCollins, 1991; Bickerton, I.J. and Klausner, C.L.

(2010). *A History of the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 6e. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, on the first page of each chapter; Wasserstein, B. *Israelis and Palestinians*, 179–194; Lesch, D.W. (2008). *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: A History*, 467–472. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- [28](#) Among the best available maps of this type are those in Khalidi, W. (1984). *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians, 1876–1948*. Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 34, 84, 237, 239 at <http://www.passia.org/maps/38> (accessed online 30 June 2018). For an overview and critical discussion, see Biger, G. (2008). The boundaries of Israel–Palestine, past, present and future: A critical geographical view. *Israel Studies* 13 (1): 68–93.
- [29](#) See e.g. the pioneering work of Brecher, M. (1972). *The Foreign Policy System of Israel: Setting, Images, Process*. London/Toronto/Melbourne: Oxford University Press, and *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975.
- [30](#) Rabinovich, I. *The Lingering Conflict*, 2–3. See also Cohen, S.P. (2005). Intractability and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In: *Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict* (ed. C.A. Crocker, F.O. Hampson, and P. Aall), 348–350. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- [31](#) Deutscher, I. (1968). The Israeli–Arab War, June 1967 (from an interview given to the *New Left Review*, 23 June 1967). In: *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, 136–137. London: Oxford University Press. Cf. the similar allegory retold by Nusseibeh, S. with David, A. (2007). *Once upon a Country: A Palestinian Life*, 462. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- [32](#) Nusseibeh, S. *Once upon a Country*, 483–487.
- [33](#) Oz, A. (2006). *How to Cure a Fanatic*, 19–20, 62. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Burg, A.

(2003). A three-story approach to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Haaretz* 5.

- 34 See Ochsenswald, W.L. (1976). The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem and Israel: An historical comparison. *Middle East Journal* 30 (2): 221–226; Haddad, Y. (1992). Islamists and the ‘Problem of Israel’: The 1967 awakening. *Middle East Journal* 46 (2): 270–271, 280–282; Avnery, U. (1971). *Israel without Zionism: A Plan for Peace in the Middle East*. New York: Collier, ch. 5; Ohana, D. (2012). *The Origins of Israeli Mythology: Neither Canaanites nor Crusaders* (transl. D. Maisel), 151–162, 169–181, 222–223. Cambridge UK/New York: Cambridge University Press; Avnery, U. Crusaders and Zionists, 11 October 2014, 2 September 2017, accessed online 3 June 2018 at <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1412954246/>, <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1504285130>.
- 35 See e.g. Talmon, J. (1970). *Israel among the Nations*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; Tsur, J. (1977). *Zionism: The Saga of a National Liberation Movement*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction; O’Brien, C.C. (1986). *The Siege: The Saga of Israel and Zionism*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- 36 Among many, see Bishara, M. (2001). *Palestine/Israel: Peace or Apartheid: Prospects for Resolving the Conflict*. London: Zed Books/Halifax, NS: Fernwood. For an overview of the uses and misuses of Israel–South Africa analogies, see Adam, H. and Moodley, K. (2005). *Seeking Mandela: Peacemaking between Israelis and Palestinians*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- 37 Troen, S.I. (2007). De-Judaizing the Homeland: Academic politics in rewriting the history of Palestine. *Israel Affairs* 13 (4): 882–883.

Part II

Histories in Contention

3

Background to 1917: Origins of Conflict

Ancient Ties and Historical Memories

In the late nineteenth century, a struggle developed between immigrating Zionist Jews and the indigenous Arab (Muslim and Christian) population; the two communities would thereafter become rivals seeking to exercise self-determination over a small but strategically important and religiously sensitive area, then a part of the Ottoman Empire. These encounters occurred at a time of what one Palestinian historian has described as “the European Biblical discovery [or rediscovery] of Palestine,” a land known for its “unique religious/symbolic significance to the West as the home of Judaism, the birthplace of Christianity, and the heartland of the Crusader adventure.”¹

Within this European perspective, the emigration of Jews to this land was motivated by Zionism, a movement for their “national liberation ... a consequence of the insufferable predicament of the Jews of Eastern Europe, excluded from or oppressed by the emergent national movements of the late nineteenth century.” In the Jewish-Zionist narrative, these people were returning to seek “a national refuge in their ancient homeland in *Eretz Yisrael*, the cradle of historical Jewish nationhood and sovereign existence.” For the great majority of Jewish Israelis today, “the establishment of the State of Israel was the ultimate attainment, against all odds, of a normal national existence, as deserved by all peoples, and the guarantee of their collective survival in dignity, instead of their horrific history of suffering, intolerance, and physical annihilation.”²

To the Muslim and Christian Arabs living there, the arrival of Zionist Jews in their midst takes on a

completely different hue. In the context of the Palestinian narrative, “Palestine as *our* homeland was established in the course of over fifteen hundred years of continuous Arab-Muslim presence; it was only by superior force and colonial machination that we were eventually dispossessed of it.”³ From the vantage point of the resident population, the new settlers arriving in Ottoman Palestine during this period were strangers, alien Europeans. Those who became aware of the Zionist goal of establishing a Jewish state necessarily saw them as invaders.

While we choose to begin our study of the Israel–Palestine conflict at this point, in the early 1880s, we cannot ignore the ongoing relevance of ancient ties and historical memories. Some of today’s Israelis or Palestinians may evoke memories of centuries of respectful tolerance and fruitful Muslim–Jewish collaboration since the seventh century CE as a pattern to be remembered and replicated, if possible, in overcoming more recent hostility. More often, however, both peoples reach back to their ancient pasts in order to build their contemporary national identity and consciousness, and to lay claim to original ownership of the contested (and divinely promised) land.⁴

This leads us to discuss the first of 11 “core arguments” to be surveyed in our study: *Who was there first, and whose land was it to begin with?* Both sides evoke and reconstruct a largely mythical past, handed down through generations by written texts and oral tradition, through museums and public education, from parents to children, in order to prove that their ancestors were “there” first, that their forebears and descendants controlled the territory for extended periods of time, and/or that the land in question was promised to them by God.

For some, the issue is one to be decided mainly by theological analysis and exegesis of holy texts. Proofs of the Jewish claim can be taken from Hebrew scriptures, especially those verses in the *Torah* (the Five Books of Moses, part of the Old Testament of the Christian Bible)

in which, some two millennia before Christ, God is recorded as having promised defined territories as an “everlasting possession” to Abraham and his seed.⁵ Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Despite their wanderings, dispersion, and forced expulsions over the centuries, Jews claiming descent from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob have maintained a continuous presence in the land, albeit for long stretches in reduced numbers as a minority community.

Muslims recognize a common ancestry and spiritual heritage in most of the Hebrew prophets, and they include Jesus in this lineage. They revere Ibrahim (Abraham) as the common ancestor of all Muslims, Arabs, and other Semitic peoples, and see their own lineage passing through Abraham’s son, Ishmael. In the course of spreading the new faith of Islam in the mid-seventh century CE, Arabs conquered the area known as Palestine, and lived there under a series of Islamic empires until the end of World War I.

Since the late 1800s the contest over the land has involved, for some, a dispute over where the boundaries of the Biblically promised land would run today, and which contemporary peoples would be classified as descendants of Abraham and heirs to that land.⁶ Religious fundamentalists have no trouble accepting the higher authority and authenticity of divine promises as revealed in their respective holy scriptures. Believers in other faiths (not to mention non-believers) will, of course, not feel compelled to accept land claims based on particular holy texts.

Interestingly, a strong fascination with the Biblical Hebrews animated a number of prominent secular-socialist Zionists like David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan. For them the holy book constituted a proof of the Jewish connection to the modern-day Palestine/*Eretz-Israel*, serving both as archeological guidebook⁷ and legal entitlement. During his public testimony to the Peel (Royal) Commission that investigated complaints against the British Mandate régime in 1937, Ben-Gurion

explained the Jews' claim to Palestine as follows: "the Bible is our Mandate, the Bible which was written by us, in our own language, in Hebrew, in this very country. That is our Mandate. Our right is as old as the Jewish people."⁸

There are also secular, non-theological components to claims of longstanding ties to the land. Archeology has become a tool to either sustain or discredit claims of ancestral links to earlier communities made by today's Arabs, Palestinians, and Jews in the contested territory. To establish such proofs and reinforce claims of original ownership, professional and amateur archeologists dig up the past of the disputed land and seek to map out a chain of continuous habitation back to the ancient Canaanites, Phoenicians, Philistines, Hebrews, and other peoples. Some Palestinians, for example, claim ancestry to peoples that pre-date the Hebrews of the Biblical period; some Muslim and Arab authors interpret ancient history in ways to prove that "the Arabs had lived in Palestine from prehistoric times and had even bestowed on the Jews their religion and literature."⁹ For their part, Jews focus on the Biblical period to emphasize that their national existence pre-dated the arrival of the Arabs who are portrayed as arriving in the Fertile Crescent only during the seventh-century CE expansion of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

It is possible, and indeed very common, to interpret archeological findings selectively for different ends. Palestinians are easily able to amass sufficient proofs to reinforce what they already believe about their primordial claim to the land, and have no difficulty finding evidence that would undermine Jewish claims as spurious. Similarly, Israelis are able to interpret the archeological evidence in ways that help them feel justified in their longstanding connection to the land, while casting doubt on rival Palestinian claims. The output of published literature backing up one side and debunking the claims of the other is enormous, spans many decades, and shows little sign of letting up.¹⁰ Interestingly, some Israelis have recently committed the

heresy of challenging their country's accepted myth of an ancient and continuous "Jewish people" culminating in Zionism and a Jewish state.¹¹

Academic dialogue seems to do little to settle this dispute, as illustrated by a recorded debate between Israeli "new historian" Benny Morris and Palestinian-American Joseph Massad. Launched in the spirit of a suggestion to establish a committee of scholars to work for "Historical Truth and Political Justice," the discussion reached a bitter dead-end on the basic question of who was there first.¹² Like most of the 11 core arguments that we shall encounter, this one is essentially unwinnable.

Early Encounters: 1880s–1914

As we are focusing primarily on the last 140 years of the current conflict, let us examine the contexts in which two national movements emerged.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, Arabic-speaking populations of the multicultural Muslim Ottoman Empire came increasingly to feel themselves separately as Arabs, wishing to emphasize their "Arabness" or Arabism, in some cases more strongly than their identity as Muslims or as Ottoman citizens. This growing self-identification in Arab nationalist terms paralleled developments in Europe, where language and territory were also becoming defining features of new societies and states. At first, Arab nationalists constituted only a minority movement amid a majority of loyal Ottoman subjects. They formed secret societies, discussed new ideas in army officers' clubs and were also able to promote Arabic language and culture in literary salons and clubs.

Three strands, or impulses, contributed to this renewed sense of pride in, and identification with, Arabism. One was the Islamic impulse. The prophet Muhammad was an Arab, the tribes of Arabia were the original founders of the Muslim *umma* (community), and the Holy Quran

was written in the Arabic language. A second contributing strand was the importation of ideas from Europe, especially those promoting linguistic-cultural nationalism. These ideas were being spread through traders and missionaries (European Christians), and it was especially Christian Arabs who attempted to emphasize the new idea of the unity of all Arabic-speakers in order to cut across, or submerge, Christian–Muslim differences, rivalries, or jealousies.¹³ A third impetus to the formation of distinctly Arab consciousness was the Arab reaction, following the “Young Turk” revolution in Constantinople in 1908, against attempts at the centralization of the Ottoman Empire; Arabs reacted even more strongly to the new “Turkification” of previously loose, laissez-faire, decentralized relationships between the Ottoman center and its regions and provinces. One group of nationalist Arabs formed the “Decentralist” Party, aimed at autonomy if not secession of their regions of the tottering empire.

Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Arab nationalist thinkers felt entitled to self-determination based on their permanent continuous majority residence in the area, albeit under a succession of Islamic empires, since the seventh century. But, at precisely this time, this assumption was challenged in the area known as Palestine by a rival movement of national awakening among the Jews of Europe. Most of the latter, known as Zionists, focused their attention not on European soil but rather on the Holy Land. Within a decade of the creation of the World Zionist Organization, an Arab nationalist writer and former Ottoman official based in Paris was able to point to the existence of

two important phenomena, of the same nature but opposed, ... the awakening of the Arab nation, and the latent effort of the Jews to reconstitute on a very large scale the ancient kingdom of Israel. Both these movements are destined to fight continually until one of them wins. The fate of the entire world [he predicted] will depend on the final result of this struggle between these two peoples representing two contrary principles.¹⁴

Like Arab nationalists of the Ottoman Empire, groups of Jews in Europe also penned pamphlets and created associations to promulgate a redefinition of themselves in more secular, national terms. Following several decades of internal discussion and publications, pioneering settlers began to leave Europe and Russia in the early 1880s for the area known generally as Palestine and to the Jewish people as *Eretz-Israel*, the land of Israel. At Basle, Switzerland, in 1897 Theodor Herzl convened the first world Zionist Congress and created the organizational framework of a movement dedicated to enhancing national consciousness among Jews. Another goal of the movement was to mobilize support among the powers of the time to help acquire the territory upon which Zionist Jews hoped to rebuild their national home and future state.

Zionism was thus promoting territorial regrouping as an answer to what was known as “the Jewish question” – which can be summed up, at that time, as: What is to become of the Jews of Europe, who as individual citizens had recently enjoyed emancipation from legally defined inferiority and submission but who were finding it increasingly difficult, as a group, to fit into the new matrix of nationalities and nation-states? A number of state-inspired outbursts of violent antisemitism (“pogroms”) underscored the vulnerability of the Jews and their inability to blend in with their surrounding cultures. The answer seemed to be a state of their own.

Although they were scattered among the nations, Jews were already united by common religion, customs, historical legacy, and spoken (Yiddish) and liturgical

(Hebrew) languages. At first only a few thinkers dreamed of transforming their community into a single national group. Zionism sought to convince Jewish communities in various lands to reorient themselves, as it were, not only in their way of thinking, but also to mobilize them for a physical “return to Zion,” the Biblical homeland of the ancient Hebrews.

This was, of course, the very same land known at the time generally as Palestine and administered as several provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Except for not being physically located on the territory needed for their national revival, the new Jewish secular-nationalists calling themselves “Zionists” were emulating the recent nationalist movements and nation-states created by Italians, French, and other European peoples.¹⁵

Much has been written about this early period in which the seeds of today’s conflict were sown. In the world of international politics, the leaders of the Zionist movement sought to win the favor of the Ottoman Turks who ruled the land in question; later, high-level diplomatic efforts were directed by both Arab nationalists and Zionists toward Britain, France, the US, and other world powers. Thus began a pattern by which both contesting parties looked toward, and drew in, powerful outsiders to support their demands. This would have the complicating effect of adding external layers and actors to the core rivalry between two emerging national movements for the same territory.

During 1913 and 1914, representatives of the Zionist and Arab movements actually met several times to discuss the possibilities of an entente that might have excluded these outsiders; nothing came from these meetings.¹⁶ On the ground, first encounters between the Zionist pioneers/settlers and the indigenous Arabic-speaking population (Muslim and Christian) were mixed, including episodes of misunderstandings, suspicion, and friction along with examples of cooperation and good neighborly relations.¹⁷

An Unseen Question?

We have quoted early evidence of Arab awareness of an emerging clash with Zionists in Palestine. During the last decades of the Ottoman period other Arab politicians, officials, and journalists in the region likewise gave expression to their fears and concern.¹⁸

How did the early Zionists view the indigenous population? Did they not foresee any problems in their relations with the Arabs? There is plenty of evidence that Zionists were indeed aware of the fears, suspicions, and hostility expressed by the inhabitants of the land to which they were immigrating. Noted Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha-Am produced some disturbing firsthand reports of what he saw on a tour of Zionist settlements in *Eretz-Israel* in 1891.¹⁹ In 1899, Theodor Herzl himself felt the need to write to Youssuf Zia al-Khalidi in defense of Zionism and in an attempt to allay the criticisms and fears expressed by the Mayor of Jerusalem.²⁰

Other examples abound of Zionist efforts to analyze and/or dispel the opposition evinced by the inhabitants of Ottoman Palestine.²¹ But none of these efforts was sustained or effective, as the successes of Zionism in Ottoman and subsequently British Palestine would be achieved on the level of high diplomacy. One can only speculate whether better attempts to win over the local population through grass-roots activity could ever have bridged the gap between what the two peoples wanted most in this contested land. We return to this question in [Chapter 12](#) as one of the possible “missed opportunities” to avert the growth of the conflict.

Colonialism and Nationalism

It is the European origins of the reawakening Jewish national movement to “return to Zion” that bring us to consider a second core argument that is still today being debated by the parties in conflict and those dedicated to explaining and teaching about it. It is over the questions:

Was the Zionist solution to the Jewish question a Jewish variant of national revivals and struggles for liberation around the globe? Or was Zionism part of an aggressive European colonialist expansion into the Middle East, whose raison d'être was to exploit, dispossess, or overpower the indigenous population?

Nascent Arab nationalism and Zionism were not simply colliding in a vacuum over a piece of land; they were also operating within the broader context of a European thrust of economic, political, and cultural power over the 400-year-old Ottoman Empire, which was in a state of decline and headed for dissolution. Within the perspective of Jewish history and emerging Zionism, Jews who moved to Palestine saw themselves as returning to their ancient homeland. From the perspective of the Arabic-speaking, mostly Muslim, inhabitants of the land, these Zionist immigrants were viewed as foreign intruders (at best) or invaders (at worst). Here we have a clash of perspectives that is unlikely to be adjusted by convincing one side of the rightness of the other's view.

The way one chooses to answer the question "Was Zionism a legitimate expression of Jewish nationalism, or part of an aggressive European colonialist expansion?" will have several sets of consequences. First, it will strongly affect how one weighs all the historical data, and how one interprets the evidence and arguments put forth by the protagonists. Secondly, and perhaps more seriously, it will amount to choosing one side over the other by endorsing the main claim of its narrative while rejecting the other. Accepting the Zionist narrative of return contradicts the Palestinian narrative of being invaded and colonized, while subscribing to the colonialist interpretation undermines the legitimacy of the Zionist case. Observers, scholars, and journalists who may consider themselves open-minded, unbiased, or neutral will – immediately upon crediting one view over the other – nonetheless become part of the debate itself, with the resultant approval or disapproval of the parties themselves. Even the answer that "both are true"

contains a position that would be considered 50% incorrect by most partisans on either side.

In recent generations the colonial-settler prism has enjoyed great popularity among scholars around the world; in some academic circles it has become almost axiomatic, not even requiring demonstration or discussion.²² Even in Israel, “post-Zionists” and many of the “new historians” ([Chapter 12](#)) consciously embrace this approach and challenge the mainstream view of heroic Jewish pioneers who brought only good and no harm to the local population. Ilan Troen, a critic of the colonial-settler view of Zionism, sees this current fashion as a deformity of arguments that, in earlier days, were convincing enough to produce widespread recognition of Jewish-Zionist national rights in Western societies and the academic world. Troen describes this as a major “paradigm shift in the scholarship concerned with Palestine” in the twentieth century, and tries to convince readers of the weaknesses of this paradigm.²³

It is to be expected that other pro-Israeli scholars and those who subscribe to the Zionism-as-Jewish-nationalism paradigm will find the “Israel-as-colonialist-implant” model unconvincing. Israeli and pro-Israeli scholars and commentators have invested much intellectual and public-relations energy into countering this view; Zionists and Israelis, they argue, are “neither Canaanites nor Crusaders,” but rather “the indigenous people, not colonial usurpers.”²⁴ Some of these counterattacks also question the motives of those who promote the colonial-settler narrative, dismissing it as propagandistic and challenging the accuracy or solidity of its underpinning scholarship. Noting the change in attitudes toward Israel in Western academe in the 1970s, Haifa University historian Yoav Gelber has characterized the situation as follows:

The same Palestinian slogans that had made little impression on European public opinion between the two world wars and in the aftermath of 1948 now found fertile ground in Europe's newfound postcolonial guilt. The process was encouraged by Arab petrodollars and other forms of funding and spread to American universities and later even to Israel. Early signs of the change in attitude appeared in the late 1980s with the emergence of the so-called New Historians, whose principal contribution to the study of the Arab–Israeli conflict has been to deflect the focus from Israeli accomplishments to the Palestinian ordeal. Palestinians are portrayed as hapless objects of violence and Israeli oppression, Israeli–Transjordanian collusion, and treacherous British and Arab diplomacy. Some describe Israelis as intransigent, merciless, and needlessly callous usurpers who cynically exploited the Holocaust to gain world support for Jewish statehood at the expense of Palestinian rights to their country.²⁵

But can the colonial paradigm be explained away as simply an artificial product of shifts in academic and international politics? Although there may be an interesting mix of noble and nefarious reasons why one paradigm becomes popular at the expense of another at any given time, it is a distortion to imagine that the “Zionism-is-colonialism” narrative was invented post facto in order to win contemporary debates and to undermine the Zionist narrative, or that it is simply a tool created by antisemites and Israel-haters to denounce Jews and delegitimize the Jewish claim to statehood.

What gets lost in critiques like the one quoted above is the fact that the colonial-settler model of Zionism is more than an intellectual construct: it is also an integral part of an authentic Palestinian narrative based on actual experience – just as the rival narrative of the longing for and return to Zion is a genuine reflection of Jewish diaspora experience, and not to be dismissed as mere self-serving brainwashing or propaganda. Unfortunately,

scholars on both sides of this debate seldom rise above the widespread myopic tendency of partisans and the populations they represent to believe that “Our narrative tells the facts; their narrative is propaganda.”²⁶ We will see examples of this in the pages that follow, and will revisit the dueling narratives concept in [Chapter 12](#).

Contemporary academic and other treatments of Zionism as a colonial-settler phenomenon can be viewed as the continuation of claims and arguments presented by Palestinian nationalists who have been active in a struggle against Zionism since the early 1920s, if not earlier. Aside from ephemeral political protests, treatises, and pamphlets, these arguments found their first powerful expression in the 1938 publication of George Antonius’s influential book, *The Arab Awakening*.²⁷ Major contributors to this approach in later decades have been French scholar Maxime Rodinson, whose seminal essay, “Israël: fait colonial?” was published in 1967; and the dean of Palestinian historians, Professor Walid Khalidi.²⁸

Perhaps the best-known exponent of this approach was the Palestinian-American scholar and activist, Edward Said. The titles and subtitles used in Said’s much-reprinted and oft-quoted 1979 book, *The Question of Palestine*, capture the essence of the anticolonialist critique. Part Two is entitled “Zionism from the standpoint of its victims,” and is subdivided into two discussions: “Zionism and the attitudes of European colonialism” and “Zionist population, Palestinian depopulation.”²⁹ A more radical exponent of this approach is Joseph Massad, whose writings suggest that the very phrase “Israeli–Palestinian conflict” is misleading because the word “conflict” implies a balance and symmetry between two equal and equally legitimate contestants. For him, we should rather be talking about a colonial-settler invasion, an aggression perpetrated by one supremacist, racist party (Zionists) against another party (Palestinians) simply attempting to defend itself.³⁰

In a debate that patently fails to persuade those who subscribe to the view that Zionism is a form of colonialism, writers like Troen, Gelber, and others advance counterarguments that either reject the colonialist analogy outright, or point to qualifications that would make Zionism not a form of pure colonialism. Troen, for example, offers evidence of the international (i.e. European) community's previous acceptance of the Jews' "reconstitution," and right to return to and rebuild their homeland, in Palestine/*Eretz-Israel*. He describes the Zionist attitude as one of building a new society (the *yishuv*) that sought to reject, rather than reproduce, European realities in the Middle East:

Adaptation, transformation and rejection of Europe reverberated throughout the intellectual and cultural reality of the Yishuv. It was patently clear that Zionism was not engaging in mere imitation or in direct transplantation. Zionists did not see themselves as foreigners or conquerors. For centuries in the Diaspora they had been strangers. In Eretz Israel they expended enormous creative energy to feel at home, as if they were natives. It was this rejuvenation that convinced a large portion of the world community that Jews were entitled to independence within that portion of the country they had so distinctively marked.³¹

Among the other arguments advanced against the "Zionism = colonialism" model are that:

- Zionist settlement and colonizing were nation-building activities of a people wishing to reintegrate themselves with the land, rather than create an outpost to exploit its resources for the benefit of a foreign metropolis.
- Zionists' use of force came about not as part of an original plan of aggressive conquest, but as a response to Arab violence.
- Zionists purchased, rather than conquered or stole, land.

- Zionism contained a mixture of elements of “colonial, anti-colonial and post-colonial discourse and practice.”³²

The debate over whether to view the conflict in accordance with the colonial-settler paradigm or the rival Jewish nationalist narrative is one that, I submit, can never be won. It continues to resurface, even among Israeli intellectuals.³³ The existence of counterarguments seems to matter little to those who hold firmly and exclusively to either paradigm; counterevidence is easily dismissed as self-serving or arrogant. Dialogues among Palestinian and Israeli scholars, however open-minded and well-intentioned to start with, tend to degenerate into inconclusive and at times heated tit-for-tat debates when the issue of Zionism-versus-colonialism is brought up.³⁴ Those bent on advancing “the case for Israel” or “the case for Palestine” seem unable to go beyond treating the opponent’s paradigm as a polemical thrust that needs to be discredited and debunked by skillful advocacy, as if this were merely a matter of scoring points.

In our treatment of the dispute we shall accept and treat both of these contested versions as authentic expressions of the protagonists’ respective narratives. Perhaps it makes more sense to view this not as a binary, either/or, choice, but rather one of Zionism being a movement *both* of conquest (of Palestine) *and* of national liberation (of Jews).³⁵

Victims versus Victims

The perhaps unresolvable differences between viewing the Israeli–Arab conflict as being either a clash of nationalisms or as a colonial-settler invasion feed into the self-view each party has of itself as being the righteous victim of the other. As we shall illustrate elsewhere in these pages, this “victims-versus-victims” dimension is itself a large contributing factor to the intractability of this conflict. Early Zionists were imbued

with a sense of mission that they were correcting the injustices and afflictions the Jews had endured for centuries as dispersed and despised victims of, at first, religious, then racial-biological, hatred and persecution. The zeal and sacrifices required by the effort they made to leave Europe for what they considered to be their ancient homeland may account in part for the blindness of Zionist pioneers to the negative impact they were having on segments of the indigenous population of Ottoman Palestine.

These Zionist idealists, even the socialists and internationalists among them, also carried with them cultural prejudices of their times about their inherent superiority as Europeans facing primitive “natives” who were in need of political stability and the social and economic progress that they, as Europeans, would be bringing with them into western Asia. Zionists did indeed view the Arabs not as their equals but as an underdeveloped people not particularly attached to any particular territory, a people who respected only force and (recalling periods of repressive Turkish rule) who would bow to superior authority. Early Zionist plans for and assumptions about Palestine and Palestinians were captured in the naïve slogan, “a land without a people for a people without a land” (see [Chapter 1](#), section Maps).

For their part, many Muslims and Christians of the Ottoman Empire came to fear the new Jewish arrivals as members of a mysterious people, formerly subservient and docile but now bent on world domination, and were convinced of this (like many people of the period) by conspiracy theories of *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.³⁶ This made it easy to demonize Zionism as a dangerous imperialist force with secret connections in all the world’s capitals, whose sole aim was to dispossess the Palestinian and other Arabs of their homeland. Nationalist spokesmen inspired their followers with calls to resist foreign domination by these unwanted Jewish intruders.

As we’ll see again during the coming decades of conflict, this sense of exclusive and righteous victimhood would

become an enduring feature of each party's self-perception, not easily dislodged by soothing words of good intentions.

Notes

- 1** Doumani, B. (2007). Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Rewriting Palestinians into history. In: *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, 2e (ed. I. Pappé), 13–14. London/New York: Routledge.
- 2** Susser, A. (2012). *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 134–135, 159.
- 3** Khalidi, A.S. (2011). Why can't the Palestinians recognize the Jewish state?. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40 (4): 79. See also [Chapter 13](#), section "Telling It Like It Is."
- 4** For an excellent and balanced overview of early Jewish and Arab/Muslim history and its relevance to the current conflict, see Tessler, M. (2009). *A History of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*, 2e. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, chs. 1–2. See also Patai, R. (1986). *The Seed of Abraham: Jews and Arabs in Contact and Conflict*, 296–304. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- 5** In the standard translations of Genesis, chapter 17, verse 8, God said to Abraham, "I will give to you and to your seed after you, the land wherein you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." Other verses that have God promising land to the Hebrews are Genesis 4, 12:7, 13:14, 15, 16:7, 17, 18, 26:3, 28:13, 35:12; Exodus 6:4; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 13, 14:16, 33:53, 34:12; and Joshua 1:2–4.
- 6** For a modern commentary on Isaac and Ishmael, see Firestone, R. (2001). *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims*, 10–12. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav. For an innovative alternative

geographical interpretation, see Salibi, K. (1985). *The Bible Came from Arabia*. London: Jonathan Cape.

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- 8 Notes of Evidence taken on Thursday, 7th January 1937, 49th Meeting, Palestine Royal Commission, *Minutes of Evidence Heard at Public Sessions (with Index)*, Colonial No. 143, London: HMSO, 288. Reproduced in Klieman, A.S. (ed. with an introduction by) (1987). *The Rise of Israel, vol. 22: The Palestine Royal Commission*. New York/London: Garland.
- 9 Baihum, M.J. (1957). Arabism and Jewry in Syria, transl. in Haim, S.G. (ed.) (1962). *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology*, 128–146. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press; quotation from Haim's introduction, 38. See also Baker, A. (2014, 23 March). Changing the Historical Narrative: Saeb Erekat's New Spin. *Jerusalem Issue Briefs* 14: 8 at <http://jcpa.org/article/changing-Historical-Narrative-saeb-erekats-New-Spin> (accessed online 19 October 2018).
- 10 For a sampling from the abundant polemical, academic, and popular writing on this question, see essays by Ilene Beatty and Alfred Guillaume reproduced in *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948* (ed. and introduced by Walid Khalidi), 3–30. Beirut, 1971; 2nd printing, Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987; Elon, A. (1971). *The Israelis: Founders and Sons*, 280–289. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Bowersock, G.W. (1985). Palestine: Ancient history and modern politics. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 56 (Summer): 49–57, reproduced in Said, E.W. and Hitchens, C. (eds.) (2001). *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, 181–191. London: Verso; Shanks, H. (1986, August). Archeology as politics. *Commentary*, 50–52; Glock, A. (1994). Archeology as cultural survival: The

future of the Palestinian past. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23 (3): 70–84 and Glock, A. (1995). Cultural bias in the archaeology of Palestine. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 24 (4): 48–59; Zerubavel, Y. (1995). *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*, 22–36. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press; Marblestone, H. (2000). The great archaeological debate. *Israel Studies Bulletin* 16 (1): 23–29; Marcus, A.D. (2000). *The View from Nebo: How Archaeology is Rewriting the Bible and Reshaping the Middle East*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown; El-Haj, N.A. (2001). *Facts on the Ground: Archeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Ami Isseroff, Nadia Abu El Haj versus written history and the scientific method (in 2 parts) at <http://www.zionism-israel.com/log/archives/00000443.html> and <http://www.zionism-israel.com/log/archives/00000444.html> (both accessed 5 April 2018); Lassner, J. and Troen, S.I. (2007). *Jews and Muslims in the Arab World: Haunted by Pasts, Real and Imagined*. Lanham/Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, ch. 8; Masalha, N. (2007). *The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-colonialism in Palestine–Israel*. London/New York: Zed Books; Inbari, P. (2017, 7 August). Who are the Palestinians? Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs at <http://jcpa.org/article/who-are-the-palestinians> (accessed 16 September 2018). For the problems of attempts to establish lineage scientifically through DNA, see Appelbaum, D.M. and Appelbaum, P.S. (2007, Winter). The gene wars. *Azure* 27 at <http://azure.org.il/article.php?id=30> (accessed 17 May 2018).

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- 13 See e.g. Kedourie, E. (1970). Religion and politics. In: *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies*, 317–350. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- 14 Azoury, N. (1905). *Le Réveil de la nation arabe dans l’Asie turque ... Partie asiatique de la question d’Orient et programme de la Ligue de la patrie arabe*, v. Paris: Plon, quoted in Mandel, N.J. (1976). *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, 52. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- 15 For a sampling of some of the basic and classic works on Zionism, see *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (ed. and introduced by A. Hertzberg). Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Herzl Press, 1959; reprinted New York: Atheneum, 1969; Laqueur, W.Z. (1972). *A History of Zionism*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, reissued New York: Schocken Books, 1989 (with a new preface by the author); Avineri, S. (1981). *The Making of Modern Zionism: Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*. New York: Basic Books; Rubinstein, A. (2000). *From Herzl to Rabin: The Changing Image of Zionism*. New York: Holmes and Meier. For some recent analytical interpretations, see Lozowick, Y. (2003). *Right to Exist: A Moral Defense of Israel’s Wars*, 42–49. New York, etc.: Doubleday.

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- [17](#) Among the rich literature on Arab–Jewish relations in the late Ottoman period, see Marmorstein, E. (1982). European Jews in Muslim Palestine. In: *Palestine and Israel in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (ed. E. Kedourie and S.G. Haim), 1–14. London: Frank Cass; Ro'i, Y. (1982). The Zionist attitude to the Arabs, 1908–1914. In: *Palestine and Israel in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 15–59; Mandel, N.J. (1989). *Arabs and Zionism*; Shafir, G. (1996). *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, updated ed., Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press; Khalidi, R. (1997). *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. New York: Columbia University Press, ch. 5.
- [18](#) Mandel, N.J., *Arabs and Zionism*, 76–92, 210–222; Khalidi, R. *Palestinian Identity*, ch. 6.
- [19](#) Ha'am, A. (Asher Zvi Ginzberg). (1891, 19–30 June). Truth from Eretz-Israel. *ha-Melitz*, transl. in Dowty, A.M. (2000). Much ado about little: Ahad Ha'am's 'Truth from Eretz-Israel,' Zionism, and the Arabs. *Israel Studies* 5 (2): 154–181.
- [20](#) Theodor Herzl to Youssuf Zia al-Khalidi, 19 March 1899, transl. and reproduced in Khalidi, W. (ed.) *From Haven to Conquest*, 91–93; see also the extended discussion in Khalidi, R., *Palestinian Identity*, 69–84.
- [21](#) Ro'i, Y. (1968). The Zionist attitude to the Arabs, 1908–1914, reprinted in *Palestine and Israel in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (ed. E. Kedourie and S.G.

Haim), 15–59; Laqueur, W., *History of Zionism*, ch. 5; Dowty, A. (2017). *Israel/Palestine*, 4e, 41–46. Malden, MA/Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

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- [24](#) See, e.g., Mansdorf, I.J. (2010, March–April). Is Israel a colonial state? The political psychology of Palestinian nomenclature. *Jerusalem Viewpoints* No. 576, at <http://jcpa.org/article/is-israel-a-colonial-state-the-political-psychology-of-palestinian-nomenclature> (accessed online 13 May 2018); Ohana, D. (2012). *The Origins of Israeli Mythology: Neither Canaanites nor Crusaders* (transl. D. Maisel). Cambridge UK/New York: Cambridge University Press; Glick, C.B. (2014). *The Israeli Solution: A One-State Plan for Peace in the Middle East*. New York: Crown Forum, ch. 13; Joffe, A. (2017, 3 September). Palestinian Settler-Colonialism, *BESA Center Perspectives*, Paper No. 577 at <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/palestinians-settlers-colonialism> (accessed online 14 August 2018).
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- [26](#) E.g. Bar-On, D. and Adwan, S. (2006). The psychology of better dialogue between two separate

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- [28](#) Rodinson, M. (1967). Israël, fait colonial? *Les Temps modernes* 22 253bis, 17–88, later translated as *Israel: A Colonial Settler-State?*, transl. David Thorstad, introduced by Peter Buch, New York: Anchor Foundation, 1973; Khalidi, W. *From Haven to Conquest*.
- [29](#) Said, E.W. (1980). *The Question of Palestine*, 56–114. New York: Vintage; 2e, with a new preface and epilogue, New York: Vintage, 1992. A more recent and effective presentation of Palestinian history in this light can be found in Khalidi, R. (2006). *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- [30](#) Massad, J. *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question*, 143, 152–3, 161. See also White, B. (2016, 18 August). Why we must see Israeli policies as a form of settler colonialism. *MEMO: Middle East Monitor*, at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160818-why-we-must-see-israeli-policies-as-a-form-of-settler-colonialism/> (accessed 16 September 2018).
- [31](#) Troen, S.I. De-Judaizing the homeland, 875.
- [32](#) Penslar, D.J. (2007). *Israel in History: The Jewish State in Comparative Perspective*, 91. London/New York: Routledge (and ch. 5 generally); Gelber, Y. The history of Zionist historiography, 64–69. Cf. Shafir, G. (2007). Zionism and colonialism: A comparative approach. In: *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, 2e (ed. I. Pappé), 78–93. London/New York:

Routledge. Shafir, often identified with the “critical sociologists,” supports the colonial paradigm, but with qualifications. See also Pappé, I. *The Idea of Israel*, 102–104.

- 33 See e.g. Rosen-Zvi, I. (2018, 18 October). The big denial of Zionist colonialism: Zionist colonialism was not motivated by an aspiration for economic gain, but one that stemmed from Jewish distress and was fulfilled by people who could be described as refugees. *Haaretz*; Yakobson, A. (2018, 20 October). If Zionism were colonial it would have ended long ago: The Palestinians’ refusal to accept that they are confronting a rival national movement has been disastrous for them. *Haaretz*.
- 34 Scham, P., Salem, W., and Pogrund, B. (eds.) (2005). *Shared Histories: A Palestinian–Israeli Dialogue*, 75–91. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- 35 E.g. Khalidi, R. *The Iron Cage*, xxxiii–xxxiv, 186–193.
- 36 See e.g. evidence cited in Patai, R., *The Seed of Abraham*, 279–296.

4

Arabs and Jews under the British Mandate: Entrenching Positions, 1917–1928

Wartime Commitments: Palestine as the “Much Too Promised Land”?

In late 1917 British forces advanced from bases in Egypt, overrunning positions of the Ottoman Army to conquer the southern half of Palestine to a line just north of Jerusalem and Jaffa. The remainder of the contested land of Palestine/*Eretz-Israel* would come under British control in a second assault within a year. For the next 30 years, what would later become the Arab–Israeli conflict simmered, festered, and became entrenched in Palestine under British rule. During the Mandate period, as it became known, a contest between two national communities would take shape and gain in intensity, building on the nascent rivalry already noted by Azoury and others during the prewar period.

The impact of the 1919 peace settlement at Versailles on the emerging Zionist–Palestinian conflict was complicated and formative. After World War I, in the place of the eastern Mediterranean provinces of the defeated 400-year-old Ottoman Empire, a number of sovereign countries and semiautonomous territories would emerge, administered as territories mandated by the newly created League of Nations to several Christian European powers. A new map of the Middle East would show a French mandate for Syria and Lebanon, and British mandates for Iraq and Palestine.

In this chapter we examine the impact of the post-war settlement and British rule on the conflict and its protagonists. In setting out the evolving conflict during this period, we will also examine three more core

arguments that contribute to its increasing complexity and intractability over time, namely:

Core argument 3: Did the British create or aggravate the conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Zionist Jews by unduly favoring one party over the other?

Core argument 4: Were the protests and demands of Palestinian leaders legitimate expressions of an authentic Palestinian national feeling?

Core argument 5: Did Zionism bring harm or benefit to the indigenous population of Palestine and the region?

To deal properly with the period of the British Mandate, it is necessary to backtrack briefly to consider wartime commitments and promises made by Britain that would affect the competing claims of Arabs, Palestinians, and Zionists for decades to come. With the Ottoman Empire allied with Germany during World War I, Britain, France, and Russia accompanied their war efforts by the preparation of diplomatic alliances with a view to extending their respective interests and zones of influence into the Middle East. Great Britain was the prime mover in the creation of three main sets of commitments for what should happen once the guns fell silent. Much has been written about the “Eastern Question” or the “Arab Question” and the motives and maneuvers of all the players; what follows is, of necessity, a simplification of some very complicated issues.

Chronologically, the first of these commitments emerged from correspondence exchanged between the Sharif Husayn of Mecca (in the Hejaz, later to become Saudi Arabia) and Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Cairo. From July 1915 through March 1916, a dozen notes and letters were exchanged between the two, setting the stage for an Arab anti-Turkish revolt that began in July 1916 under Husayn and his sons Abdullah and Faysal. In exchange, they expected British

support for Arab independence following the defeat of the Ottoman Turks.¹

Meanwhile, representatives of Britain, France, and Czarist Russia were preparing among themselves a division of the region into spheres of direct and indirect rule. The plans were to include “an independent Arab State or Confederation of Arab States” under divided British and French spheres of influence, or protectorates. Under the terms of the top-secret May 1916 agreement named after Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, Palestine was to be under “an international administration.”²

The third wartime commitment, and the one most directly relevant for our subject, was the Balfour Declaration issued on 2 November 1917, pledging British support for a “Jewish national home” in Palestine. It illustrates the important role of powerful outsiders in this conflict and became one of the seminal, most discussed, and most disputed documents to shape the future of Palestine and Israel. The text itself is short, only 67 words:

His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

This government decision was transmitted in the form of a brief letter from Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Walter Rothschild, head of the English Zionist Federation.

A mixture of imperial *realpolitik* and religious sentiment combined to help members of the Cabinet respond sympathetically to sustained lobbying efforts by Zionist leaders. Hard-headed political considerations included hopes of gaining international Jewish support for the

British war effort and postwar interests. These were combined with the religious beliefs of several influential British statesmen whose reading of Biblical prophecy made them sympathetic to the aspirations of the scattered Jewish people to return to live in the land of their ancestors. The final wording of the Balfour Declaration was the result of several draftings over the course of the preceding five months. Apart from some minor disappointment in the choice of the word “establishment” over “reconstituting” (which would have recognized a *pre-existing* right of Jews to return), Zionists regarded this declaration of great-power support as a major achievement for their movement.³

Most problematic in the long term would be the ambiguous phrases outlining what would later become known as a “dual obligation” on the part of the British: a positive commitment to Zionists was conditioned by a negative injunction not to harm the civil and religious rights of the indigenous population of Palestine. This combination contained internal contradictions and a built-in imbalance which contributed to the reasons why it would be rejected by Palestinian and Arab nationalists. Among other things, the latter would point out that the resident population was not referred to as “Arabs” or as “Palestinians,” but rather as “non-Jewish,” and that it was only their “*civil and religious* rights” – not political or national rights – that would be safeguarded.⁴

Much has been written on the question of whether, taken together, these three sets of commitments were inconsistent with each other, and whether the British really believed they would be able to deliver satisfaction on all three promises. Most writers have treated these wartime pledges as the basis for considering Palestine/Israel a “twice promised” or “much too promised land.”⁵ Others regarded the three overlapping commitments as not necessarily mutually incompatible but as standard international diplomatic practice based on imperial calculations of the day.⁶

British attitudes and behavior contributed to both anti-colonialist resentment among the Arabs and (after some initial euphoria) deep mistrust and suspicion among the Jews. Arab nationalists protested that the British had, despite repeated assurances, betrayed them by not fulfilling commitments enshrined in the McMahon–Husayn correspondence – viz., to recognize Arab independence in specified areas that would include Palestine. The British, in response, claimed that the area that became Mandatory Palestine had been excluded from the promises of Arab independence. Attempts to produce authoritative interpretations of McMahon’s territorial commitments (e.g. during the St. James’s Palace “round-table” conferences in early 1939) were never totally convincing. Even today, scholars remain divided over the status of this exchange of correspondence and the extent of British promises to, or duplicity toward, the Arabs.⁷ One thing was certain: these competing wartime promises led to exaggerated and incompatible expectations among Arabs, Palestinians, and Zionists alike, aggravating already existing tensions and mutual suspicions.

Britain’s “Dual Obligation”

In the immediate postwar years the British attempted to promote their interests in the region while minimally satisfying some of the claims and demands of their French allies, along with those of their new Arab and Zionist clients. During the year of the Paris Peace Conference, for example, British efforts to harmonize relations among these competing factors led to the promotion of an entente, brokered by officials like Colonel T. E. Lawrence (“of Arabia”), between Amir Faysal, who was (temporarily) enthroned in Damascus, and Dr. Chaim Weizmann, who headed the Zionist Organization. This reconciliation effort actually resulted in the signing of a landmark treaty – but one that remained inoperative partly because of French insistence on ruling in Damascus and ousting Faysal after he proclaimed himself King of Syria in early 1920.⁸ In

partial recognition of its wartime pledges to King Husayn, Britain during 1921 managed to find thrones for two of his sons: Faysal in Iraq and Abdullah in Transjordan.

Arabs, Palestinians, and Zionists at the time maintained, as their supporters today continue to maintain, different appreciations of the British role and responsibility. As noted, unfulfilled hopes of postwar independence left many Arab nationalists embittered, as the new Mandates appeared to be thinly disguised versions of colonial rule. Most Arabs rejected a priori the legitimacy of the Balfour Declaration and the terms of the Mandate which were based on this British pledge. Together with the disappointment and frustration of not enjoying independence in the wake of World War I, Arab nationalists viewed the British role as nefarious and prejudicial to their rights and interests, both in its broader colonialist impact of blocking Arab independence and in its specific implementation in Palestine, with the Mandate's articles fostering a Jewish national home. This thread runs through all official petitions, memoranda, and proclamations issued by the recognized leadership of the Palestinians, the Palestine Arab Congress and its Arab Executive Committee during the 1920s, and the Arab Higher Committee from 1936.

This critical view of the British role can also be found in the writings of analysts and scholars, an early example of which was George Antonius's *The Arab Awakening*, published in 1938. A recent experimental high school curriculum for Palestinian and Israeli students summarized the Palestinian narrative reflecting this view of the British role:

British imperialism found in Zionism a perfect tool for attaining its own interests in the Arab East, which was strategically and economically important for the empire. Similarly, Zionism found in colonialism and an international support and the economic resources to realize its plan to colonize Palestine. This alliance of British imperialism and Zionism gave rise to ... the Balfour Declaration[,] ... a culmination of a British foreign policy of unlawfully seizing another nation's land and resources and wiping out its identity in addition to aggression, expansion and suppression of any attempts toward national liberation. For the Palestinians, 1917 was the first of many years ... marked by tragedy, war, misfortune, death, destruction, homelessness and catastrophes.⁹

Needless to say, Zionist and Israeli appreciations of the British role are different. The same recent experimental school curriculum quoted above provided the following summary of the Zionist narrative on the issue of the British contribution:

The Zionist movement was born among the large concentrations of Jews in Europe with the aim of restoring the Jewish people to its homeland and changing its anomalous status as a people dispersed among other nations without a home of its own.... [Here follows a description of Zionist immigration and settlement efforts since 1882.] The first time any country expressed support for Zionism was in a letter sent by Lord Balfour.... It expressed the support of the British Government for establishing a national home for the Jewish people in the land of Israel.

While noting the “great joy” with which Jews received the Balfour Declaration at the time, and while pointing to some of the motives behind the British decision to issue it, this schoolbook narrative emphasizes Jewish needs and self-help, somewhat downplaying the British role. “In fact, only once the Balfour Declaration was formalized in the [Mandate], which set forth the terms of British rule in Palestine before the League of Nations, did the [sic] political Zionism reach its peak.”¹⁰ This is

consistent with the post-1921 shift in Zionist claims and polemics portraying themselves as an aggrieved party having to deal with unfulfilled British commitments, lukewarm British support on the ground, and a perceived pro-Arab tilt in British attitudes and policy.

An important turning point in this regard was the mid-1921 creation of the Amirate of Transjordan in portions of Mandated Palestine territory east of the Jordan River (in the process of creating a throne for Husayn's son, Abdullah). The exclusion of this territory from the application of the Jewish national home provisions of the Mandate was, for many Zionists, a great disappointment. For followers of Revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky, it was nothing less than a British "betrayal" and the "first partition" of their anticipated homeland.¹¹

Over the ensuing years, Zionist representatives would address their complaints and grievances to London and the League of Nations, accusing the British administration in Palestine of not faithfully implementing policies that they had expected to promote the growth of the Jewish national home. This line of argument found moderate and polite expression in the Zionist mainstream, but during the 1930s and 1940s it would take on more radical (sometimes anti-colonial) rhetoric and action from militant splinter groups like the *Irgun Zvai Leumi* (the "Irgun," or *ETZEL*) and the "Stern Gang" (*Lohamei Herut Israel*, or *LEHI*).¹²

This critique by Zionists of British betrayal has been carried down through memoirs, partisan writings, and internet sites.¹³ One of the most far-reaching – and far-fetched, if the record is examined carefully¹⁴ – conspiracy theories of British anti-Jewish duplicity and a "blueprint" or "Master Plan" for controlling Palestine came from Menachem Begin, *Irgun* founder and later Israeli prime minister. His memoir, *The Revolt*, levels the following accusations:

... the Arabs, when required, would “rebel” against the “foreign invasion”; and the Jews would forever be a threatened minority. Each would have to be protected from the other—by British bayonets.... This cycle of events was repeated again and again. The Arabs were encouraged, sometimes quite openly, to organize attacks on the Jews. Then would come an Inquiry Commission with their [sic] reports. A White Paper would be published, and immigration stopped or reduced almost to nothing.¹⁵

Such extreme views illustrate the no-win situation of the British, whose attempts to implement their “dual obligation” under the terms of the Mandate were doomed to disappoint one party or the other – and often both. It would prove impossible for the British to satisfy both the repeated expressions of fears, objections, and resistance by the Arab majority, on the one hand, and Zionist complaints that the British were not fulfilling promised undertakings to them, on the other. Such contested views of the British role have become intertwined with other arguments – e.g. whether Zionists were returning to their homeland or invading someone else’s, whether Palestinian objections were genuine or artificially manipulated. While seemingly not as unbridgeable as the first two core arguments outlined in [Chapter 3](#) of this volume, the contested versions of the role played by the British only add more fuel to the mix.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will see more evidence of how this divergence is illustrated in the patterns of Palestinian–Jewish–British relations under the Mandate. In the course of this overview we will also encounter and examine the fourth and fifth of our selected core arguments: whether Palestinian nationalism and its opposition to Zionism were authentic, genuine, and based on real grievances, and whether the advent of Zionism brought harm or benefit to the indigenous population.

The Mandate and Its Implementation: Cycle of Protests and Inquiry Commissions

In the wider context of general Arab disappointment with the postwar settlement in which the Middle East was subdivided into French and British spheres of influence under the Mandate system, Arabs from Palestine who had previously been active in nationalist clubs aiming at independence shifted their focus during the immediate postwar years (1918–1921) from a *pan* Arab struggle to a specifically *local* form of *Palestinian*-Arab nationalism. With the demise of postwar hopes of including Palestine (as “Southern Syria”) in an Arab confederation under Faysal ruling from Damascus, the Palestinian Arab leadership shifted its focus to resisting the Zionist program in Palestine itself – a program that, if implemented, could certainly block the eventual emergence of an independent Arab state there.¹⁶

From 1920 onwards, the Palestinian community created – like its rival, the Jewish *yishuv* – a “state within a state.” The Palestinian political apparatus consisted at first of two major overarching institutions: the Palestine Arab Congress, built from local Muslim–Christian associations, and the Supreme Muslim Council. The former elected an Executive Committee, known as the Arab Executive, to represent the spectrum of family, regional, and religious affiliations. Until the mid-1930s, the Arab Executive served as the chief advocate of Palestinian interests in interviews with British officials; it also sent delegations abroad to London and Geneva.¹⁷

After 1920, both Arabs and Zionists became locked into repeating patterns of complaining to the British colonial officials in Palestine and/or London about the unwarranted or aggressive behavior of the other side, and/or the unfair treatment they were receiving from the authorities in comparison with the other community. Ostensibly insignificant incidents or symbolic gestures took on nationalistic colors as each side jealously sought

to maintain and advance its status vis-à-vis the other – as, for example, with the early British decision to recognize Hebrew as one of Palestine’s three official languages in government communications, on coins, and on postage stamps.

The Mandate for Palestine, an international legal document consisting of 28 articles, was officially ratified in mid-1922 and came into force a year later. Replicating the same ambivalence and contradictions that were built into the Balfour Declaration, the Preamble and Articles 2, 4, and 6 of the Mandate included some phrasing that was even more favorable to the Zionists than the Balfour Declaration itself – especially the Preamble’s recognition of “the historical connexion of the Jewish people with Palestine and ... the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country.” The document provided the three parties with a sort of “constitution” defining Britain’s obligations and responsibilities as Mandatory vis-à-vis both the Zionists and the indigenous population, and became a key reference point for official complaints by leaders on both sides.

Throughout the period of British rule, Palestinian representatives rejected the legitimacy of the Mandate itself as being in violation of parts of Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant. They also pointed out that the Jewish national home provisions of the Mandate were inconsistent with principles of self-determination and pledges enunciated in other British declarations, US president Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points,” and the King–Crane Commission Report of August 1919.¹⁸ Over the years, scholars of international law and political commentators have applied their analytical skills to advocating the respective cases for Palestine or the Zionists – attempting to prove, as if in a courtroom, either that the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate for Palestine were illegal documents or that they were legitimate exercises in international (i.e. European) diplomacy and law.¹⁹

Palestinian protests notwithstanding, the Mandate was adopted and came into force. Great Britain would

administer Palestine much like a Crown Colony, but entrusted with a “dual obligation” to promote the Jewish national home while, at the same time, preparing its population for eventual self-government and independence. The British were required to submit annual reports to the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, which also became a forum for competing representations from Palestinian Arabs and Zionists.

The main issues in contention throughout the Mandate period remained more or less constant, namely: Jewish immigration, land sales to Jews, and the creation of self-governing institutions. Arab representatives called for restriction or elimination of the first two, while pressing for fulfillment of measures to achieve the third (as called for in Article 2 of the Mandate). Zionist representatives argued for support for the first two (as outlined under Article 2 and other terms of the Mandate), claiming that these would bring only benefit and progress to the country and all its inhabitants. They advised and lobbied against steps that would have brought the country closer to full democratic self-government on the grounds that the wishes of the local population could not be used to override the stated objective of creating a Jewish national home.

Looking at the Mandate period as a whole, the following pattern repeats itself at various intervals:

- An administrative measure is adopted implementing an aspect of the Zionist program – e.g. a new government immigration schedule, purchase of lands and establishment of a new Jewish settlement, issuing of a government contract or concession to a Jewish individual or Zionist body.
- Palestinian Arabs express displeasure with such measures as unfairly advancing the interests of the Zionists against their own.
- Periodically, frustrations and other catalysts transform these cumulative complaints and protests

into violent outbreaks aimed at the *yishuv* and/or the British administration.

- The British apply police/military measures to restore law and order, and then contemplate (minimal) political steps to deal with the expressed Palestinian grievances.
- A commission of inquiry is created, gathers evidence, and makes recommendations (often issued as a “White Paper”) for palliative measures aimed at resolving the most pressing of the complaints presented by the Palestinians.
- Zionists complain about the British handling of the Palestinian complaints.
- Palestinians complain about the inadequacy and/or hypocrisy of British proposed solutions, and/or about Zionist abilities to sidestep or divert plans for recommended changes in British policy in Palestine.

Clashes and Confrontations during the Early Years of the Mandate

This cycle of protest–commission–recommendation could be seen most dramatically in the form of outbreaks of violence in April 1920, May 1921, August 1929, and April 1936. In the first case, three days of anti-Jewish rioting in Jerusalem during the overlapping religious festivals of Nebi Musa, Easter, and Passover left 5 Jews dead and 211 wounded, with 4 Arabs dead and 25 wounded, the latter mostly from British police action. Religious and political tensions at this time had been aggravated by the news from San Remo that Great Britain would indeed be awarded the Mandate for Palestine, and also by defiant protesters waving portraits of Faysal as “King of Syria and Palestine.” The reaction of the Zionist leadership was to label the events a “pogrom,” blaming “a few Arab agitators” and openly accusing the British administration of complicity and encouragement of the rioters through its indifference and hostility toward the Jews. A military inquiry (the

Palin Commission) focused its attention on the failings of the British military administration (shortly to be replaced by a civil one) in the maintenance of law and order.²⁰

The 1920 Jerusalem riots, and the subsequent imprisonment of Vladimir Jabotinsky and other Jews involved in attempting to organize armed Jewish defense bands, also marked an important turning point in discussions among *yishuv* and Zionist leaders about the organization of militias to protect Jews from Arab attack. In December of that year, the *Histadrut* (the powerful General Federation of Jewish Labor in Palestine) laid the foundations of the *Hagana* (“defense”), the semi-clandestine Jewish paramilitary force that would be transformed in 1948 into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The *Hagana* built itself on the previous experience and cadres of the watchmen’s organizations that had been formed in the pre-1914 period to protect outlying Jewish settlements. Its commanders would be funded by and answerable to the *yishuv* political leadership, and the militiamen would keep a low profile under tacit British acquiescence.²¹

In May 1921, under a new civil administration headed by High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, Palestinian Arabs attacked Jews in Jaffa and Jewish settlements in the neighboring area. Following factional skirmishes between two Jewish May-Day parades on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, looting and “a general hunting of Jews” in Jaffa spread to a number of places, including a Zionist hostel for new immigrants. After six days of intermittent attacks, some 50 Jews were dead and 150 wounded. In the wake of the riots, Zionist leaders criticized British laxity in protecting Jews, and were extremely concerned with the High Commissioner’s decision to suspend Jewish immigration temporarily – a move that they feared would constitute a political precedent that could lead to a de facto Arab veto on the progress on the Jewish national home.

In their testimony before the inquiry commission headed by the chief justice of the Palestine Supreme Court, Sir

Thomas Haycraft, Zionist and *yishuv* spokesmen stressed the malevolent role played by Arab demagogues, agitators, “effendis” and foreign agents. The Commission’s summary of these Zionist submissions merit quotation here as they represent a line of argument that would be used again and again throughout the Mandate period:

It has been said to us by Jewish witnesses that there was no essentially anti-Jewish question at that time [May 1921], but that a movement against the Jews was engineered by persons who, anxious to discredit the British Government, promoted discontent and disturbance of the peace by stirring up the common people against the Jews. It is argued by them that all the trouble is due to the propaganda of a small class whose members regret the departure of the old regime, because British administration has put an end to privileges and opportunities of profit formerly enjoyed by them.... These witnesses asseverate that Zionism has nothing to do with the anti-Jewish feeling manifested in the Jaffa disturbances.

Immediately rejecting such an interpretation, the Haycraft Report noted that “the feeling against the Jews was too genuine, too widespread and too intense to be accounted for in the above superficial manner.”²²

This snapshot offers an early example of the recurring argument over the genuineness of Palestinian nationalism and opposition to Zionism, another of the 11 core arguments that make this conflict so contested. During the Mandate period itself, and subsequently in academic and polemical writing, many advocates of Zionism promoted the idea that Arabs living in Palestine were not genuinely opposed to the coming of the Jews – whether because they had no particular political attachment to the country, or because everyone believed that Zionism would bring only great benefit to the local population.

Zionist Responses to Palestinian Arab Opposition

As we shall see, those who were on the ground in Palestine could not avoid noticing the periodic expressions of Palestinian Arab opposition to Zionism. How did Zionist and *yishuv* leaders deal with evidence of Palestinian unrest, protest, or resistance? Some have argued that, whether out of arrogance or naïveté, Zionist pioneer settlers had a blind spot and did not see the Palestinian Arabs, who were invisible or a neutral part of the landscape. While it may be true that at some points the contesting claims of the Palestinians were an “unseen question” for many Jews in the *yishuv*, there is ample evidence that not speaking publicly about it was a conscious and tactical decision. For, behind closed doors and notwithstanding the publicly expressed denunciations of agitators and challenges to the credibility of Palestinian protesters, Jews and Zionists did indeed engage in periodic soul-searching and internal debates on the issue of how to deal with and defuse Arab rejection.

These stock-taking exercises produced a wide range of explanations and remedies for the opposition Zionists were encountering.²³ The vast majority of Jews and Zionists – inspired by the drive and need for a Jewish homeland in Palestine and believing their own claims to be legitimate and internationally recognized – were unable or unwilling to interpret and accept the outbreaks of 1920 and 1921 as genuine evidence of legitimate Palestinian fears or concerns. Looking back, one is tempted to conclude that those public responses were rationalizations, a form of denial, whether self-serving or self-delusionary.²⁴

There were, however, a few Zionist and *yishuv* leaders who did conclude that Palestinian resistance to Zionism was indeed a genuine and natural (rather than artificial or transitory) response to being “invaded” by Zionist immigrants. Some were forced to the difficult conclusion that – unfortunately, tragically even – such rejection

might eventually block the implementation of the Zionist program. A number of possible conclusions flowed from this realization. A minority within this minority concluded that the Zionist dream was therefore unrealizable and had to be abandoned; these individuals “dropped out,” became non-Zionists or anti-Zionists. More often, those who recognized both the fact and legitimacy of Palestinian opposition sought ways to adjust their Zionist credo while seeking solutions to the impasse that presented itself.

Some, including members of the right-wing Zionist Revisionist movement, responded to this clash in an unabashedly colonialist manner, and sought to make the Jewish presence in Palestine an irremovable reality by fortifying it and overriding the objections of the indigenous population. Those objections were unfortunate and inevitable, in this analysis, but the answer was for Zionists to proceed with immigration, land acquisition, and military strengthening of the *yishuv* until a defensible Jewish state could be created. This has become known as the “iron wall” approach, based on two outspoken articles published in November 1923 by Revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky. Although they may not have owned up to it, many rival left-wing labor-Zionists shared the same determination to press ahead with immigration, land purchase, and military preparedness (“*hagana*”) as forcefully as needed.²⁵

On the other extreme, *Brit-Shalom* (Covenant of Peace), *Ihud* (Unity), and similar organizations dedicated to Arab–Zionist reconciliation proposed that – faced with the reality of rival Arab nationalist demands – Zionists had to downsize or abandon their goal of a Jewish state and pursue other constitutional options instead. One such option was a binational state; others were parity or federal arrangements that would take into account the Palestinian Arabs as a people entitled, equally with Zionist Jews, to share in ruling a future independent state of Palestine.²⁶ But these were minority views amid the majority of Zionists who continued to believe in the

legitimacy and historical necessity of their own movement for Jewish statehood.

For many, belief in the inherent goodness and historic necessity of Zionism excluded the logical possibility that rival Palestinian claims and complaints could also be valid. It was therefore comforting for Zionists to believe that Palestinian protests and objections were temporary or artificially manipulated. Not only for public consumption, as conveyed in testimonies before inquiry commissions, but also in internal correspondence, did Zionist officials invoke evidence and adduce reasons in conscious or subconscious efforts to convince themselves that Palestinian objections were not insurmountable, not driven by genuine popular feeling, discontent, or nationalism, but rather by the manipulation of selfish, special interests – e.g. merchants, landowners, effendis, British pro-Arab conspirators, or anti-British intriguers.

Socialist-Zionists, who were the backbone of the foundational second *aliya* (wave of immigration, 1904–1914), saw the clash through their own ideological prism. In their view, the indigenous society was a feudal one that awaited only the liberation of the Palestinian peasant and working classes – a revolutionary utopia that would arrive with the help of massive Jewish immigration, the assistance and solidarity of a powerful Jewish labor movement, and the creation of a Jewish state. In retrospect, critical scholarship has debunked this vision as naïve at best, hypocritical at worst – fraught with contradictions, such as the insistence on a Jewish majority that meant the exclusion or subservient status of Arab labor. In the end, despite their ideological idealism, labor-Zionists offended and alienated the indigenous population rather than appearing as its saviors or benefactors.²⁷

“Making the Desert Bloom”

These negative Zionist arguments dismissing Palestinian and Arab objections and resistance were intimately connected to the frequently advanced positive argument

that Zionism – contrary to Palestinian complaints of dispossession and disenfranchisement – was bringing economic and social benefits to the entire population and the region as a whole. As one Zionist writer explained in 1945,

The Jews had always hoped that the benefits which their development of Palestine conferred upon the Arabs would naturally result in the process of time in the latter becoming reconciled to the Balfour Declaration. Despite the unprovoked attacks upon them in [1920 and] 1921, they made every effort to live on terms of friendship and goodwill with their Arab neighbours. Not only did they adopt solemn declarations to this effect at Zionist Congresses and on other occasions and reaffirm them in official documents, but they sought to realise them in various spheres of daily life – social, economic, and cultural. Apart from the thousands of Arabs employed in the old Jewish agricultural settlements, hundreds found work in the new industrial undertakings directly due to Jewish enterprise. Arab landowners enriched themselves by selling land to Jews, Arab farmers by disposing of their agricultural produce to them, and Arab landlords by letting houses and other property.²⁸

Indeed, such negative and positive arguments were organically linked in the minds of many Zionists who expected – whether naïvely, benignly or cynically – the resident Palestinian population to accept new Jewish immigrants in the same spirit as this fictional exchange in Herzl's 1902 novel, *Altneuland* (Old New Land), set in a futuristic Palestine of 1923:

Just look at that field! [exclaims local Arab leader, Reschid Bey] It was a swamp in my boyhood. The New Society [i.e., the Zionist land purchase company] bought up this tract rather cheaply, and turned it into the best soil in the country. It belongs to that tidy settlement up there on the hill. It is a Moslem village—you can tell by the mosque. These people are better off than at any time in the past. They support themselves decently, their children are healthier and are being taught something. Their religion and ancient customs have in no wise been interfered with. They have become more prosperous—that is all.

You're queer fellows, you Moslems [exclaims Mr Kingscourt, a visiting ex-Prussian nobleman]. Don't you regard these Jews as intruders?

“You speak strangely, Christian,” responded the friendly Reschid. “Would you call a man a robber who takes nothing from you, but brings you something instead? The Jews have enriched us. Why should we be angry with them? They dwell among us like brothers. Why should we not love them?”²⁹

Throughout the Mandate period, Zionist officials knew they had to justify their continued demands for Jewish immigration and opportunities for land purchase by demonstrating that such activity brought benefit, both locally to the Palestinians and also to the British exchequer through revenues that made Palestine a less expensive burden for the British taxpayer. Much effort was devoted to presenting statistics proving this case. Commissions of inquiry during the Mandate period could not but be impressed with the economic and social indicators (e.g. population growth, infant mortality) presented to them showing striking differences between areas within Palestine that had significant versus insignificant Jewish presence, as well as between Palestine as a whole and the neighboring countries. The Peel Commission (see [Chapter 5](#)), for example, was impressed by what it saw in 1936:

The general beneficent effect of Jewish immigration on Arab welfare is illustrated by the fact that the increase in the Arab population is most marked in urban areas affected by Jewish development. A comparison of the census returns in 1922 and 1931 shows that, six years ago, the increase percent in Haifa was 86, in Jaffa 62, in Jerusalem 37, while in purely Arab towns such as Nablus and Hebron it was only 7, and at Gaza there was a decrease of 2 percent.³⁰

Academic and popular literature of the time – with titles like *Palestine: Land of Promise* and *Harvest in the Desert* – reinforced this argument for the general public, especially during the 1930s and 1940s.³¹

This emphasis on “Zionism = progress” was often accompanied by disparaging remarks about the ability of the indigenous Arab population to develop the land and the economy. Zionist spokesmen, from Dr. Weizmann on down, frequently likened the Arab–Zionist struggle to one between the “forces of destruction, the forces of the desert” on the one side and “the forces of civilization and building” on the other.³² Later, in 1947, Zionist representatives would press for the UN partition boundaries of the proposed Jewish state to include the Negev Desert by arguing that

The largely uninhabited, derelict territory could be developed only by means of bold and comprehensive irrigation schemes, which we alone were ready and able to undertake. Handing over the Negev to the Arabs ... meant abandoning it to eternal neglect and desolation. Only the Jews, who were prepared to invest their full energies and resources in the Negev with no commercial intent, could redeem the vast arid expanse and uncover the buried mineral deposits.³³

An interesting corollary to this stress on Zionism as the bearer of economic blessings for Palestine was the argument that the improved economy of Palestine during the Mandate period attracted a significant number of unrecorded or illegal Arab immigrants from the

neighboring countries.³⁴ This not only reinforced the general Zionist claim, but at the same time was used to undermine the genuineness of Palestinian opposition and complaints by implying that (i) Arab as much as Jewish immigration contributed to any apparent overcrowding or landlessness inside Palestine, and (ii) that there was nothing particularly distinct about *Palestinian* Arabs, since all residents of the region moved about interchangeably without any particular attachment to a specific country. A variation of these latter claims, clearly aimed at discrediting Palestinian and Arab connections to the contested land, surfaced during the 1980s with the publication and promotion of a contentious book called *From Time Immemorial*.³⁵

From the late 1920s onward, Palestinians and their supporters challenged the economic blessings argument by offering evidence of distress caused by the dispossession of tenant farmers who were forced to migrate to harsh conditions or unemployment in urban areas, even while some people in the Arab sector drew benefits from land sales and from Jewish contributions to the economy of Mandatory Palestine. British and international inquiry commissions throughout the period received submissions and listened to testimonies that described the hardships caused by demographic pressure and economic change wrought by the newcomers, especially in the late 1920s and early 1930s.³⁶

On the political level, observers often noted a clear disconnect between economic benefits and political satisfaction. The Peel Commission, for example, found that, though the Arabs had benefited by the development of the country owing to Jewish immigration, this had no impact on lessening their antagonism to Zionism. The Commission's Report paraphrases Arab testimony as follows:

You say we are better off: you say my house has been enriched by the strangers who have entered it. But it is *my* house, and I did not invite the strangers in, or ask them to enrich it, and I do not care how poor or bare it is [as long as] I am master in it.³⁷

Zionist officials, too, had to face the unhappy realization that few if any leaders of the Palestinian community welcomed them in the spirit of Herzl's fictitious Reschid Bey. Vladimir Jabotinsky was one Zionist who was not surprised; he had never shared the mainstream and left-wing view that the "natives" would sell their birthright in exchange for economic benefits.³⁸ By the 1930s labor leader and newly elected chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive David Ben-Gurion also became aware of the futility of the economic blessings argument in persuading Palestinians to welcome Zionism. "For the Arab leaders," he reported to his colleagues on the Jewish Agency Executive, "there is no value to the economic aspect of the development of the country, even if they admit—and not all of them do—that our immigration brings a *material blessing* to the land. They say—and from an Arab viewpoint I think rightly so —'None of your honey, none of your sting'."³⁹

These divergent views on whether Zionism brought economic benefit or damage to Palestine and its people continued throughout the Mandate period to be a crucial part of the representations made in attempts to influence important third-parties. As with other core arguments noted thus far, much effort was expended and continues to be expended in attempts to establish which party is right on this contested point.

The Deceptive Lull

With an eye to defusing tensions and grievances that had threatened the tranquility of the country during 1920 and 1921, the Colonial Secretary in London (Winston Churchill) and the High Commissioner in Jerusalem (Herbert Samuel) studied the Haycraft Report on the Jaffa riots with a view to establishing Britain's future policy on more solid ground. This they hoped to achieve by improving public security, by taking steps toward setting up (controlled) representative institutions, and by issuing a major statement of policy. In rapid succession, the British presented proposals for a legislative council,

an advisory council, and an “Arab Agency” – but these were abandoned after being boycotted by the Palestinian leadership mainly because of their built-in recognition and protections of the Jewish national home and the absence of Arab majority control.⁴⁰ In [Chapter 12](#), in the section “Missed Opportunities,” we will look at the question of whether the Palestinians, by rejecting these early offers of limited self-government, deprived themselves of a tool that might have had some effect in limiting the advance of Zionism.

The Churchill White Paper of June 1922 – in part, a damage-control response to the Jaffa riots of May 1921 – was an important attempt to clarify and balance both parts of Britain’s dual obligation. It would remain in force for the coming 15 years as the authoritative statement of how Britain planned to rule Palestine. While solemnly reaffirming His Majesty’s Government’s (HMG’s) commitment to promoting the Jewish national home, Churchill announced that Jewish immigration would be limited by the country’s “economic absorptive capacity” – suggesting that Zionist immigration would not be allowed to strain Palestine’s economy but rather only to improve it by bringing progress and prosperity to the land. Further attempts to ease Arab fears included a clarification that the terms of the Balfour Declaration did “not contemplate that Palestine as a whole should be converted into a Jewish National Home, but that such a Home should be founded *in Palestine*” (emphasis in original) – wittingly or unwittingly setting the stage for the possible future partition of the country. Also, in an indirect rebuke to Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, Churchill affirmed that HMG had no intention of making Palestine “as Jewish as England is English.”⁴¹

The five years following the issuance of Churchill’s White Paper and the ratification of the Mandate were uneventful, even peaceful – leading both British and Zionist leaders to conclude that the expressions of Palestinian discontent displayed in 1919–1921 would turn out to be a passing, transitional phenomenon, probably less genuine or deeply felt than had first

appeared. Many concluded that this opposition was bound eventually to dissipate as the population came to enjoy the expected economic and other benefits to be brought by European Zionist immigrants. Such, at least, were the optimistic assumptions under which British and Zionist officials operated in the mid-1920s.⁴² These assumptions were soon to prove untenable, shattered by renewed tension and violence in 1928 and 1929.

Notes

- 1 For maps indicating areas promised to the Arabs and those to be shared by the allies under the Sykes–Picot Agreement, see Gilbert, M. (2012). *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 10e, 5–6. London/New York: Routledge.
- 2 Grey to Cambon, 16 May 1916, reproduced in Moore, J.N. (ed.) (1977). *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: Readings and Documents*, abridged and revised edition, 880–883. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 3 The classic examination of the genesis of and politics surrounding the Balfour Declaration is Leonard Stein (1961). *The Balfour Declaration*. London: Valentine Mitchell. For a legalistic anti-Zionist critique, see Mallison, W.T. Jr. (1987). The Balfour Declaration: An appraisal in international law. In: *The Transformation of Palestine*, 2e (ed. I.A. Lughod), 61–111. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press; Mallison, W.T. and Mallison, S.V. (1986). *The Palestine Problem in International Law and World Order*. Harlow, UK: Longman, ch. 1.
- 4 Antonius, G. (1946). *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons [orig. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938; reprinted New York: Capricorn, 1965], 394–397, 400–402; Khalidi, R. (1997). *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 22–23, New York: Columbia University Press, and Khalidi, R. (2006). *The Iron*

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- 5 Miller, A.D. (2008). *The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab–Israeli Peace*. New York: Random House (Bantam Dell); Chapman, C. (2002). *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis over Israel and Palestine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- 6 See e.g. Kedourie, E. (1976). *In the Anglo–Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon–Husayn Correspondence and Its Interpretations, 1914–1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, reprinted London: Frank Cass, 2000; Stone, J. (1981). *Israel and Palestine: Assault on the Law of Nations*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, ch. 1; Friedman, I. (2000). *Palestine, a Twice-Promised Land?* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- 7 Antonius, G. Arab Awakening, chs. VIII, IX, X, XIII; John, R. and Hadawi, S. (1970). *The Palestine Diary*, vol. 1, foreword by Arnold J. Toynbee, 299–312. New York: New World Press; Kedourie, E. *In the Anglo–Arab Labyrinth*; Friedman, I. (1973). *The Question of Palestine, 1914–1918: British–Jewish–Arab Relations*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, and *Palestine, A Twice-Promised Land?*; Smith, C.D. (1993). The invention of a tradition: The question of Arab acceptance of the Zionist right to Palestine during World War I. *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXII (2; Winter): 48–61; United Nations, Division for Palestinian Rights, The origins and evolution of the Palestine problem: 1917–1988. New York, 1990 at <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/o/57C45A3DDoD46B09802564740045CCoA> (accessed 29 May 2018).
- 8 This stillborn agreement has become a landmark, not without some controversy, in the annals of Arab–Zionist diplomatic efforts. See Caplan, N. (2015). *Futile Diplomacy, vol. I: Early Arab–Zionist Negotiation Attempts, 1913–1931*, 36–46. London:

- [Frank Cass, 1983] Routledge RLE, and Caplan, N. (1983). Faisal Ibn Husain and the Zionists: A re-examination with documents. *International History Review* (4): 561–614.
- [9](#) Adwan, S., Bar-On, D., Naveh, E., and PRIME. (2012). *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine*, 5. New York: The New Press. See also Bar-On, D. and Adwan, S. (2006). The psychology of better dialogue between two separate but interdependent narratives. In: *Israelis and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix* (ed. R.I. Rotberg). 219–220, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- [10](#) Adwan, S. et al. *Side by Side*, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16; Bar-On and Adwan, The psychology of better dialogue, 219–221.
- [11](#) Cf. Map 1.2. Bernard Wasserstein dismisses as right-wing propaganda this interpretation of the British cutting back on territory allegedly promised for the Jewish national home. See his *Israelis and Palestinians: Why Do They Fight? Can They Stop?*, 3e, 102–106. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press/London: Profile Books, 2008.
- [12](#) On the latter group, see Heller, J. (1995). *The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics, and Terror, 1940–1949*. London/Portland, OR: Frank Cass.
- [13](#) E.g. Ziff, W.B. (1938). *The Rape of Palestine*. New York/Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co.; Katz, S. (1968). *Days of Fire: The Secret Story of the Making of Israel*. Jerusalem: Steimatsky's [London: W. H. Allen]; Netanyahu, B. (2002). *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place among the Nations* (rev. ed.) New York: Warner Books, ch. 2 (“The Betrayal”).
- [14](#) For a sober and insightful look at the role of British officials working in Palestine, see Wasserstein, B. (1991). *The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and the Arab-Jewish Conflict, 1917–1929*, 2e. Cambridge, MA: B. Blackwell. See also:

- Mossek, M. (1978). *Palestine Immigration Policy under Sir Herbert Samuel: British, Zionist, and Arab Attitudes*. London: Frank Cass; Sheffer, G. (1988), Principles of pragmatism: A reevaluation of British policies toward Palestine in the 1930s. In: *The Great Powers in the Middle East, 1919–1939*, (ed. U. Dann), 109–127. New York/London: Holmes and Meier; Shepherd, N. (2000). *Ploughing Sand: British Rule in Palestine, 1917–1948*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Sherman, A.J. (2001). *Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine, 1918–1948*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, [New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1998].
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- 16** Porath, Y. (2015). *The Emergence of the Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1918–1929*. London: [Frank Cass, 1974] Routledge RLE, ch. 2; Khalidi, R. *Palestinian Identity*, ch. 7.
- 17** See, e.g., Porath, *Emergence*, chs. 3, 7, 8; Lesch, A.M. (1979). *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917–1939: The Frustration of a National Movement*. Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell University Press, 90–101, 152–170.
- 18** Text of the King–Crane Report at https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_King-Crane_Report (accessed 18 April 2018). Other major documents from 1918–1919 are available in: *A Documentary History of the Arab–Israeli Conflict* (ed. and with historical introductions by Charles L. Geddes), 23–28, 39–78. New York, etc: Praeger, 1991; Antonius, G. *Arab Awakening*, 440–458; *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 21–25. For discussions, see: Antonius, G. *Arab Awakening*, 292–298; Porath, Y. *Emergence*,

42–49; Knee, S.E. (1977, April). The King–Crane Commission of 1919: The articulation of political anti-Zionism. *American Jewish Archives*, 22–52, downloaded 28 May 2018 from http://americanjewisharchives.org/publications/journal/PDF/1977_29_01_00_knee.pdf; Lesch, D.W. (2008). *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: A History*, 85–90. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- [19](#) For the Arab case, see Boustany, W. F. (1936). *The Palestine Mandate: Invalid and Impracticable: A Contribution of Arguments and Documents towards the Solution of the Palestine Problem*. Beirut: American Press; Cattán, H. (1976). *Palestine and International Law: The Legal Aspects of the Arab–Israel Conflict*, 2e, foreword by Mallison, W.T. Jr. London: Longman, chs. II and III; Mallison, W.T. and Mallison, S.V. *The Palestine Problem*, chs. 1 and 2; Kattan, V. (2009). *From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1891–1949*. London: Pluto Press. For the Zionist case, see Feinberg, N. (1979). *Studies in International Law: With Special Reference to the Arab–Israel Conflict*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University; Dershowitz, A. (2003). *The Case for Israel*. New York: John Wiley, ch. 4.
- [20](#) Report of the Court of Inquiry ... regarding the Riots in Jerusalem, 1 July 1920, National Archive (formerly Public Record Office), Kew, England, FO 371/5121, file E9379/85/44; Caplan, N., *Palestine Jewry and the Arab Question, 1917–1925*, 57–61. London: [Frank Cass, 1978] Routledge RLE.
- [21](#) Caplan, N. *Palestine Jewry*, 76–79; Shapira, A. (1999). *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (transl. William Templar), 97–98, 124–125. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Lozowick, Y. (2003). *Right to Exist: A Moral Defense of Israel’s Wars*, 70–71. New York, etc.: Doubleday.
- [22](#) Colonial Office, *Palestine: Disturbances in May 1921*, Cmd. 1540, October 1921 (the Haycraft Report),

quotation from p. 44; Caplan, N., *Palestine Jewry*, 85–87, 94.

- [23](#) Elon, A. (1971). *The Israelis: Founders and Sons*, 154, 158, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Caplan, *Palestine Jewry*, 2–7, 199–203; Shapira, A. *Land and Power*, 357.
- [24](#) For a comprehensive psychosocial examination of this phenomenon, see Cohen, S. (2001). *States of Denial, Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge, UK/Malden, MA: Polity/Blackwell.
- [25](#) Jabotinsky, V. “The Iron Wall” [originally published in Russian *O Zheleznoi Stene*] in *Rassvyet*, 4 November 1923, reprinted in *The Jewish Herald* (South Africa), 26 November 1937 and reproduced online in 2016 at <https://ansionnachfionn.com/2016/08/23/zeev-jabotinsky-the-iron-wall-we-and-the-arabs> (accessed 31 May 2018); extract reproduced as doc. 11 in *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present*, 2e (ed. Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz), 41–43. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2008. Cf. Lustick, I. (1996, Spring). To build and to be built by: Israel and the hidden logic of the Iron Wall. *Israel Studies* I (1): 196–223; Shapira, *Land and Power*, 154–163; Shlaim, A. (2014). *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, updated and expanded, 11–17. New York/London: W.W. Norton; Abulof, U. (2014). National ethics in ethnic conflicts: The Zionist ‘Iron Wall’ and the ‘Arab Question.’ *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37 (14): 2653–2669.
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- [27](#) Shafir, G. (1989). *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press,

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- [28](#) Cohen, I. (1945). *The Zionist Movement*, 182. London: Frederick Muller (ch. XII, “Outrages, Enquiries, and Congresses”).
- [29](#) Herzl, T. (1987). *Old New Land [Altneuland]*, transl. from German [1941, 1960] by Lotta Levensohn, with a new introduction by Jacques Kornberg, 124. New York: Markus Wiener and Herzl Press. Cf. different renderings in Elon, A. *The Israelis*, 161, and Laqueur, W. (1976). *A History of Zionism*, 133. New York: Schocken.
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- [31](#) Lowdermilk, W.C. (1944). *Palestine, Land of Promise*, 2e. New York/London: Harper and Bros.; Samuel, M. (1944). *Harvest in the Desert*, Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society; ESCO Foundation for Palestine, Inc. (1947). *Palestine: A Study of Jewish, Arab, and British Policies*. New Haven, CT.
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- [33](#) Horowitz, D. (1953). *State in the Making* (transl. J. Meltzer), 268. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- [34](#) Gottheil, F.M. (1982). Arab immigration into pre-state Israel: 1922–1931. In: *Palestine and Israel in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (ed. E. Kedourie and S.G. Haim), 143–152. London: Frank Cass; Avneri, A.L. (1984). *The Claim of Dispossession: Jewish Land-*

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- 35 Peters, J. (1984). *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab–Jewish Conflict over Palestine*. New York: Harper and Row. For important critiques of this work, see Finkelstein, N.G. (2001). Disinformation and the Palestine question: The not-so-strange case of Joan Peters's *From Time Immemorial*. In: *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question* (ed. E.W. Said and C. Hitchens), 33–69. London: Verso, and his *Image and Reality of the Israel–Palestine Conflict*, new and rev. ed. New York: W.W. Norton [2e, London: Verso], 2003, ch. 2; Porath, Y. (1986, 16 January). Mrs. Peters's Palestine, *New York Review of Books*, 32: 21–22, at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/01/16/mrs-peterss-palestine> (accessed 31 May 2018); Mrs. Peters's Palestine: An exchange (Ronald Sanders, Daniel Pipes, Yehoshua Porath), *New York Review of Books*, 35 (5), 27 March 1986, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/03/27/mrs-peterss-palestine-an-exchange> (accessed 31 May 2018).
- 36 E.g., Arab Executive Committee, Memorandum on the White Paper of October 1930, prepared by Aouni Abdul-Hadi, Jerusalem, December 1930, reproduced [in English] in *Documents of the Palestinian National Movement, 1918–1939: From the Papers of Akram Zuaytir [in Arabic]*, ed. Bayan Nuwayhid al-Hout, Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1979, doc. 167, pp. 342–350 (land), 350–352 (immigration), and doc. 168 (cover-letter of 5 January 1931), p. 354; Kayyali, A.W. *Palestine*, 205. Ruedy, J. (1971). Dynamics of land alienation. In: *The Transformation of Palestine* (ed. I. Abu-Lughod), 119–138; Abu-Lughod, J.L. (1971). The demographic transformation of Palestine. In: *The Transformation of Palestine*, 139–163.

- 37 Palestine Royal Commission, *Report*, 131. Cf. *ibid.*, 125–130.
- 38 Jabotinsky, V. (1923, 4 November). “The Iron Wall”; also his letter to Kisch, F., 4 July 1925, quoted in Caplan N., *Palestine Jewry*, 198–199; Khalidi, A.W. *The Iron Cage*, 72.
- 39 Ben-Gurion, D. (1972). *My Talks with Arab Leaders*, transl. Aryeh Rubinstein and Misha Louvish (ed. M. Louvish), 80, 15, Jerusalem: Keter (for Musa Alami’s reported remark “that he would prefer the land to remain poor and desolate even for another hundred years, until the Arabs themselves were capable of developing and making it flower”).
- 40 Porath, Y. *Emergence*, 147–158, 169–178; Lesch A.M., *Arab Politics in Palestine*, ch. 8. For the *yishuv*’s reactions to the same proposals, see Caplan N. *Palestine Jewry*, ch. 8.
- 41 Colonial Office, *Palestine: Correspondence with the Palestine Arab Delegation and the Zionist Organisation*, Cmd. 1700, June 1922 (the Churchill White Paper); reproduced in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 25–29; available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2010/08/document-s3.html>.
- 42 For a snapshot of British optimism and perceptions of tranquility, see Colonial Office, *Palestine: Report of the High Commissioner on the Administration of Palestine, 1920–1925*, Colonial No. 15, 1925; Caplan, N. *Palestine Jewry*, 195–197.

5

Collapse of the Mandate: Rebellion, Partition, White Paper, 1929–1939

Radicalization of Palestinian Politics

The peaceful lull started to unravel after September 1928 owing to an upsurge in religious-incited nationalist tensions. In late August 1929, following a year of incidents, provocations, and demonstrations around Muslim and Jewish holy places, Palestinian worshippers emerged from Friday prayer to attack Jews in Jerusalem. Rumors of Jewish attacks on Muslims sparked similar violence in other places, including savage attacks on the long-established, non-Zionist, ultra-orthodox Jewish communities living in Hebron and Safed. In all, some 133 Jews were killed and 339 wounded, almost all of them by Arabs, with 116 Arab deaths and 232 wounded, caused mostly by British troops and police.¹

The Hebron massacre, in particular, is still remembered by Jews as the worst of the “events of *tarpat*” (the Hebrew acronym for the year corresponding to 1929).² In Hebron, 59 men, women, and children were murdered, another 60 wounded, and some mutilated and raped, by mobs. As elsewhere, British police action left something to be desired. Apart from these victims and perpetrators, some 300 Hebronite Jews found protection thanks to the courage of almost two dozen of their Palestinian neighbors. The subsequent evacuation of Hebron’s remaining Jews to Jerusalem left a scar for decades. After the 1967 war in which Israel captured the city from Jordanian rule, some Jews sought to restore their ancient community in the midst of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs.³

The 1929 “disturbances” brought the Shaw Commission of Inquiry to Palestine to investigate the underlying causes and to recommend solutions. Between 24 October

and 27 December 1929, the commissioners heard evidence from British, Zionist, and Arab counsel and witnesses. Zionist spokesmen sought to incriminate the Mufti of Jerusalem for willful religious incitement and to indict the British administration for its underpreparedness and laxity in maintaining the firm hand of law and order. Testimony presented by Palestinian witnesses spoke of landlessness and other hardships caused by Zionist immigration and land purchase, as well as their fears of domination by the Jews. While these fears could not have been based on the actual, declining number of Jews arriving in the country at the time, the Palestinian public was alarmed by nationalist statements and provocations coming especially from members of the Zionist–Revisionist movement, and from other Jews who were making religious claims to take control over the Western (Wailing) Wall, which was also holy to Muslims as *al-Buraq* – the place from which the Prophet Muhammad is supposed to have ascended to Heaven.⁴

To the great disappointment of Zionist and *yishuv* leaders, the Shaw Commission's *Report* published on 31 March 1930 gave more credence to Arab fears and complaints than to their own.⁵ A new fact-finding inquiry followed quickly under Sir John Hope Simpson, whose report focused on the economic impact on Palestinian farmers of Zionist immigration and land purchase. Assessment of these reports by the British cabinet led to a new White Paper, issued in October 1930 and bearing the name of Colonial Secretary, Lord Passfield. Meanwhile, an international legal commission appointed by the League of Nations recommended ways of defusing the specifically religious conflict over the Holy Places.

The Passfield White Paper greatly distressed Zionists by focusing on the Arab grievances that it felt needed to be addressed through proposed restrictions on land sales and Jewish immigration. The White Paper also recommended a resumption of suspended discussions toward establishing self-governing institutions in Palestine.⁶ But the restrictions envisaged for Zionist

immigration, settlement, and land purchase were soon overturned by Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, who addressed a letter of reassurance to Dr. Weizmann in February 1931 – the product of several months of intensive lobbying in London. What had at first appeared as the worst setback for the Zionists and the greatest victory for the Palestinians vis-à-vis the crucial support of British policy-makers ended in another stalemate.⁷

The years 1929–1931 marked an important turning-point in Arab–Jewish–British relations in Palestine, with each party drawing a number of lessons. Neither Arabs nor Jews emerged from the political crisis with much confidence that they could count on the British to satisfy their respective demands. Recent events had demonstrated the importance and power of religious symbolism (perceived threats to holy places) in mobilizing the two communities into violent confrontation with distinctly nationalistic overtones. Even if the Shaw and Hope Simpson recommendations were not fully implemented, the door had now been opened to reconsideration of some of the basic premises of the Mandate and the application of its Jewish national home provisions. New ideas for “parity” arrangements in government, cantonization, and other constitutional measures were floated in Zionist circles, while good relations were quietly developed with the Amir Abdullah across the Jordan.⁸

Palestinian leaders took some time to recover from the shock and disappointment of MacDonald’s letter to Weizmann, which they considered a betrayal and dubbed the “Black Letter.” The Arab Executive’s cap-in-hand diplomacy with the British masters of the country was now discredited among a younger generation who would press for more militant forms of resistance.⁹ The reports of Development Commissioner Lewis French (December 1931, April 1932) on agriculture and settlement confirmed several of the Palestinians’ complaints, but left Zionists feeling somewhat vindicated because the extent of the landlessness problem was shown to be less than previously claimed.¹⁰ Wishing to rectify their

tactical error of having rejected British proposals in 1922–1923, some Palestinian Arab politicians sought to reopen discussions toward creating a democratically elected legislative council.

In late October 1933, reflecting a deliberate defiance focused on British rather than Jewish or Zionist targets, Palestinian nationalists organized well-coordinated protests in Jaffa, Haifa, and other towns. British police action against the demonstrations, declared illegal, resulted in some 25 deaths and over 200 injuries.¹¹ The importance of these generally not-well-remembered events lies in their being a forerunner of the 1936 Arab general strike, and in helping to convince a small but growing number of British officials and Zionist leaders that they were now dealing with a genuine national movement and not merely gangs of malcontents working at the behest of agitators or self-serving, manipulative effendis.

Indeed, Palestinian Arab politics during the 1930s came to be more effectively organized and directed from below, as a younger and more radical generation grew tired of the political style of the older notables. The Arab Executive Committee became increasingly criticized for its moderation and cooperation with the British, and its ineffective protests against the Mandatory's implementation of Zionist policies. New political parties were formed, no longer based exclusively on family ties or clan loyalty.¹²

In the northern hill country, an Islamic preacher, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, embarked on guerilla warfare against British and Zionist targets until he was killed in a gun battle in November 1935. Qassam's well-attended funeral channeled and increased the political tensions in the country, which were already rising owing to a number of other factors. London's disappointing response to Palestinian pressure for an elected legislative council contributed to a radicalization of Palestinian political thinking, as did the fears caused by a sharp increase in Jewish immigration during 1933, 1934, and especially 1935, when the highest total (61 854) of Jewish

immigrants of any year of the Mandate period was recorded. Political tensions also escalated following disclosures of Jewish arms-smuggling activity, while publicity surrounding cases of evicted tenant farmers, especially those from Wadi al-Hawarith in August 1933, focused nationalist criticism on land sales to Jews. The grievances and problems associated with the outbreaks in 1929 had evidently not been solved by intervening inquiry commissions, policy statements, or changes in the Mandate's regulations and administration.

General Strike and Rebellion, 1936

Following several murders, attacks, and counterattacks by Arabs and Jews in mid-April 1936, the British imposed a curfew and declared a state of emergency. The Arab Higher Committee [AHC], a recently formed umbrella grouping of Palestinian political factions, called for a general strike which was accompanied by an armed uprising. What started as "disturbances" soon escalated into what became known as the Palestinian Arab "revolt" or "rebellion" (*thawra*) that lasted until 1939, seriously challenging British rule and the Zionist policy in Palestine. While the British civil administration was criticized by Zionists for its ineffectual response to the violence, including its slowness to empower the military to forcefully pursue the rebels, there can be no doubt that many of the countermeasures taken by police and army – searches, collective fines, curfews, and bulldozing of homes – were indeed harsh, causing great suffering and bitterness among the Palestinian population.¹³

After more than five months of daily attacks, damage, and disruption caused by the general strike and rebellion, secret diplomacy orchestrated in London yielded identical public statements in early October 1936 by three neighboring Arab rulers (Arabia's Ibn Sa'ud, Transjordan's Abdullah, and Iraq's Ghazi) urging the Palestinians to return to peaceful life and to put their trust in Great Britain to find a just solution to their grievances. In response (also prearranged), the AHC

called off its general strike and the Rebellion subsided. The ceasefire was achieved along with the setting of an important precedent: inviting and allowing regional leaders to intervene in Palestinian affairs. Historians generally portray this turning point as one that harmed, more than it helped, the Palestinians.¹⁴

During the preceding six months, according to official British accounts, “upward of 1,000 Arab rebels” were killed mostly in clashes with troops and police, along with another 314 dead (including 195 Arabs and 80 Jews) and 1337 wounded (including 804 Arabs and 308 Jews).¹⁵ By all accounts, the zeal and degree of organization under a network of improvised national committees had been impressive – albeit accompanied by a degree of violence and intimidation directed against those Palestinians who displayed insufficient commitment and loyalty to the strike and/or to the armed rebels.¹⁶

Turning Point: The (Peel) Royal Commission

The outbreak had given rise to serious doubts as to whether the Palestine Mandate was still workable. Important changes during the 1930s contributed to these doubts, notably the deteriorating conditions of European Jews after the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the successful movement toward greater independence in neighboring Arab countries. Britain’s inability to fulfill its dual obligation under the Mandate was increasingly apparent as the country became torn between two rival, inward-looking and increasingly nationalistic communities.

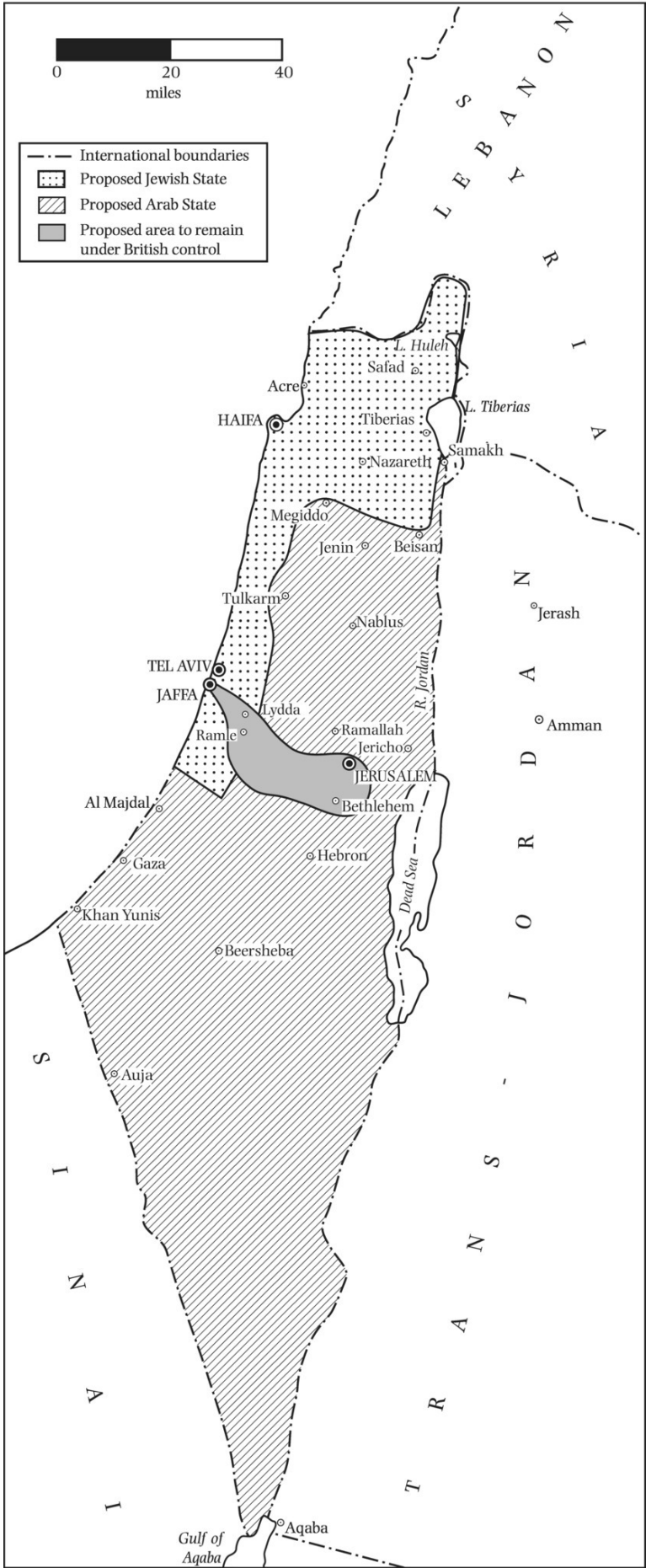
The lull in the violence paved the way for the British Cabinet to send out a waiting Royal Commission whose terms of reference were more far-reaching than any of its predecessors, viz.:

to ascertain the underlying causes of the disturbances which broke out in Palestine in the middle of April; to inquire into the manner in which the Mandate for Palestine is being implemented in relation to the obligations of the Mandatory towards the Arabs and the Jews respectively; and to ascertain whether, upon a proper construction of the terms of the Mandate, either the Arabs or the Jews have any legitimate grievances upon account of the way in which the Mandate has been, or is being implemented; and if the Commission is satisfied that any such grievances are well founded, to make recommendations for their removal and for the prevention of their recurrence.¹⁷

On 11 November 1936 the Commission, subsequently known by the name of its chairman, the first Earl of Peel, arrived in Palestine to begin gathering evidence and hearing testimony from British officials and from Zionist and Arab representatives. In Jerusalem the Commission heard from 60 witnesses in public sessions and another 53 in private sessions. In January the Commissioners returned to London and heard two more witnesses in public and another eight during in camera sessions before adjourning to write their report.¹⁸

The 404-page *Report*, published as a White Paper in early July 1937, stands today as a seminal study of the conflict in all its complexity. In unsentimental and penetrating fashion, the authors paid tribute to the growth and dynamism of the Jewish *yishuv* while acknowledging the deep-seated nationalistic expectations and grievances that motivated both Arabs and Jews to reject each other, as well as continued British rule. Among the Commission's rather daring conclusions was that the Mandate was unworkable. In one of its most quoted lines, the *Report* solemnly affirmed that "an irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country." There was, the commissioners went on, "no common ground between them." The *Report* proposed the partition of the contested country as the only option that offered any

hope of a solution: “while neither race can justly rule *all* Palestine, we see no reason why, if it were practicable, each race should not rule *part* of it.”¹⁹ This dramatic recommendation was accompanied by proposals for interim restrictions on land sales and a cap on Jewish immigration to be determined, for the first time, not by Palestine’s “economic absorptive capacity” (as laid down in the Churchill White Paper of 1922), but rather by the political temperature in the country. The British Government welcomed the *Report* and prepared to take steps toward implementing its main recommendations (see [Map 5.1](#)).



Map 5.1 Peel Commission Partition Plan, July 1937.

Immediate reactions to the Peel proposals were mostly negative. The Palestinian community was united behind the AHC in rejecting the proposals and repeating its demands for a termination of the Mandate, cessation of Jewish immigration and land purchases, and the creation of an independent Arab state. Particularly offensive to the Palestinian leadership was the Royal Commission's proposed solution which seemed to treat "the Jewish case as the basic issue to be considered and solved without reference to the Arab issues at stake." This represented, they claimed, a clear and unacceptable violation of Arab rights:

For the Arabs of Palestine are the owners of the country and lived in it prior to the British Occupation for hundreds of years and in it they still constitute the overwhelming majority. The Jews on the other hand are a minority of intruders, who before the war had no great standing in this country, and whose political connections therewith had been severed for almost 2000 years. It is impossible to find either in logic or morality any justification for the attempt to renew this broken connection by the establishment of a so-called Jewish National Home. Such an attempt is without precedent in history, ancient or modern, nor is it based on anything but the force of British Arms and the complete lack of a sense of political reality among the Jews.²⁰

The revolt reignited with greater fury, especially after late September 1937 when rebels assassinated the acting British District Commissioner in Nazareth. British countermeasures became more severe, including the outlawing of the AHC; its president, the Mufti al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, was forced to flee, first to Beirut and then to Baghdad, Teheran, and Berlin. Other members of the AHC were either interned or banished from the country, creating a leadership vacuum that would have disastrous consequences for the Palestinian national movement over the coming decade. In [Chapter 12](#), under our discussion of "missed opportunities," we will

examine whether the Palestinians were wise to reject Peel's proposal to partition the country, and whether, by accepting it, they might have contained the further growth of the Jewish national home.

The *Peel Report* and the renewed Rebellion also had their regional echoes. The Amir Abdullah, who stood to gain territorially by Peel's proposal to incorporate the Arab parts of Palestine into his Transjordanian kingdom, tentatively welcomed the Royal Commission's *Report* but soon retreated as other neighboring Arab leaders echoed each other in denouncing the partition plan. Solidarity committees were set up in Damascus, Baghdad, and elsewhere to provide support for the Palestinian rebels, culminating in a pan-Arab conference attended by over 400 delegates in Bludan, Syria, in early September 1937. Among the resolutions adopted in support of the Palestinians was one suggesting that the Arab states might be inclined to ally themselves more closely with Britain's European enemies.²¹ British leaders had to be concerned with these reactions, as Arab displeasure over Palestine threatened to undermine imperial stability in the Middle East as well as Muslim sympathy in the Indian subcontinent, during a time of growing tensions with European Fascist powers.

With Peel's proposal for a Jewish *state* (rather than a mere "national home"), Zionists were faced with difficult choices that divided the movement as a whole, as well as its various parties and factions. The Zionist Congress meeting in Zurich in July 1937 adopted, by a 2-to-1 majority vote, a set of convoluted resolutions that accepted the principle of partition but sharply criticized many of the details of the plan; it mandated the executive to negotiate with the British for a more favorable map.²² During 1938, the Jewish Agency prepared and submitted elaborate research reports and studies on Palestine's demography and economy to a follow-up "technical" commission (aka the "Palestine Partition Commission") under Sir John Woodhead. Palestinian Arabs boycotted the technical commission, which visited Palestine from late April to early August 1938. The Woodhead

Commission *Report* of November 1938 concluded that partition was impractical, and found it impossible to recommend any plan unanimously.²³

Retreat from Partition

The (not unexpected) inconclusive result of the Woodhead Commission was welcomed by most policy-makers in London as a signal to announce that His Majesty's Government (HMG) was no longer wedded to a partition solution. Instead, the British government would invite Arab and Zionist delegates to attend a roundtable conference in London.²⁴ Strategic calculations regarding the Arab states' loyalty during an imminent confrontation with Germany and Italy played a role in British decisions and attitudes of the day, placing the Zionists at a clear disadvantage as preparations were made for a conference at St. James's Palace. If the conference failed to produce an agreed solution, Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald announced, HMG would take up its responsibility to promulgate a new policy for Palestine.

Arab and Palestinian delegates in London refused to meet alone with Zionists, whether as a delegation or as individuals. Predictably, almost three dozen parallel, formal Anglo–Arab and Anglo–Zionist sessions (and three secret tripartite meetings) in early 1939 produced only frustration and no agreement on a future policy for Palestine. Given the deadlock, MacDonald issued a White Paper in May 1939 calling for new restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchases. Only 75 000 immigrants might enter Palestine over the coming five-year period, after which the Arabs would have to give their consent. The High Commissioner would be given “general powers to prohibit and regulate transfers of land” to Jews with a view to protecting Arab cultivators.²⁵ Palestine would become independent within 10 years, but the final independence of Palestine was to be granted only after a transitional period which, according to MacDonald's original idea, “could not end

unless Arabs and Jews were, in practice co-operating and unless there was an assurance that such co-operation would continue.”²⁶

The MacDonald White Paper, and the London talks leading up to its issue, provided one of the last major examples of the futility of British efforts to play the role of “honest broker” between Arabs and Zionists in their struggle over Palestine. “In the last resort,” complained Palestinian leader Awni Abd al-Hadi, the British had cynically placed the Arabs “at the mercy of Jewish co-operation” since they “knew that the Jews would never allow an independent [i.e. Arab] state.” Other Arab delegates at St. James’s protested that this amounted to placing humiliating (and insuperable) obstacles in the path of the Palestinians’ right to self-determination.²⁷ For David Ben-Gurion, on the other hand, the British proposals at St. James’s amounted to the “handing over [of] the Jews to the mercy of the Arabs” – “a more evil, stupid and shortsighted plan,” he wrote to his wife, “cannot be imagined.”²⁸ Following the publication of the White Paper two months later, the *yishuv* reacted with violent protests while Ben-Gurion later vowed to fight the White Paper as if there was no war against Germany, but to fight the war on Britain’s side against Nazi Germany as if there were no White Paper.²⁹

Both sides found fault with the new British policy. The White Paper outraged Zionists by its immigration restrictions and by its presumption that the promises of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate were now fulfilled. The new policies seemed to them nothing short of blatant appeasement of the Arab world. Indeed, Palestinians emerged from the St. James’s Conference and the White Paper with two distinct political gains:

1. Palestine’s right to independence, even though conditional and deferred, was recognized in principle by the Mandatory Power.
2. The right of the Palestinians to safeguard their majority status by preventing the Jews from

surpassing a certain proportion of the population was also acknowledged, and the Palestinians would be given an instrument (a veto over immigration after five years) with which to exercise this right.

Still, the exiled Mufti and other Palestinian leaders were adamant in their rejection of MacDonald's new Palestine policy, as it fell short of their demands for full and immediate independence.³⁰ In retrospect, we can wonder whether Palestinians missed an opportunity to contain or block the further expansion of the Jewish national home at this crucial historical moment (see also [Chapter 12](#)) by not seizing upon and attempting to operationalize the White Paper's proposals for an independent Palestinian state – a state which might have emerged within 10 years with a clear Arab majority, based upon limitations imposed on Jewish immigration and land purchase.

The Resort to Force: Violence, Terrorism, and National Struggles

If these two political gains could be called fruits of the 1936–1939 Rebellion, its costs would prove enormous in terms of the harm done to the Palestinians' potential as a national community to hold their ground against the minority *yishuv* in its struggle for Jewish statehood. In their first sustained uprising against British rule and the Zionist program, the rebels did succeed in inflicting much damage and, at times, were in control of large areas of the country. Official British tallies for 1938, for example, were 5708 incidents of violence, including 986 attacks on the police or military, 651 attacks on Jewish settlements or quarters, 331 bomb throwings, 215 abductions, 720 attacks on telegraph communications, 341 incidents of sabotage on roads and railways, 104 punctures of oil pipelines, and 430 assassinations or attempted assassinations. By the time the second phase of the revolt petered out in mid-1939, the official tally of Arab rebels killed by British military and police forces was another 1000, while the courts had tried and

sentenced more than 55 Arabs to death and 3300 to terms of imprisonment. Official figures for other casualties “from terrorist and gang activities” for the 1937–1939 stage of the revolt were 1500 killed (including at least 115 British, 350 Jews and 900 Arabs) and 2000 wounded.³¹

These British figures almost certainly underestimate the real losses, especially among the Palestinians.³² The high toll of Palestinian Arabs was due in largest part to serious schisms and killings among rival pro-rebel, pro-Mufti, and anti-Mufti groups. Referring also to the harsh repression meted out by the British, historian Rashid Khalidi laments the “tragic course that led to the sacrifices of the 1936–1939 revolt, the crushing of which marked the beginning of the end of Arab Palestine.”³³ The impact of these losses would be felt most seriously in the leadership vacuum that would handicap the Palestinians during the crucial showdown in the final years of British rule (see [Chapter 6](#)).

The second phase of the Rebellion also introduced a new element on the *yishuv* side – the increased operations of dissident militias not answering to the official Zionist leadership’s strategy of “*havlaga*” (self-restraint). By the Fall of 1937, with the resumption and increase of rebel activity, discipline behind the *yishuv*’s strategy of self-restraint was wearing thin, especially among *Irgun* (ETZEL, until then known as “*Hagana-B*”) militants. In July 1938, two *Irgun* bombings killed 74 Arabs and wounded 129 in Haifa’s main market, unleashing a cycle of reprisal attacks targeting Jewish and Arab civilians.³⁴ Even the mainstream underground *Hagana* adjusted its tactics by taking offensive action against Arab targets, creating “Special Night Squads” under the guidance of an eccentric Christian fundamentalist and Zionist, Orde Charles Wingate, who was seconded for a period to the British military in Palestine.³⁵ During the coming decade, an even more radical splinter, *Lohamei Herut Israel* (*LEHI*; aka the “Stern Gang”) would join in what would become a major “Jewish revolt” against British rule³⁶ (see also [Chapter 6](#)).

For both Palestinian Arabs and Jews, the 1936–1939 revolt marked the climax of a long-running process of militarization of their respective struggles. From the earliest local skirmishes between Palestinian farmers, Bedouin raiders, and Zionist settlers and the creation of *ha-Shomer* (the Jewish watchmen’s organization) during Ottoman times, the resort to arms would take on an increasingly important role as the struggle between the two communities became more nationalistic during the Mandate period. From December 1920, as we have noted, the semi-underground *Hagana* organization undertook responsibilities for arming and training Jews who were put to their first tests in May 1921, November 1922, and August 1929.

This brings us to the sixth of the core arguments to be examined: *Is the [Palestinians’] [Arabs’] [Zionists’] [Israelis’] resort to violence justified, or is it to be condemned?* In some ways this contested point can be seen as an offshoot of the core argument over whether Zionists were returning to their land, or invading someone else’s. In the cross-fire of argument and counterargument, supporters of one party or the other will attempt to undermine the worthiness of the rival’s claim by allegations of its essentially aggressive and violent – and hence “evil” – character. Each party, in its own defense, will assert that it was not initiating violence, but only responding to the violence emanating from the other side. In the post-1948 period, successor versions of these arguments would be launched with rephrased questions: Who is the aggressor, and who is acting in self-defense? Who is the “terrorist,” and who is the “freedom fighter”?

Seen from the Palestinians’ point of view, the very arrival of Jewish immigrants in what they considered to be their homeland was self-evidently objectionable – especially since these newcomers sometimes openly proclaimed that they intended one day to become a majority and create a sovereign Jewish state within which the indigenous inhabitants would be forced to become a minority. Did this not, they asked, entitle them to object

and resist, if necessary taking up arms to prevent this from happening? Zionism, despite being sanctioned by the international (i.e. European) community, was for the Palestinians an imposition and an intrusion – an inherently aggressive act, even though many of its various small steps may have been carried out by the letter of the law or without actual use of oppressive force.

Some commentators, advancing the argument made by Palestinians, lay the blame squarely on the British for overlooking and overriding Arab wishes and providing the bayonets without which Zionism could not have implanted itself. In 1970, for example, noted historian Arnold J. Toynbee wrote:

The reason why the state of Israel exists today and why 1,500,000 Palestinian Arabs are refugees is that, for thirty years, Jewish immigration was imposed on the Palestinian Arabs by British military power until the immigrants were sufficiently numerous and sufficiently well-armed to be able to fend for themselves with tanks and planes of their own.³⁷

Earlier, in 1938, George Antonius, a well-to-do intellectual living in Jerusalem, was able to articulate the dilemmas he experienced as the terror and violence of the Rebellion continued to inflict their damage on all parties across the country.

No lasting solution of the Palestine problem [he wrote] is to be hoped for until the injustice is removed. Violence, whether physical or moral, cannot provide a solution. It is not only reprehensible in itself: it also renders an understanding between Arabs, British and Jews increasingly difficult of attainment. By resorting to it, the Arabs have certainly attracted an earnest attention to their grievances, which all their peaceful representations in Jerusalem, in London and in Geneva had for twenty years failed to do.

Building on his distinction between “moral” and “physical” violence, Antonius went on:

But violence defeats its own ends; and such immediate gains as it may score are invariably discounted by the harm which is inseparable from it. Nothing can come from the terror raging in Palestine; but the wise way to put an end to it is to remove the causes which have brought it about. The fact must be faced that the violence of the Arabs is the inevitable corollary of the moral violence done to them, and that it is not likely to cease, whatever the brutality of the repression, unless the moral violence itself were to cease.

And, invoking what he called “the path of ordinary common sense and justice,” he pointed an accusatory finger in the direction of Zionism:

There is no room for a second nation in a country which is already inhabited, and inhabited by a people whose national consciousness is fully awakened and whose affection for their homes and their countryside is obviously unconquerable... [N]o room can be made in Palestine for a second nation except by dislodging or exterminating the nation in possession.³⁸

This sentiment, captured during the peak violent period of the 1936–1939 Palestinian revolt, is still part of the contemporary Palestinian sense of grievance at the loss of their homeland in 1948 to the rival Zionist movement.

From the foregoing one can see how and why Palestinians can and do view themselves, throughout the past 140 years of conflict, as the aggrieved party facing unwarranted Jewish and Zionist aggression. Seen from the Zionists’ point of view, the picture is altogether different. They regard their return to what they consider their homeland, what was once a largely undeveloped and sparsely inhabited land they called *Eretz-Israel*, as not only sanctioned by divine promise but also recognized by the world powers and the League of Nations. Hence, when Palestinian objections to their arrival took the form of physical attacks, this constituted for the Zionists an intolerable act of aggression – not unlike the wanton pogroms that Jews had faced in

eastern Europe and elsewhere. Such threats naturally required Jews in Palestine to defend themselves, especially given the uncertain ability or willingness of the ruling power (after 1917, the British) to provide adequate protection.

Many Israeli and Jewish writers cannot accept the notion of parallels, reciprocity, or symmetry in the violence exhibited by both sides. In setting out his contemporary “moral defense of Israel’s wars,” Israeli writer and archivist Yaacov Lozowick reviewed the history and clearly saw no shared responsibility for any “cycle” of violence. What he saw was, rather, a clash between the antithetical forces of “building” (Zionists) and “destroying” (Palestinians) during the Mandate period. For Lozowick and others, the Palestinians’ rejection is unwarranted, irrational, total – made even more illegitimate because of its murderous (often antisemitic and genocidal) qualities.³⁹ This viewpoint is countered by Palestinian historian, Rashid Khalidi, who calls it “the ludicrous but widely believed accusation that the Palestinians were motivated by no more than antisemitism in their opposition to Zionism,” whereas in reality they should be viewed as “just ... a colonized people trying to defend their majority status and achieve independence in their own country.”⁴⁰

Not all expositions of the Zionist case are so clear-cut or one-sided as Lozowick’s. We can learn much on this tricky question from the analysis of “the Zionist resort to force” between 1881 and 1948 offered by Anita Shapira. The Israeli historian begins her important study *Land and Power* by recreating the worldview of the early pioneers and their Palestine-born offspring, describing the sense of isolation and desperation captured by the phrase “*ein breira*” – there is “no choice,” i.e. no choice but to fight the Arabs for control of the country. “Awareness of the existence of an irreconcilable Jewish–Arab conflict,” she notes, “contained a subliminal assumption that this was a Gordian knot and could only be cut by the sword.”⁴¹

Unlike Lozowick and others, Shapira has no moral or intellectual difficulty in recognizing and understanding why the Palestinians could choose to reject Zionism. Along with the demographic and economic growth of the *yishuv* during the Mandate period came important changes in Jewish self-perception, radically transformed from that of a weak, defenseless, and easily victimized people to that of a determined and self-confident community able and willing to defend itself. This “growing confidence” and “new self-assurance,” Shapira recognizes, were viewed by the Palestinians “as a form of insolence.” Increasing Jewish immigration and land purchases, she writes, only demonstrated further to the Palestinians that the Zionist project “naturally harbored an element of aggressiveness.”⁴² Indeed, the ideological rhetoric of socialist Zionism included phrases like *kibush ha-avoda*, the “conquest of labor.”

Shapira notes that Zionist psychology was “molded by the conflicting parameters of a national liberation movement and a movement of European colonization in a Middle Eastern country”⁴³ – accepting and merging, in effect, both sides of the core argument which we discussed in [Chapter 3](#) about whether Zionism is a form of either colonialism or nationalism. Her examination of the evolution of Zionist attitudes to the Arabs and the use of force yields two distinct approaches. From 1881 to 1936, she believes, Zionist thinking was dominated by a “defensive ethos,” which was replaced after 1936 by an “offensive ethos.” This transformation reflected the movement’s changing fortunes in the real world of international politics and in the regional arena of Arab and Palestinian affairs.

The “defensive ethos” had been built on evolutionary and gradualist assumptions regarding the ability of Zionism to flourish under protection of the Turkish and British régimes, ultimately producing a Jewish majority, and thus peacefully take over the country through the power of their critical mass: numbers (immigration), economic infrastructure, newly purchased land, and the creation of colonies and collective settlements. But these optimistic

assumptions began to unravel by the early 1930s, as the Palestinians awakened to the dangers that Zionist successes represented to their own aspirations to national self-determination on that same contested territory. By the mid-1930s, Shapira believes, the defensive ethos was already changing, and “functioning as an incubator of enmity and alienation.” This allowed *yishuv* political culture to become more influenced by its “nationalist component,” which expanded “at the expense of the socialist component” among the youth.⁴⁴ The imagery of the stalwart pioneer, worker, and watchman that had been at the core of the mythology and mystique of the earlier defensive ethos was supplanted in the later period of the offensive ethos by that of the intrepid underground fighter or warrior – “the new image of the Jew, proud and courageous, ready to fight back.” Young Jews came to believe that “[t]he land was theirs, theirs alone. This feeling was accompanied by a fierce sense of possessiveness, of joyous anticipation of the fight for it.”⁴⁵

By the time of the Arab rebellion, and with the deteriorating situation of Europe’s Jewish communities, more and more people in the *yishuv* came to the pessimistic conclusion that time was running out for the Zionist project. They became increasingly aware of the rising national consciousness of the Arabs in Palestine and the neighboring countries. Equally obvious to the Jews was Britain’s self-interest in appeasing these Arab nationalist forces and retreating from the burdensome pro-Zionist commitments enshrined in the Mandate. These factors, made painfully obvious during the Palestinian revolt and the St. James’s Conference, combined to force the *yishuv* “to confront the terrifying prospect of a war without any end in sight.” One result was “a slow shift in the meaning of the concept of *power* from the sense of a critical mass to physical-military power.”⁴⁶

In the internal struggle between left- and right-wing approaches, Shapira notes how labor-Zionism’s support for the policy of *havlaga* (self-restraint) was losing out to

the appeal of the *Irgun*'s "unbridled nationalist ideology joined with the sanctification of violence as the exclusive political method."⁴⁷ The challenge was indeed seen as an existential one by followers of *Irgun* leader Menachem Begin, who unabashedly transformed Descartes' well-known dictum "I think, therefore I am" into "We fight, therefore we are!" There were, he wrote

times in the history of peoples when thought alone does not prove their existence. A people may "think" and yet its sons, with their thoughts and in spite of them, may be turned into a herd of slaves—or into soap. There are times when everything in you cries out: your very self-respect as a human being lies in your resistance to evil.⁴⁸

This self-understanding of Zionists about the nature and purpose of violence before 1948 has a number of echoes for the wider conflict and for the evolution of parallel attitudes among Palestinians through the 1950s and beyond. One is the logical progression from this militant brand of heroism to the desire to sacrifice oneself for the good of the nation: a willingness to die, as well as to kill, for the cause – the personal quest for martyrdom. Another is the symmetry and numerous similarities to be found when examining the internal Palestinian debates in the 1960s and afterwards over the role of revolutionary armed struggle in the still unsuccessful quest for Palestinian statehood (see [Chapter 8](#)).⁴⁹

A third consideration is what political scientist Ian Lustick has called the "solipsistic" use of terror by both sides both before and after 1948. As Lustick convincingly demonstrates, the purposes of resorting to terror include not only drawing attention to one's cause, harming the enemy, and causing the enemy to panic. An equally important function of terror is the liberating and empowering contribution it can make to the identity and self-image of an embattled party.⁵⁰ Such views on the inevitability and the cleansing power of violence can be viewed as offsetting, in some ways, the demoralizing self-

perceptions both parties entertain of their “righteous victimhood.”

The overuse and emotional misuse of the very terms “terror” and “terrorism” can create smokescreens that careful analysts need to avoid. For some – including Zionists in the 1930s and 1940s⁵¹ – the label “terrorist” is one to be worn proudly and defiantly. For others – including Israelis and Americans vis-à-vis the Palestine Liberation Organization from the 1960s onward – it became a term of extreme vilification used to discredit one’s enemies. Since 11 September 2001 especially, the term has been so liberally applied to discredit opponents and critics as to lose much of its essential meaning.

The parties’ resort to violence during the Mandate period has been carried forward to the present day, taking different forms to suit the evolving conflict and improvements in the technologies of war and killing. Arguments over its justification or glorification have continued and remain unresolved, as partisans of both sides follow their predictable scripts. First, they give eloquent expression to their side’s profound and passionate desire for peace, while documenting and denouncing the other party’s lack thereof. Then they claim that their resort to violence is in fact legitimate self-defense against the threats and unwarranted aggression perpetrated by the other side. Finally, they supply evidence to dismiss, debunk, or delegitimize claims of the other side that it was merely acting in self-defense. Thus, deeply anchored in a self-evident belief in the rightness of their cause and the purity of their side’s intentions and behavior, each side’s partisans are locked into a closed-circle argument as they review the history of outbreaks and easily blame the other side for creating the violence that continues to this day.

Notes

¹ United Kingdom, *A Survey of Palestine, Prepared in December 1945 and January 1946 for the Information of the Anglo-American Committee of*

Inquiry, vol. I, 24, HMSO: 1946, reprinted 1991 by the Institute for Palestine Studies. Washington, DC.

- [2](#) Similarly, Zionists and Israelis would recall and refer to the outbreaks of 1936 by their Hebrew calendar year, *tartzoh*, and the pivotal war of 1948 as *tatzah*.
- [3](#) Kohn, M. Massacre remembered, A belated Thanksgiving, and Hebron scroll. *Jerusalem Post* (intl. ed.), week ending 26 August 1989; Keinon, H. Memories of a massacre. *Jerusalem Post* (intl. ed.), week ending 9 November 1996; Burg, A. (2018). *In Days to Come: A New Hope for Israel*, 184–190, 192–203 (transl. J. Greenberg). New York: Nation Books.
- [4](#) Colonial Office (1930). Palestine Commission on the Disturbances of August 1929, *Evidence Heard ... in Open Sitings*, Colonial No. 48; Porath, Y. (2015). *The Emergence of the Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1918–1929*. London: [Frank Cass, 1974] Routledge RLE, ch. 7; Mattar, P. (1992). *Mufti of Jerusalem: al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* (rev. ed.). New York: Columbia University Press, ch. 3. As can be seen in [Table 2.1](#), official Jewish immigration figures for 1927 and 1928 were –3358 (net emigration) and 10, respectively.
- [5](#) Colonial Office, *Palestine: Report of the Commission ... 1929 Disturbances*, Cmd. 3530, April 1930.
- [6](#) Colonial Office, *Palestine: Report on Immigration, Land Settlement and Development by Sir John Hope Simpson*, Cmd. 3686, October 1930, extract reproduced in *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948* (ed. and introduced by Walid Khalidi), 303–307. Beirut, 1971; 2nd printing, Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987; *Palestine: Statement of Policy*, Cmd. 3692, October 1930 (“Passfield White Paper”), available online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2010/08/document-s4.html>.

- 7 J. Ramsay MacDonald to Chaim Weizmann, 13 February 1931, extracts in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 36–41, available online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2010/08/document-s5.html>. See also Caplan, N. (2015). *Futile Diplomacy, vol. I: Early Arab–Zionist Negotiation Attempts, 1913–1931*, 84–87. London: [Frank Cass, 1983] Routledge RLE.
- 8 Caplan, N. (2015). *Futile Diplomacy, Arab–Zionist Negotiations and the End of the Mandate*, vol. II. London: [Frank Cass, 1986] Routledge RLE, ch. 1.
- 9 For assessments of Arab and Zionist reactions to the crisis of 1929–1931, see: Sela, A. (1994, January–April). The ‘Wailing Wall’ riots (1929) as a watershed in the Palestine conflict. *The Muslim World* LXXXIV (1–2): 60–94; Matthews, W.C. (2006). *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation: Arab Nationalists and Popular Politics in Mandate Palestine*. London/New York: I. B. Tauris; Cohen, H. (2015). *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929* (transl. H. Watzman). UPNE/Brandeis University Press [Schusterman Series in Israel Studies].
- 10 ESCO Foundation for Palestine, Inc. (1947). *Palestine: A Study of Jewish, Arab, and British Policies*, vol. II, 713–722. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Stein, K.W. (1984). *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917–1939*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, ch. 5; Wasserstein, B. (2008). *Israelis and Palestinians: Why Do They Fight? Can They Stop?*, 3e, 51–53. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press/London: Profile Books.
- 11 League of Nations, Permanent Mandates Commission, Minutes of the Twenty-Fifth Session, Geneva, May 30 to 12 June 1934. <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/mandate-for-palestine-league-of-nations-25th-session-minutes-of-the-permanent-mandates-commission/> (accessed 30

June 2018); Kolinsky. *Law, Order and Riots*, 172–181; Matthews, W.C. *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation*, ch. 7.

- [12](#) Porath, Y. (2015). *The Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1929–1939: From Riots to Rebellion*. London: [Frank Cass, 1977] Routledge RLE, chs. 2, 5; Lesch, A.M. (1979). *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917–1939: The Frustration of a National Movement*. Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell University Press, chs. 5, 9; Matthews, W.C. *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation*, ch. 2; Khalidi, R. (2006). *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, 82–90. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- [13](#) Compare, for example, Marlowe, J. (1946). *Rebellion in Palestine*. London: Cresset Press, chs. X, XII, and XIV with Kayyali, A.W. (1978). *Palestine: A Modern History*. London: Croom Helm, ch. 7. For archives-based studies, see Cohen, M.J. (1973). Sir Arthur Wauchope, the Army, and the rebellion in Palestine, 1936. *Middle Eastern Studies* IX: 19–34; Bowden, T. (1975). The politics of the Arab rebellion in Palestine, 1936–39. *Middle Eastern Studies* XI (2): 160–169.
- [14](#) Marlowe, J. *Rebellion in Palestine*, 165; Kedourie, E. (1980). Great Britain and Palestine: The turning point. In: *Islam in the Modern World and Other Studies*, 93–170. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Hurewitz, J.C. (1950). *The Struggle for Palestine*, 71. New York: W.W. Norton; Porath, Y. *Palestinian Arab National Movement*, 214; Kayyali, A.W. *Palestine: A Modern History*, 198–199; Klieman, A.S. (1982). The Arab States and Palestine. In: *Zionism and Arabism in Palestine and Israel* (ed. E. Kedourie and S.G. Haim), 118–136. London: Frank Cass; Khalidi, R. *The Iron Cage*, 124.
- [15](#) *A Survey of Palestine*, I: 38. For a critical reassessment of these figures, see Khalidi, W. Note on Arab casualties in the 1936–39 Rebellion. In: *From Haven to Conquest*, Appendix IV, 846–849.

- [16](#) Marlowe, J. *Rebellion in Palestine*, ch. X; Hurewitz, J.C. *Struggle*, 67–72; Porath, Y. *Palestinian Arab National Movement*, ch. 7; Lesch, A.M. *Arab Politics in Palestine*, 217–227. One analyst, less impressed than other scholars and observers by the degree of rebel organization and effectiveness, characterizes the revolt as “highly developed brigandage,” half-way between “primitive banditry” and a “sophisticated people’s revolutionary war.” Bowden, T. The politics of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine, 1936–39, 169.
- [17](#) Palestine Royal Commission. *Report*, Cmd. 5479, London: HMSO, July 1937, ix.
- [18](#) Palestine Royal Commission, *Minutes of Evidence Heard at Public Sessions (with Index)*. Colonial No. 134, London: HMSO, 1937. Reproduced in *The Rise of Israel, vol. 22: The Palestine Royal Commission* (ed. and introduced by Aaron S. Klieman). New York/London: Garland, 1987.
- [19](#) Palestine Royal Commission. *Report*, 370–1, 375–376.
- [20](#) *Memorandum Submitted by the Arab Higher Committee to the Permanent Mandates Commission and the Secretary of State for the Colonies*, [Jerusalem] dated 23 July 1937, p. 4; reprinted in *The Rise of Israel, vol. 17, Arab–Jewish Relations, 1921–1937* (ed. and introduced by Aaron S. Klieman), 218. New York/London: Garland Publishing, 1987.
- [21](#) Bludan resolutions discussed and quoted in Sykes, C. (1965). *Crossroads to Israel, 1917–1948*, 177. Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press [Midland paperback, 1973]. For interesting primary documents illustrating daily activities, see Fry, M.G. and Rabinovich, I. (eds.) (1985). *Despatches from Damascus: Gilbert MacKereth and British Policy in the Levant, 1933–1939*. Tel Aviv: Dayan Center, 171–195.
- [22](#) Political Resolution of the Twentieth Zionist Congress concerning the Report of the Palestine Royal

Commission, reproduced in Moore, J.N. (ed.) (1974). *The Arab–Israeli Conflict*, vol. 3, doc. 25, 184–186. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; also quoted and discussed in ESCO Foundation. *Palestine: A Study of Jewish, Arab, and British Policies*, II. 854–856, and Gerson, A. (1978). *Israel, the West Bank and International Law*, 87–88. London/Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass. For a detailed treatment of the debates, see Galnoor, Y. (1995). *The Partition of Palestine: Decision Crossroads in the Zionist Movement*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- [23](#) Cmd. 5854. See also Katz, Y. (1998). *Partner to Partition: The Jewish Agency’s Partition Plan in the Mandate Era*. London/Portland, OR: Frank Cass.
- [24](#) Cmd. 5893.
- [25](#) *Palestine: Statement of Policy*, Cmd. 6019, London: HMSO, May 1939; text available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-8.html>.
- [26](#) MacDonald, minutes of St. James’s Conference meetings with Arabs and with Jews, both 6 March 1939, quoted in Caplan, N. *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. II, 111.
- [27](#) Minutes of St. James’s Conference meetings with Arabs, 1 and 17 March 1939, quoted in Caplan, N. *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. II, 112.
- [28](#) Quoted in Caplan, N. *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. II, 112.
- [29](#) Teveth, S. (1987). *Ben-Gurion: The Burning Ground, 1886–1948*, 718 and chs 40–41. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- [30](#) Caplan, N. *Futile Diplomacy*, vol. II: 110–113; Khalidi, R. *The Iron Cage*, 114–116.
- [31](#) *A Survey of Palestine*, I: 43, 46, 49.

- 32 In his critical reassessment of these figures, Walid Khalidi estimates the total number of Arabs killed at more than 5000, and wounded at just under 15000. See Khalidi, W. Note on Arab casualties in the 1936–39 Rebellion. In: *From Haven to Conquest*, Appendix IV, 849.
- 33 Khalidi, R. *The Iron Cage*, 64, 66–67, 107–108, 111–112.
- 34 *A Survey of Palestine*, I: 45.
- 35 On Wingate, see Leonard Mosley, “Orde Wingate and Moshe Dayan,” and David Ben-Gurion, “Our Friend: What Wingate did for us,” *Jewish Observer and Middle East Review*, 27 September 1963, 15–16, both reproduced as ch. 39 in *From Haven to Conquest*, 375–387; Sykes, C. *Crossroads to Israel*, 182–183; Samuel, E. (1970). *A Lifetime in Jerusalem*, 169–171. Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press; Katz, S. (1968). *Days of Fire: The Secret Story of the Making of Israel*, 34–35. Jerusalem: Steimatsky’s [London: W. H. Allen].
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41. Shapira, A. (1999). *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (transl. W. Templer), 283. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
42. Shapira, A. *Land and Power*, 107, 139.
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46. Shapira, A. *Land and Power*, 221–222.
47. Shapira, A. *Land and Power*, 248.
48. Emphasis orig. Begin, M. (1972). *The Revolt [Story of the Irgun]*, foreword by Rabbi Meir Kahane. Los Angeles: Nash Publishing [orig. New York: Schuman/London: W. H. Allen, 1948/1951], 46.
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and Gender in Early Jewish and Palestinian Nationalism. Gainesville, etc.: University Press of Florida, ch. 5 (“Politicizing Masculinities: *Shahada* and *Haganah*”).

- [51](#) E.g. Cohen, G. (1966). *Woman of Violence: Memoirs of a Young Terrorist, 1943–1948* (transl. H. Halkin). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. For a detailed study, see Heller, J. (1995). *The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics, and Terror, 1940–1949*. London/Portland, OR: Frank Cass.

6

Shoah, Atzma'ut, Nakba: 1939–1949

The Holocaust and Jewish Immigration to Palestine

During the course of World War II and the closing years of the Mandate period, the British governed Palestine under the 1939 White Paper's revised interpretation of their obligations to both communities – an interpretation that was challenged and undermined at many turns by both principal parties and their regional and international supporters. The issue of whether Britain unfairly favored one party over the other, in this latest incarnation of Palestine policy as in previous statements, remains one of the unresolved core arguments in the contested histories of Palestine and Israel.

In this chapter we will focus on the impact of the Holocaust in Europe on the situation in Palestine and the creation of Israel. In the course of this momentous decade we note the emergence of several new core arguments between Zionists (soon to become “Israelis”), Palestinians, and Arabs, as the clash between them assumed dramatic and crisis proportions.

In his opening testimony to members of the Peel Commission in Jerusalem on 25 November 1936, Dr. Chaim Weizmann began by elaborating on “the Jewish problem as it presents itself to us today.” Citing recent events and unsympathetic or anti-Jewish remarks made by German and Polish leaders, the President of the World Zionist Organization built his case for the Jewish need for immigration to Palestine by pointing to the growing number of Jews “for whom the world is divided into places where they cannot live, and places into which they cannot enter.”¹ This was fully two years before the notorious nationwide “Kristallnacht” pogroms in

Germany and Austria, which gave notice to the world of the drastic plans the Nazi régime really intended for the Jews of Europe. Within a few years, Jews in Nazi-run territories were subjected to disenfranchisement, round-ups, ghettoization, deportations, firing squads, and ultimately industrial-scale murder which resulted in the death of two-thirds of Europe's 9 million Jews.²

In this chapter we explore the connections that have been made between (i) the Holocaust (in Hebrew, *Shoah*) and the pre-1948 Zionist–Arab conflict, (ii) the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel (independence, or *atzma'ut*, in Hebrew), and (iii) the Jewish Holocaust (*Shoah*) and the Palestinian catastrophe (*Nakba*, in Arabic).³

From the 1930s until today, Jews, Palestinians, and Arabs have used and misused the Holocaust in their arguments over whose rights are being fulfilled or denied in their contest over Palestine/Israel. In the cross-fire of arguments, there has been no shortage of contentious parallels, comparisons, or “lessons” deduced from that unprecedented event in human history.⁴ In our own discussion, we shall try to steer clear of gratuitous misuse and misappropriation – even while conveying as accurately as possible how the parties themselves may at times have been guilty of just that.⁵

In [Chapter 5](#) we saw evidence of how events in Europe began to have their impact on Palestine's Arab and Jewish communities, especially with the sharp increase in Jewish immigration in the wake of Hitler's 1933 takeover in Germany. Controversies still persist over a number of issues. Both Jews and Palestinian Arabs, each for their own reasons, raise disturbing questions about why *other* countries – especially the USA and the underpopulated British dominions – were not more generous in easing quotas and visa restrictions, and welcoming Jewish refugees. Year-by-year comparisons for Jewish immigration to the US and to Palestine for 1933–1946 are given in [Table 6.1](#).

Table 6.1 *Jewish immigration to USA and Palestine, 1933–1946.*

Source: Adapted from: *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948* (ed. Walid Khalidi). Beirut, 1971; 2nd printing, Washington, DC, 1987, Appendix VI, 855; Great Britain, *Supplement to Survey of Palestine, Notes Compiled for the Information of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, June 1947*. HMSO: 1947, reprinted 1991 by the Institute for Palestine Studies, Washington, DC, 17; *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol. 48 (1946–1947), 610, at http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1946_1947_13_Statistics.pdf (accessed 19 November 2018).

| Year | Jewish immigrants to USA | Jewish immigrants to Palestine |
|---------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1933 | 2 372 | 30 327 |
| 1934 | 4 134 | 42 359 |
| 1935 | 4 837 | 61 854 |
| 1936 | 6 252 | 29 727 |
| 1937 | 11 352 | 10 536 |
| 1938 | 19 736 | 12 868 |
| 1939 | 43 450 | 16 405 |
| 1940 | 36 945 | 4 547 |
| 1941 | 23 737 | 3 647 |
| 1942 | 10 608 | 2 194 |
| 1943 | 4 705 | 8 507 |
| 1944 | 28 551 | 14 464 |
| 1945 | 38 119 | 12 751 |
| 1946 | 26 795 ^a | 7 851 |
| TOTAL: | 261 593 | 258 037 |

^a January to June.

Another question still disputed by observers and historians is whether leaders of the Zionist movement are to be blamed for not placing the elementary humanitarian value of saving lives during the Nazi period ahead of the political advantages of using the Jewish refugee plight as an argument for strengthening

the Zionist claim to, and the existing Jewish *yishuv* in, Palestine. These are indeed major controversies worthy of profound ethical and historiographical investigation, but they go beyond the framework of the present study.⁶

In the pages that follow, we shall trace the spillover of the European Jewish crisis onto the situation in Palestine as the nationalist rivalry between the two communities became ever more acute. The immediate impact on Palestine of the rise of Nazism in Europe was plain enough to see. To the mounting insecurity of Jewish communities in various European states was added the huge disappointment that very few countries were willing to intervene to protect the targeted minorities or to welcome refugees. This was especially obvious after the pathetic results of the July 1938 Evian Conference that was convened to mobilize resources for receiving Jews seeking to emigrate from Europe. As a result, more and more Jewish leaders around the globe came to view Palestine as the main, if not the only, shores of their salvation.⁷

Not surprisingly, the massive increase in the Jewish population sparked Palestinian Arab fears of being overrun by Jewish newcomers. These fears, as we noted in [Chapter 5](#), were a contributing factor to the outbreak of the 1936 Rebellion. In addition, the appeal of Nazi and Fascist movements and ideologies grew stronger among Arab nationalists who came to view the British and French colonial powers, along with world Jewry and the Zionist movement in Palestine, as their prime enemies. Indeed, within a few years al-Haj Amin al-Husayni, Mufti of Jerusalem and exiled leader of the Palestinian Arab national movement, would seek to ally himself with the Third Reich.⁸ This constellation of anti-Jewish forces resonated, in its turn, among the Jews of Palestine, increasing their sense of vulnerability and common fate, as illustrated by the Hebrew national poet Haim Nahman Bialik's use of phrases like "the entire world is my gallows" in his writings of the period.⁹

In the months and years following the issuance of MacDonald's statement of British policy in May 1939,

Zionist representatives and supporters lobbied with increased intensity among Western politicians and diplomats for the abrogation of the White Paper's restrictions on Jewish immigration so that Palestine could better serve as a refuge for those seeking to flee the horrors of Nazi Europe. In May 1942, an emergency Zionist conference convened at the Biltmore Hotel in New York and passed resolutions calling for immediate mass immigration to *Eretz-Israel*, and also for the postwar creation of a Jewish "commonwealth" (i.e. state) in an undivided Palestine.¹⁰ Going beyond a repetition of the Zionists' official rejection of the 1939 White Paper policy, the Biltmore resolutions constituted the first overt and full Zionist demand for *statehood* – not merely a "national home," and not merely in a *part* of partitioned Palestine. The Holocaust was immediate in the minds and hearts of the delegates assembled at this emergency Zionist conference. As American Zionist leader Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver argued at the time:

We cannot truly rescue the Jews of Europe unless we have free immigration to Palestine. We cannot have free immigration into Palestine unless our political rights are recognized there. Our political rights cannot be recognized unless our historic connection to the country is acknowledged and our right to rebuild our national home is affirmed. The whole chain breaks if one of our links is missing.¹¹

The logic of this appeal is an eloquent example of the seventh of our selected core arguments in dispute: *What linkage, if any, should be made between the destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust and the question of who should rule Palestine/Israel?* Contrary to the Zionist position outlined above, Arab reaction was to seek to detach, as much as possible, the struggle for Palestine from the European Jewish question. In the concluding pages of *The Arab Awakening*, composed in late 1937 or early 1938, George Antonius was already acutely aware of the impact the Jewish tragedy would have on the struggle for Palestine:

The relief of Jewish distress must be sought elsewhere than in Palestine, for the country is too small to hold a larger increase of population, and it has already borne more than its fair share. It is for Great Britain who has taken the lead in this work of charity at Arab expense to turn to the vast resources of her empire and to practise there some of the charity she has been preaching....

The treatment meted out to Jews in Germany and other European countries was, in Antonius's words, "a disgrace to its authors and to modern civilisation." But

to place the brunt of the burden upon Arab Palestine is a miserable evasion of the duty that lies upon the whole of the civilised world. It is also morally outrageous. No code of morals can justify the persecution of one people in an attempt to relieve the persecution of another. The cure for the eviction of the Jews from Germany is not to be sought in the eviction of the Arabs from their homeland; and the relief of Jewish distress may not be accomplished at the cost of inflicting a corresponding distress upon an innocent and peaceful population.¹²

Seven years later, in the Fall of 1944, the foundations of the League of Arab States were laid and resolutions in support of the Palestinians were passed at a conference in Alexandria, Egypt, repeating earlier Arab calls for "the cessation of Jewish immigration, the preservation of Arab lands, and the achievement of independence for Palestine." While declaring their regret over "the woes which [had] been inflicted upon the Jews of Europe by European dictatorial states," delegates to the Alexandria conference echoed Antonius's plea that "the question of these Jews should not be confused with Zionism, for there can be no greater injustice and aggression than solving the problem of the Jews of Europe by another injustice, i.e. by inflicting injustice on the Arabs of Palestine."¹³ During a meeting aboard a US warship in the Red Sea in early 1945, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought – in vain – to convince Saudi Arabia's King Ibn Sa'ud to support the opening of the doors of

Palestine so as to provide a refuge for Jewish survivors of Nazi Europe. The Arab monarch insisted stiffly that the European Jewish tragedy would have to be solved by the nations of Christian Europe.¹⁴

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, the fate of Jewish Holocaust survivors, many of whom were languishing in displaced persons (“DP”) camps, overshadowed all efforts to resolve the already intense intercommunal conflict between Palestinian Arabs and the Jewish *yishuv*. During the three remaining years of the British Mandate, militant Jewish groups resorted increasingly to anti-British and anti-Arab terror attacks, declaring their own “Jewish Revolt” against British rule and cooperating with the mainstream *Hagana* to create a temporarily unified “Jewish Resistance Movement.”¹⁵ Zionist underground groups also organized secret operations and boatlifts to ferry survivors to the shores of Palestine through a British naval blockade. Only a few ships got through, and many Jewish refugees were caught and sent to be interned in British camps on the nearby island of Cyprus. These events became dramatized for the American and European publics through effective media coverage, especially in the case of the ship *Exodus 1947*, whose passengers were returned to European soil.¹⁶

As sincerely and as passionately as some came to adopt the view that the only salvation for European Jewish refugees was to throw open the gates of Palestine, Arabs and Palestinians continued to protest that the Holocaust was a Christian-European and global problem that needed an international solution, one to be undertaken mainly by European powers and their allies. But such arguments were unable to win over Western audiences, most of whom came to support a Zionist/Palestine solution for the survivors of the Holocaust. US president Harry Truman commissioned his representative on the Inter-Governmental Committee on Refugees, Earl G. Harrison, to visit the DP camps and to report back on the situation and wishes of the internees. Harrison’s report, which unsurprisingly affirmed that almost all of them desired to go to Palestine, influenced the president to

press publicly for Great Britain to immediately admit 100 000 Jewish refugees to Palestine.¹⁷ The Palestinians' main contention, that solving the problem of European Jewish survivors by sending them to Palestine was unjust, fell on deaf ears.

The Anglo–American Committee of Inquiry

In response to growing criticism over their policies on Palestine and Jewish refugees, and coinciding with greater direct American involvement in dealing with the aftermath of war in Europe, British policy-makers in October 1945 agreed to set up an Anglo–American Committee of Inquiry (AACI). The Committee was co-chaired by US Judge Joseph C. Hutcheson and Sir John E. Singleton of Britain, and was composed of six American and six British members. Its first public hearings were held in early 1946 in Washington DC and London. During February members of the Committee visited Europe, including DP camps, before concluding with March meetings in Cairo, Jerusalem, and Arab capitals, gathering submissions and testimonies from British, Arab, and Jewish representatives.¹⁸

Partly because it would be overtaken by events and by a United Nations report 16 months later, the *AACI Report* of May 1946 is not particularly well remembered today. But its recommendations – surprisingly unanimous, given sharp official Anglo–American disagreements over how to deal with both the refugee and Palestine issues – are worth reviewing here. They offer important insights into the positions of the rival contestants as they stood deadlocked in 1945–1946, especially under the added weight of the postwar European situation.¹⁹

To the great dismay of Arab and Palestinian spokesmen, the AACI clearly and deliberately linked, rather than divorced, the issues of Holocaust survivors and the future of Palestine. The *Report* specifically proposed, as both a humanitarian and political gesture, the immediate

entry into Palestine of 100 000 Jewish survivors. As for constitutional arrangements, the Committee sidestepped both partition (as Peel had proposed nine years earlier) and the unitary state (consistently demanded by Arab spokesmen) and recommended instead that the future government of Palestine be based on non-domination and “binational” principles:

- i. That Jew shall not dominate Arab and Arab shall not dominate Jew in Palestine.
- ii. That Palestine shall be neither a Jewish state nor an Arab state ... Palestine ... must be established as a country in which the legitimate national aspirations of both Jews and Arabs can be reconciled without either side fearing the ascendancy of the other. In our view this cannot be done under any form of constitution in which a mere numerical majority is decisive, since it is precisely the struggle for a numerical majority which bedevils Arab–Jewish relations....[20](#)

Such a radical recommendation testifies to the impact on the commissioners of a small but articulate group of Jewish intellectuals that included world-renowned philosopher Martin Buber and Hebrew University president Dr. Judah L. Magnes, members of the *Ihud* Association, a successor to the *Brit-Shalom* group active in the late 1920s. Today’s discussions over the one-state versus the two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians can look back to the *AACI Report* as the greatest achievement of advocates of what was then called a binational (one-state) solution, although the use of terminology has shifted over the years.

As we shall see, the Committee’s proposals were soon overtaken by events, leading to other proposals more palatable to the great powers.

UNSCOP and the Creation of Israel

Even before the outbreak of World War II, Adolf Hitler's successful takeover of Germany helped to convince many formerly non-Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews to appreciate, if not embrace, the Zionist "option" as vital for their physical salvation. For Zionist leaders and ideologues, Hitler and the Holocaust were the terrible proof of the correctness of Herzl's theory and the urgent need for a Jewish state in Palestine. Deriving little comfort from this confirmation of the Zionist thesis, many were overcome with grief by the war's end, knowing that, for millions already murdered, a Jewish state would come too late. From 1946 to 1948, little else seemed to matter to Jewish community leaders as they mobilized for what they regarded as a life-and-death campaign to turn Palestine into a Jewish state that could welcome those who managed to survive the horrors of the war.

During the postwar period, the linkage between the questions of Jewish DPs in Europe and the future of contested Palestine was indeed a central focus of public discussion, offering the Zionist movement an unprecedented advantage in garnering world sympathy in a contest that the Palestinian Arabs simply could not win. In February 1947 the British returned the Palestine problem to the United Nations General Assembly, which proceeded in May to appoint the final investigative body of the period: an 11-member United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP).

Following the familiar pattern of previous commissions, the Special Committee gathered evidence (some of which was simply updated versions of material submitted a year earlier to the AACI) and heard testimony from mid-June to late July 1947. UNSCOP's visit to Palestine came exactly at the right time for Committee members to witness, firsthand, the arrival and subsequent deportation of survivors aboard the refugee-laden ship *Exodus 1947*.²¹ Owing to a boycott declared by Palestinian leaders, the Committee heard testimony only from non-Palestinian Arab representatives in Beirut and Amman.²² It had been decided in advance that UNSCOP would *not* visit the camps in Europe (as the AACI had

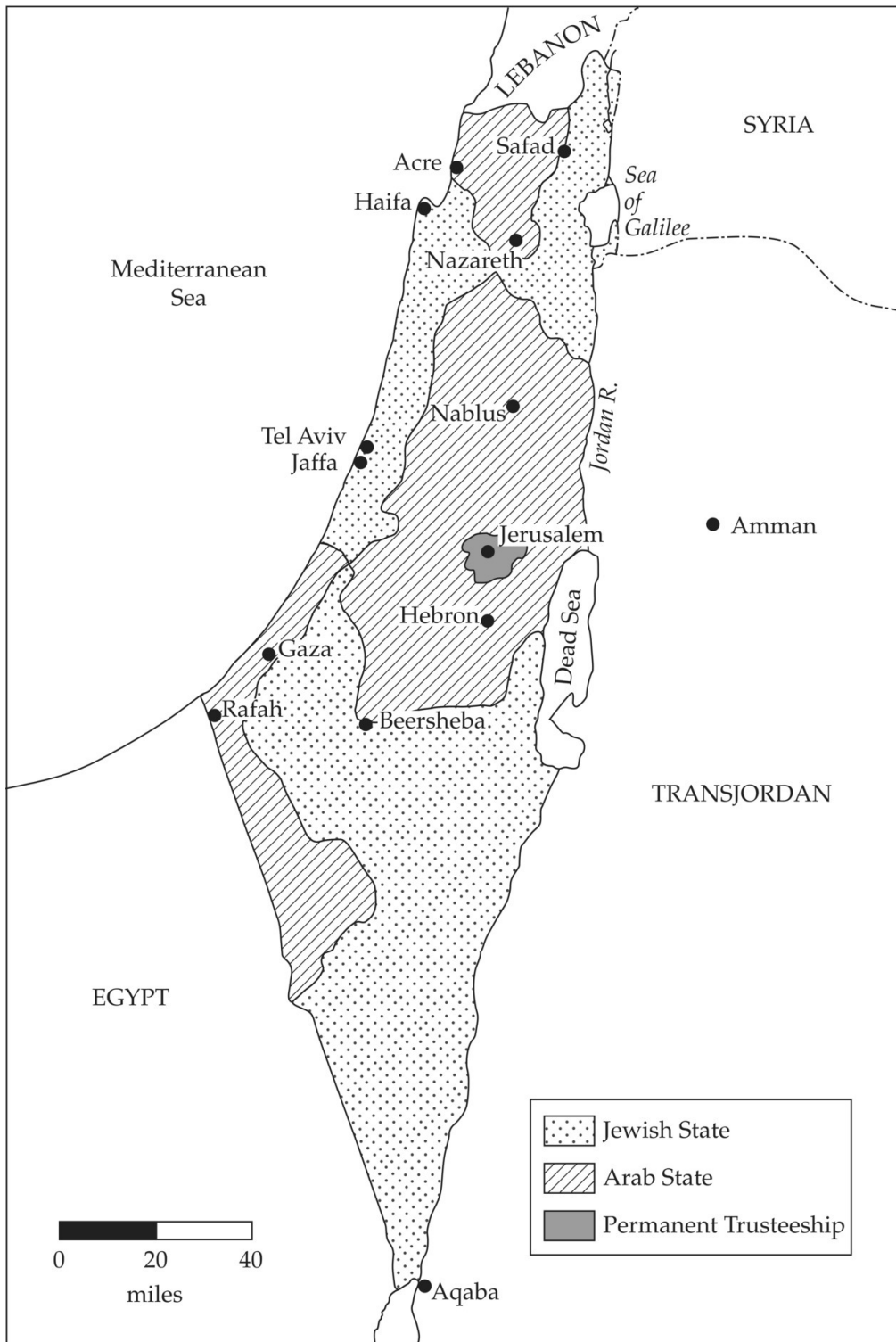
done), but several members nevertheless organized unofficial side-trips to Indersdorf, Hahne, and other DP camps while the Committee based itself in Geneva to complete the writing of its *Report*.²³

The majority *Report* submitted by UNSCOP on 31 August 1947 recommended the partition of Palestine into independent Jewish and Arab states and a *corpus separatum* for Jerusalem under international administration, to be bound by economic union.²⁴ There can be no doubt that Committee members were affected, as the AACI had been, by the plight of European Jewish Holocaust survivors. The determination of which lands, and how much territory, should be accorded to the proposed Jewish state was influenced not only by the vaunted creative abilities of the Jews to “make the desert bloom” but also by the need to absorb the expected hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors. In the end, after debate and slight amendments, the boundaries of the proposed Jewish state would comprise 55% of the land surface of Mandatory Palestine, including the largely unpopulated Negev Desert. Its population would comprise roughly 500 000 Jews and 400 000 Arabs – a problematically large Arab minority by any standard.

During September, October, and November, 1947, discussions ensued in committees and in the plenary of the UN General Assembly meeting at Lake Success, NY. Public debates over both technicalities and principles were accompanied by extensive behind-the-scenes lobbying in UN corridors as well as with the foreign ministries and home governments of many member-states. The contrast between pro-Palestinian and pro-Zionist accounts of these fateful months is dramatic. Pro-Arab narratives portray strong-arm tactics ruthlessly wielded by Zionists and their powerful (often American) supporters to push weak or wavering small states to vote in favor of partition.²⁵ Pro-Israeli accounts depict the whole process as a lobbying campaign waged by “a small, feeble people, without sovereignty or influence” fighting against “overwhelming” odds to win statehood through the required two-thirds vote in the General Assembly.²⁶

Even after discounting hyperbolic and propagandistic excesses, there remains a large gap between the contested accounts of how the UN partition plan came to be adopted, with Palestinians and their supporters claiming foul play and Zionists/Israelis viewing the achievement as a valiant uphill struggle against heavy odds. Another question that continues to receive varying answers is the extent to which Western guilt for what had happened to the Jews in the Holocaust was a factor affecting the ultimate voting decisions of UN member-states.²⁷

On 29 November 1947, the UNSCOP proposals were finally adopted, with slight modification, in General Assembly Resolution 181 by a vote of 33 in favor, 13 against, with 10 abstentions (see [Map 6.1](#)).²⁸ Among other things, this controversial landmark decision laid the moral foundations for what would later become known as the two-state solution (see [Chapter 13](#)).²⁹ Zionists at the time were elated by the result, while Palestinians and Arabs were outraged, vowing to defend Arab Palestine from what they considered the unjust imposition of a Jewish state in their homeland. More than the perceived unfairness and particulars of the proposed plan and map, Palestinians objected in principle to an outside body, the United Nations, forcing the demands of a minority against the wishes of the indigenous majority. This brings us to recognize, as the eighth of our selected core arguments: *Was UNGA Resolution 181 (Partition) a legitimate exercise of the authority of the United Nations in international law, and were the Arab states and the Palestinians wise to reject it?*



Map 6.1 United Nations Partition Plan, 1947.

Like the earlier unresolved questions over the legality of the Mandate for Palestine, the chief protagonists of the first part of this debate tend to be experts in international law. Anyone venturing into the legalistic niceties and Latin principles invoked by these experts

should not be surprised to discover that many of these lawyers are only human, and can often be intensely partisan commentators who see few shades of gray between the competing positions. Thus, pro-Palestinian advocates, echoing the minority arguments raised during the debates at Lake Success in the Fall of 1947, challenge the legality of the UN to force a solution that was contrary to the expressed wishes of the majority of the population. The General Assembly, they argue, lacked the power (held by the Security Council) to *enforce* its decisions by applying sanctions; its powers were only to *recommend*.³⁰

Taking the contrary legalistic position, pro-Israeli experts argue that Resolution 181 was a just and legitimate one, and register a countercriticism against the Arab states for defying the expressed will of the United Nations when they chose to attack Israel in May 1948.³¹ The absence of any UN sanctions against the Arab states for their invasion of Palestine became, for Israel and its supporters, the first example of a litany of criticisms of the alleged anti-Israel bias of the world body, tempering their jubilation at the historic vote of 29 November 1947 which had recognized the Jews' right to a sovereign state in part of Palestine.³²

Other, more political/historical, arguments flow from this crucial legal debate. Israelis and their supporters criticize the Palestinians and the Arab states by portraying their rejection of the UN partition plan as proof of aggressive attitudes and warlike intentions. A corollary is that, by their refusal to accept a partitioned Arab state in part of Mandatory Palestine and their attempt to block the creation of the Jewish state as proposed by Resolution 181, the Arabs and Palestinians are themselves to blame for the Arab–Israeli war of 1948 and must bear full responsibility for all its negative consequences – i.e. loss of territory to Israel, loss of the opportunity to create a Palestinian state, and especially the lot of the Palestinian refugees. We will discuss this later in this chapter, and again in [Chapter 12](#) under the heading of “Missed Opportunities.”

War: *Atzma'ut* and *Nakba*

The outbreak of the war, known to Israelis as the War of Independence (*Milhemet ha-Atzma'ut*) and to Palestinians as the Catastrophe (*al-Nakba*), can be dated alternatively as 30 November 1947 (the day after the UNGA passed Resolution 181) or 15 May 1948, when the Provisional Government of Israel declared its independence on the day of the departure of the British, precipitating an attack by Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian forces. Fighting continued, off and on, until early 1949. The war took the lives of some 6000 Israelis – a heavy proportion of the total population, 13 000–16 000 Palestinians, and 2000–2500 other Arabs, with many additional thousands of wounded.³³

Israelis and their supporters have often portrayed the crossing by these armies of the frontiers of the former Mandatory Palestine as not only a violation of UN Resolution 181 but also the launching of a war of extermination, with blood-curdling rhetoric about “driving the Jews into the sea.” From the perspective of the Palestinians and the Arab states, this external military intervention was an effort to save the Arab portions of Palestine from being overrun by superior Zionist forces.³⁴ Palestinians participated as members of local militias without much central military or political coordination. Adding to the confusion were troops sent under the auspices of the Arab League (the Arab Liberation Army [ALA], led by Fawzi al-Qawuqji³⁵) and bands recruited by the Muslim Brethren in Egypt. The armies of Lebanon and Iraq also took part in the fighting on limited fronts, while Yemen and Saudi Arabia sent token contingents.

The deeper perceptions and self-views of Palestinians, Arabs, and Israelis in this war are starkly different, and have often been oversimplified. In the mainstream Israeli narrative of *Milhemet ha-Atzma'ut*, the beleaguered and poorly armed few triumphed against the well-armed and better-equipped many, just as the Biblical David had bravely taken on and slain the mighty

Goliath. The new Israelis, in this narrative, narrowly escaped annihilation only by their own valiant efforts.³⁶ On the other side of the barricades, high-flown rhetoric nourished a different narrative, that of an Arab world confidently expecting to rebuff this latest “Crusader” onslaught.³⁷ But Palestinian and Arab accounts of the actual fighting show themselves confronting better-organized and highly motivated Zionist militias who had for years been secretly training and arming themselves in preparation for this day,³⁸ while they themselves were ill prepared, poorly led, and disorganized. For one critical Palestinian-American historian, the Palestinians’ disastrous military performance during 1947–1949 was also “a tragic epilogue to the shattering defeat of 1936–39,” while the behavior of the Arab states in this war followed the pattern set in the late 1930s, when they had first assumed the political initiative and responsibility for the Palestine cause – with “each major Arab state ... follow[ing] its own line and seek[ing] to serve its own interests, generally with disadvantageous consequences for the Palestinians.”³⁹

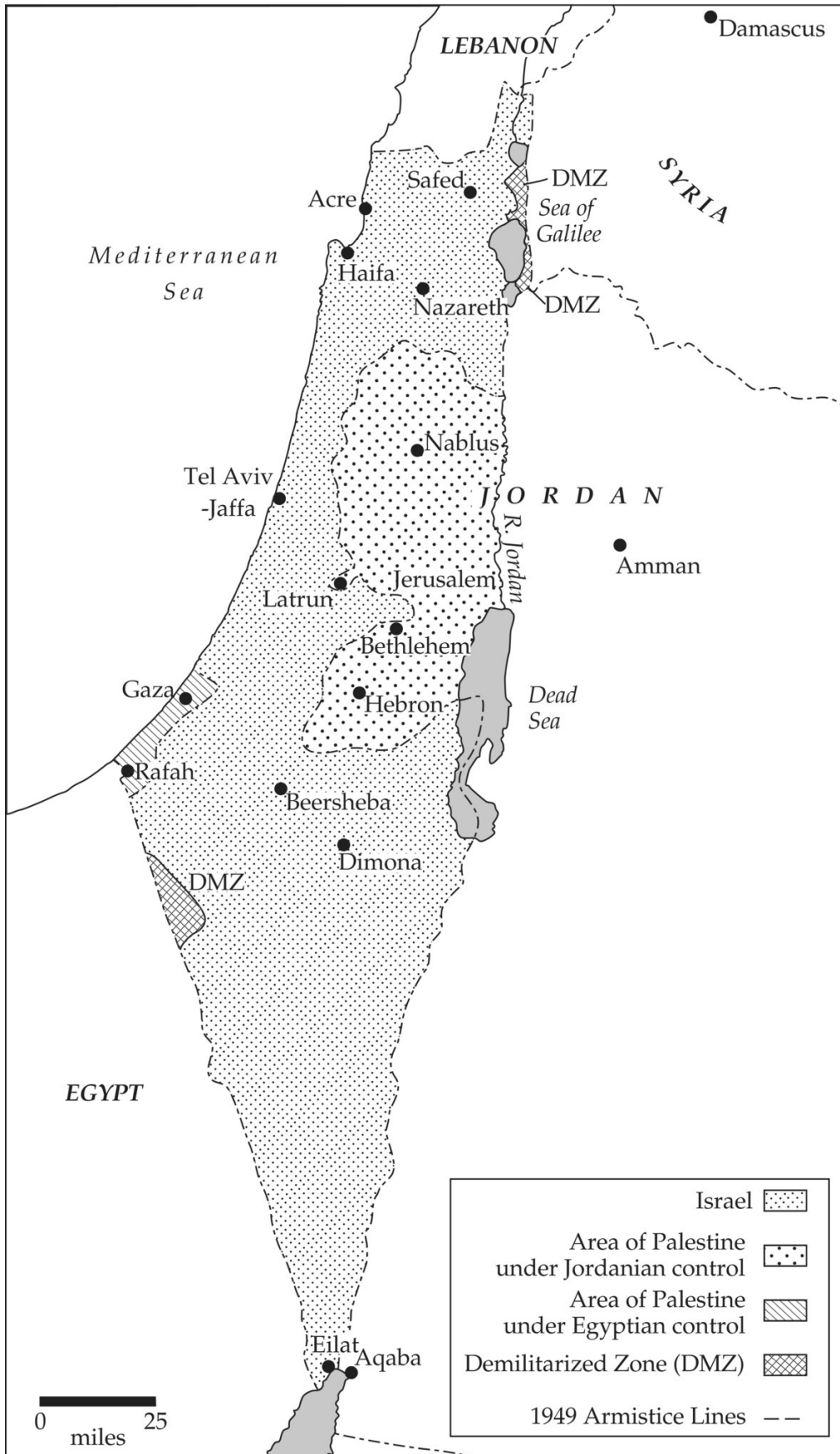
Recent research by historians has attempted to cut through the competing propaganda and self-views as underdog to establish more accurate and realistic estimates of the balance of forces during various stages of the 1947–1949 Arab–Israeli war for Palestine. Most historians now tend to discount the Israeli self-view that they were the “few against the many” in this war. While the entire Arab world by population and land mass does appear overwhelming in 1947 when juxtaposed with the tiny Jewish *yishuv* numbering between 600 000 and 650 000, the effective fighting forces doing battle on the ground were more favorable to the Zionist side. For example, during the first stage of the war (sometimes labeled the “civil war”), before the invasion of regular Arab armies, *Hagana*, and other Zionist militias registered some crucial strategic victories over the local Palestinian fighters and ALA forces, benefiting from better motivation, coordination under a central command, and superior numbers, in the range of almost

50 000 Jews (including reserves) against fewer than 10 000 Arab fighters.⁴⁰ For the first weeks of the fighting, however, Zionist forces were not as well equipped as those fielded by the Arab states.

Another controversy about the conduct of the war takes one step further the core argument over the British role that we examined in [Chapter 4](#). In the Zionist–Israeli view, Britain after 1947 continued to supply and provide diplomatic cover for its main Arab state clients, Jordan and Iraq, thereby encouraging them in their warlike ambitions and ultimate assault on the incipient Jewish state. Yet, among Palestinians there is no corresponding expression of gratitude toward the British for being helpful allies in any way. Was it not British bayonets, Palestinians asked, that had provided three decades of support for the Jewish national home to grow to the point of being able militarily to take over the country? Palestinians also blame the British governor of Haifa for colluding with *yishuv* leaders and *Hagana* officers in helping the latter take over the mixed city in April 1948.⁴¹ An even more serious denunciation is reserved for British collusion with King Abdullah of Jordan (and indirectly with the Zionists) by giving His Majesty’s Government’s (HMG’s) blessing to his plan to annex portions of the West Bank, thereby preventing the creation of a Palestinian state that might have been led by the Mufti (then in exile in Cairo) or his allies.⁴² Arabs also blamed other outsiders for the success of the Zionists in the war: the USA in particular, the Soviet Union to a lesser extent, and Zionist agents operating in both countries who provided manpower and smuggled arms that supported and fueled the Zionist militias in their military takeover of lands beyond the UN-recommended partition borders.⁴³

This first Arab–Israeli war resulted in the creation of the sovereign state of Israel, which was accepted into membership of the United Nations in May 1949. After four General Armistice Agreements were signed with Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon in 1949, the frontiers of the new state of Israel extended beyond those

recommended in the UN partition plan to cover approximately 78% of the area of former Mandatory Palestine. The territory that might have become a Palestinian Arab state under the 1947 UN partition plan now lay in fragments. Although British, American, and United Nations officials would continue for several years thereafter to refer in their documentation and speechmaking to an entity called “Palestine,” by mid-1949 the territory once known under that name was parceled out among the new state of Israel, Jordan (the West Bank, annexed in 1950), and Egypt (the Gaza Strip) (see [Map 6.2](#)).



Map 6.2 Israel and Her Neighbours, 1949–1967.

The Catastrophe, *al-Nakba*, left the Palestinians with the loss of a homeland, the destruction of their society, and the displacement (whether by flight or expulsion) of more than half the Arab population (between 650 000 and 750 000 people). These latter Palestinians became refugees, stateless, the wards of a new UN agency known as UNRWA.⁴⁴ For the next two decades they would be known internationally as the “Arab refugees” – with the term “Palestinian” receding into the background. The refugees’ right to return to their homes or be compensated was recognized in Article 11 of UN General Assembly Resolution 194, passed on 11 December 1948.⁴⁵ But, for a series of complex reasons summarized below, the Palestinian refugees and their descendants still exist today, and their rights under this resolution remain unimplemented.

One of the most contentious of the core arguments that emerged during the first Arab–Israeli war was: *How did Palestinians become refugees in 1948–1949? And why have they remained refugees for so long?* Politicians, propagandists, and historians have focused much energy over the years trying to establish whether the Palestinians became refugees as a result of voluntary flight, a by-product of war, or deliberate expulsion at the hands of Zionist and Israeli armed forces. Even today opinion remains sharply divided, with the methods and motives of researchers being challenged as much as the historical facts and arguments themselves.

For years, the official Israeli version of events claimed that most of the Palestinians left their homes voluntarily or under orders from Arab commanders to evacuate temporarily so as to return after the Jews were defeated. This explanation was challenged in the 1960s by an Irish journalist’s examination of BBC monitoring of Arabic radio broadcasts, and later by scholars digging through archive files that began to become accessible in the 1980s.⁴⁶ Pro-Zionist accounts sometimes cite cases of Jews appealing to Arabs to remain – most prominently in the evacuation of the Arab communities in the mixed towns of Haifa and Tiberias in April 1948. The

implication is that these appeals to remain were typical, whereas they were based on unique circumstances and their sincerity remains, to this day, in dispute.⁴⁷ Recent research based on oral history testimonies has tended to discount this blanket indictment of the Arab leadership, and to support the contrary version – viz., that in many cases Palestinian and Arab leaders exhorted the population to remain in place.⁴⁸

Apologists on both sides – those dedicated to proving or disproving Arab or Zionist/Israeli moral-political responsibility for the flight and/or expulsion of the Palestinian population – will selectively bring forth supportive parts of the extensive evidence available, while ignoring or discrediting those accounts that undermine or contradict their thesis. Thus, for example, Efraim Karsh revisited the 1948 war after 60 years, drawing selectively on an impressive array of previously unseen documentation, in large part files from the *Hagana* and Israel Defense Forces (IDF) archives, in order to argue that “none of the 170,000 to 180,000 Arabs fleeing urban centers, and only a handful of the 130,000 to 160,000 villagers who left their homes, had been forced out by the Jews” prior to 14 May 1948.⁴⁹

Such research findings are not dispassionate, but rather are geared to serve in the unfinished battles aimed at proving or refuting the currently pervasive view that Zionist militias and Israeli forces deliberately and systematically expelled the Palestinian population. Critics of Israel’s actions point to a master-plan, the *Hagana’s* “*Tochnit Dalet*” (Plan D), comprehensive and systematic battle orders for capturing and securing Arab-populated areas. Some regard Plan D as proof of the Zionists’ intention to “ethnically cleanse” newly captured lands of their Palestinian population – an intention dating back to hopes and plans since the days of Theodor Herzl across the entire Zionist political spectrum to remove – or “transfer” – the indigenous Arabs to make room for the creation of a Jewish majority population.⁵⁰

One of the most thorough and balanced pieces of research on the refugee question is *The Birth of the*

Palestinian Refugee Problem, published by Israeli “new historian” Benny Morris in 1987, and revised in 2004.⁵¹ Morris’s account included revelations of previously unknown massacres, rape, expulsions, and looting committed by Israeli forces that shocked Israeli and pro-Zionist readers and earned him much notoriety on both sides of the Israel–Palestine divide. But his painstaking research did not lead him to support the thesis that the Palestinians became refugees as a result of an overarching Zionist master-plan for the “ethnic cleansing” of Palestine’s Arab population. In subsequent debates, Nur Masalha and others criticized Morris for failing to follow his own evidence to what they felt was its logical conclusion.⁵² Forced to re-examine his findings and treatment, Morris responded in 2004 to these critics by admitting that pre-1948 support for the idea of “transfer” was more extensive than he had realized, but replying also that “the connection between that support and what actually happened during the war is far more tenuous than Arab propagandists will allow.”⁵³

Faced with these contested interpretations, many of which may remain unresolved, we may conclude that between 1947 and 1949 almost three-quarters of a million Palestinians became refugees as a result of a combination of causes, with varying degrees of shared responsibility among the various actors and combatants:

- Many fled to avoid the “normal” cruelties and brutality of war.
- In some locations, *yishuv*–British cooperation and collusion helped to coerce Palestinians to leave.
- Many fled in extreme panic, especially as a result of the widely publicized (and exaggerated) reports of atrocities committed by the *Irgun* and *Lohamei Herut Israel (LEHI)* attackers on the Palestinian village of Deir Yasin in early April 1948.⁵⁴
- In certain sectors Zionist militias and IDF units deliberately emptied villages and expelled thousands.

- Many Palestinian Arabs left their homes out of demoralization and confusion caused by an absence of effective leadership and discipline within their community.

As for the supplementary question – Why have the Palestinians remained refugees for so long? – it too remains contentious, with all parties pointing the finger of blame at others. While many of the twentieth-century's postwar refugee problems have been either resolved or mitigated by combinations of international humanitarian relief and political accommodation, the Palestinian case is an anomaly whose resolution seems, if anything, more difficult today than it ever was. From time to time, international bodies and actors have sought a formula for compensation, repatriation, or resettlement, but with no breakthrough of the impasse.⁵⁵

Israelis and their supporters lay the blame for the non-resolution of this problem squarely on the Arab states, mainly their refusal to sign full peace treaties (see also [Chapter 7](#)). If they had proceeded with the expected next steps toward peace and normalization, Israel claimed, the signatories to the 1949 armistice agreements could have been able to dispose of outstanding questions including boundaries and refugees. The Arab states' insistence on continuing the state of war and their refusal to recognize and deal with Israel have been, in the Israeli view, a major stumbling block in finding a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem.

In the crossfire of accusations, Israelis and their supporters further blame the Arab states, with the connivance of UNRWA (“a sinecure for bureaucrats and a breeding ground for hatred and irredentism”),⁵⁶ for deliberately and cynically perpetuating the condition of the refugees, so as to

- avoid any humanitarian or political responsibility to resettle and integrate them among their own Arab populations;

- maintain the refugees' bitterness and feelings of revenge, so as to prepare them to one day return (if readmitted) as a "fifth column" to destabilize the Jewish state or (if not readmitted) to serve as saboteurs and *feda'yun* (commandos) to attack Israel, or
- have the refugees serve as a propaganda tool in the Arabs' continuing war against Israel.⁵⁷

Arabs and Palestinians accuse the Israelis of not only having deliberately expelled large numbers of Palestinians but also callously refusing to recognize the Palestinian refugees' internationally sanctioned right, under Resolution 194, to return to their homes or be compensated. Israelis, in response, declined to implement this clause in the UN General Assembly resolution, in part pointing out (as the Arabs did regarding Resolution 181 on partition) that Assembly resolutions have the status of *recommendations* without requiring enforced implementation.

But behind this legalistic Israeli position lay more than mere quibbling or tough bargaining tactics. With the same intensity and conviction as the displaced Palestinians believed they had an uncontestable right to return to their homes, the new Israeli leadership in 1948 and 1949 took a clearly defined position against their return.⁵⁸ In declining the UN Mediator's late July 1948 personal appeal for a gesture to relieve the hardships being endured by the first waves of Palestinian refugees, Israel's new Foreign Minister, Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), wrote to Count Folke Bernadotte conveying his country's argument connecting Arab states' responsibility for the war with the fate of the Palestinian refugees:

Arab mass flight from within Israel and Israel-occupied areas is a direct effect of Arab aggression from the outside.... The Arab Governments and the Great Power [the allusion is to the UK] which espoused their cause cannot have it both ways: do everything they can to undermine and destroy the State of Israel, and then, having failed, require the State of Israel to take over the liability for the results of their own reckless action.

... [T]he Provisional Government [of Israel] is not in a position, as long as a state of war exists, to readmit the Arabs who fled from their homes on any substantial scale.

Sharett, who otherwise embodied a moderate diplomatic approach to Israel's dealings with the Arabs and the Palestinians, went on to elaborate the deeper reasoning behind what soon became the official hard line of Israeli governments against a return of Palestinian refugees:

The Palestinian Arab exodus of 1948 is one of those cataclysmic phenomena which, according to the experience of other countries, changed the course of history. It is too early to say exactly how and in what measure the exodus will affect the future of Israel and of the neighbouring territories. When the Arab States are ready to conclude a peace treaty with Israel, this question will come up for constructive solution as part of the general settlement and with due regard to our counterclaim in respect of the destruction of Jewish life and property. The long-term interests of the Jewish and Arab populations; the stability of the State of Israel and the durability of the basis of peace between it and its neighbours; the actual position and fate of the Jewish communities in the Arab countries; the responsibility of the Arab Governments for their war of aggression and their liability for reparations [— all these] will be relevant to the question of whether, and to what extent and under what conditions, the former Arab residents of the territory of Israel should be allowed to return. For such a comprehensive and lasting peace settlement the Provisional Government of Israel is ever ready, but it holds that it cannot in fairness be required to carry through unilateral and piecemeal measures of peace while the other side is bent on war.⁵⁹

Despite the passage of UNGA Resolution 194 and repeated follow-up resolutions over the years, Israel has consistently rejected any massive return of Palestinian Arab refugees in the spirit of Sharett's remarks quoted above.⁶⁰ From an early point the Israeli position was that it would consider only plans for resettlement (outside of Israel) and/or compensation of refugees, and only within the context of Arab moves toward non-belligerency (e.g. canceling the Arab boycott and blockade of Israel) and eventual comprehensive peace. Israel has offered to consider limited family reunification as a humanitarian issue, but has ruled out any wholesale return by right.

The persistence of the Palestinian refugee issue, still unresolved over so many generations, has created a

major stumbling block for anyone attempting to find a solution to today's Israeli–Arab and/or Israeli–Palestinian conflicts. Since the Oslo breakthrough and the start of direct Israeli–Palestinian negotiations in 1993, the refugees' claimed “right of return” looms large among the obstacles to a comprehensive and durable peace, one of the thorniest unresolved issues in Palestinian–Israeli diplomacy.

Nakba and Shoah: Victims versus Victims, Once Again

As if the Palestinian refugee issue were not intractable enough on its own, it becomes worse when compounded with arguments about the connection between the Holocaust and the struggle for Palestine, i.e. the interlocking of the tragedies of European Jewish refugees and Palestinian Arab refugees. Between 1947 and 1949, during and after the fighting, not one but two forced migrations took place, producing complications that would last for generations; hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled, leaving behind homes and property which the new state of Israel, seeking to alleviate an acute housing shortage, turned over to many of the hundreds of thousands of European Jewish refugees waiting in postwar transit camps, and also to “Arab Jews” who fled their homes and abandoned their assets in Arab and Muslim countries during 1948–1951.⁶¹ More poignantly than any numbers and statistics, the tragedy of individual Jewish and Palestinian families' interlocking stories of loss and displacement has been effectively conveyed in literature and film.⁶²

Many Israelis at the time hoped that this phenomenon would be treated as an “exchange of populations” (as had happened between Greece and Turkey, for example, following World War I), and thus resolve the refugee problem quickly. The Arab states and the Palestinians refused to see the refugee issue (and its proposed solution) in these terms; from their perspectives,

innocent Palestinian Arabs were unjustly being made to pay for the Holocaust, to pay for the sins of Europe.

Israelis and Zionists continue, to this day, to disagree with Palestinians and Arabs over the extent to which the plight of European Jewry during the 1940s should be linked to the Zionist plan for, and claim to, Palestine – our seventh core argument outlined earlier in this chapter. A few intellectuals have been able to break away from the consensus of their respective national communities on this highly emotional issue.⁶³ But, for the vast majority, positions adopted on the connection between the two issues are deeply felt and impervious to contradiction or persuasion, becoming part of the two parties' contrasting national narratives and their reciprocal sense of victimhood. Israel's military victory had brought to the Jews *t'kuma* (redemption) following their ultimate victimization in the *Shoah*. *Atzma'ut* (independence) and statehood changed these Jews and Zionists into the first Israelis. In the Israeli view, the Arabs' aggression and battlefield defeat in 1948 brought on their *Nakba*: the loss of Palestinian lands, the loss of a potential nation-state, and the creation of a sizable refugee population scattered throughout the region and beyond.

This feeling of unfair victimization, caught between the Holocaust and the first Palestine war, has remained deeply rooted among many Palestinians to this day and is highly resistant to explanation or counterargument. Some Palestinians denounce what they regard as Zionist and Jewish manipulation of post-Holocaust guilt in efforts to sidestep legitimate Palestinian claims and concerns; for Raja Shehadeh, the Israelis "had been allowed to get away with their crimes [against Palestinians under occupation] because of the sympathy felt towards them because of the Holocaust. But this emotional dispensation," he hoped, "would eventually run its course."⁶⁴ Even when addressing Jewish Israelis in an empathetic manner 40 years after the events, leading Palestinian–Israeli writer Emil Habibi nevertheless characterized the Holocaust "as the original

sin which enabled the Zionist movement to convince millions of Jews of the rightness of its course” and concluded his essay with the following sentence: “If not for your—and all of humanity’s—Holocaust in World War II, the catastrophe that is still the lot of my people would not have been possible.”⁶⁵

Some may view this situation in terms of Isaac Deutscher’s falling-man/burning building analogy which we quoted in [Chapter 2](#) (in the section “Analogies and Parables”). But most Israelis would refuse to see themselves, and the rescue of a part of endangered European Jewry, as the cause of the Palestinian refugee problem. They would respond that pre-1948 Jewish immigration had mostly benefited the local Arab population, rather than “falling on” and “crippling” it, and that the Arab “sufferer” did far more deadly things than merely “swear revenge” to spark the cycle of violence that came to mark the conflict. For Israelis, the allegory also ignores pre-Holocaust Zionist yearnings as a motive for migrating to Palestine/*Eretz-Israel*. Neither does the falling-man analogy take into account the indifference of the international community that might have opened more doors to fleeing survivors, thereby leading or allowing the jumping man to land elsewhere, without injuring the Palestinian man standing below. And, given the pre- and post-Holocaust Arab rejection of Zionism and Israel, along with periodic resurgences of antisemitism around the globe, Israelis view the Holocaust in a different light. For them it is still today very much an “open wound.”⁶⁶

Notes

- ¹ Weizmann, C. (1984). The Jewish Case, 25 November 1936, *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, series B [Papers], December 1931–April 1952 (ed. B. Litvinoff). Rutgers, NJ/Jerusalem: Transaction Books/Israel Universities Press, paper #22, 100, 102.

- 2 On the November 1938 Kristallnacht pogroms and their significance as a turning point in the Holocaust, see Dawidowicz, L.S. (1986). *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945*, 99–106. New York, etc.: Bantam Books.
- 3 Parts of this chapter are drawn from my article, Caplan, N. (1999). The Holocaust and the Arab–Israeli conflict. In: *So Others Will Remember: Holocaust History and Survivor Testimony* (ed. R. Headland), 82–97. Montréal: Véhicule Press.
- 4 I use the term “unprecedented” advisedly, as Professor Yehuda Bauer does, to avoid the problematics and polemics of the “unique-versus-universal” debates regarding the Holocaust. See Bauer, Y. (2001). *Rethinking the Holocaust*. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press.
- 5 See Grob, L. and Roth, J.K. (eds.) (2008). *Anguished Hope: Holocaust Scholars Confront the Palestinian–Israeli Conflict*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- 6 For a sampling of the latter controversies, see Grob, L. and Roth, J.K. (eds.) (2008). *Anguished Hope, Introduction*, lviii–lvix, 853–855; Sykes, C. (1965). *Crossroads to Israel, 1917–1948*. Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, [Midland paperback, 1973], 187–189, 377–380; Segev, T. (1993). *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*. New York: Hill and Wang; Teveth, S. (1996). *Ben-Gurion and the Holocaust*. New York: Harcourt Brace; Porat, D. (1990). *The Blue and the Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust, 1939–1945*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Zertal, I. (1998). *From Catastrophe to Power: Holocaust Survivors and the Emergence of Israel*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press; Zertal, I. (2005). *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 7 Sykes, C. *Crossroads to Israel*, 183–189.

- 8** Porath, Y. (2015). *The Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1929–1939: From Riots to Rebellion*, vol. 76, 119. London: [Frank Cass, 1977] Routledge RLE; Nicosia, F.R. (1985). *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question*. Austin: University of Texas Press; Mattar, P. (1992). *The Mufti of Jerusalem: al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, rev. ed. New York: Columbia University Press, ch. 8; Elpeleg, Z. (1993). *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement* (transl. D. Harvey) (ed. S. Himelstein). London: Frank Cass, ch. 2; Sela, A., Arab nationalists and Nazi Germany, (1939–1945). *So Others Will Remember* (ed. R. Headland), 70–81.
- 9** Shapira, A. (1999). *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (trans. W. Templer), 225. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- 10** Biltmore Program, 1942, reproduced in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 55–57, available online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2010/08/document-s6.html>. See also Bauer, Y. (1970). *From Diplomacy to Resistance: A History of Jewish Palestine, 1939–1945*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, ch. 6.
- 11** Silver, A.H. (1969). Toward American Jewish unity. In: *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (ed. A. Hertzberg), 597. New York: Atheneum; A classic exposition of this case was also made at the time for the general American public by Dr. Weizmann, C. (1942). Palestine’s role in the solution of the Jewish problem. *Foreign Affairs* 20 (2): 324–338, reprinted in Gendzier, I.L. (ed.) (1969). *A Middle East Reader*, 311–325. Indianapolis/New York: Pegasus.
- 12** Antonius, G. (1946). *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, 411. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons [orig. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938]. For a post facto version of the same arguments, see Khalidi, W. (1971). *From Haven to Conquest*:

Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948, Beirut; 2nd printing, Washington, DC, 1987, lv–lvii.

- 13 MacDonald, R.W. (1965). *The League of Arab States: A Study in the Dynamics of Regional Organization*, 317–318. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Furlonge, G. (1969). *Palestine is My Country: The Story of Musa Alami*, 130–137. New York: John Murray; Caplan, N. (2015). *Futile Diplomacy, vol. II: Arab–Zionist Negotiations and the End of the Mandate*. London: [Frank Cass, 1986] Routledge RLE, 131, 176–177, 264–267, 326 (n. 83), 333 (n. 44).
- 14 Eddy, W. (1954). *FDR Meets Ibn Saud*, 510–511. New York: American Friends of the Middle East, quoted in Khalidi, W. *From Haven to Conquest*.
- 15 Britain, G. (Lausanne, 20 April 1946). The Anglo–American Committee of Enquiry Regarding the Problems of European Jewry and Palestine, *Report, 1946*, Cmd. 6808, London: HMSO, 1946, extract on “The Zionist Military Organisations” in Khalidi, W. *From Haven to Conquest*, 595–600; Great Britain, Colonial Office (1946). *Palestine: Statement of Information Relating to Acts of Violence*, Cmd. 6873, 601–612. London: HMSO, 1946, reproduced in *From Haven to Conquest*; Begin, M. (1972). *The Revolt [Story of the Irgun]*. Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, foreword by Rabbi Meir Kahane [orig. New York: Schuman/London: W. H. Allen, 1948/1951]; Bell, J.B. (1977). *Terror Out of Zion: Irgun Zvai Leumi, LEHI, and the Palestine Underground, 1929–1949*. New York: St. Martin’s Press [reissued as *Terror out of Zion: The Fight for Israeli Independence*, with a new introduction by the author and a foreword by Moshe Arens, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996]; Bauer, Y. *From Diplomacy to Resistance*; Elam, Y. (1982). *Haganah, Irgun and ‘Stern’: Who did what?* *Jerusalem Quarterly* 23: 70–78; Cohen, M.J. (1982). *Palestine and the Great Powers, 1945–1948*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, ch. 4.

- 16** These events became immortalized in Leon Uris's best-selling 1958 novel, *Exodus*, and in the 1960 Oscar-winning Otto Preminger Hollywood film of the same name. For some first-person accounts of these refugee-smuggling operations, see Dekel, E. (1973). *Briha: Flight to the Homeland*, transl. from the Hebrew by D. Ettinger (ed. G. Hirschler). New York, Herzl Press; Avriel, E. (1975). *Open the Gates: The Dramatic Personal Story of "Illegal" Immigration to Israel*, preface by Golda Meir. New York: Atheneum; Stone, I.F. (1978). *Underground to Palestine, and Reflections Thirty Years Later* [reprint of the original 1946 edition]. New York: Pantheon; Kaniuk, Y. (1999). *Commander of the Exodus*, transl. Seymour Simckes. New York: Grove Press; Freiberg, D. (2007). *To Survive Sobibor* (trans. B. Doron), 559–599. Jerusalem/New York: Gefen; For some of the historiographic controversies surrounding the Exodus affair, see: Halamish, A. (1998). *The Exodus Affair: Holocaust Survivors and the Struggle for Palestine*. New York: Syracuse University Press; Pappé, I. (2014). *The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge*, 171–173. London/New York: Verso.
- 17** Preliminary Report to President Truman on Displaced Persons in Germany and Austria, August 1945, *Department of State Bulletin* 13 (30 September 1945), 456–463, reproduced in Hurewitz, J.C. (1987). *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East: A Documentary Record 1535–1956*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See also: Cohen, M.J. *Palestine and the Great Powers*, 56–58, 62; Radosh, A. and Radosh, R. (2009). *A Safe Haven: Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*, 92–111. New York: HarperCollins; Judis, J.B. (2014). *Genesis: Truman, American Jews and the Origins of the Arab/Israeli Conflict*, 202–206. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. For a cynical British account of Zionist propaganda and manipulation of the DPs, see Lieut.-General Sir Frederick Morgan, A. (1945–1946). Displaced person in post-war Germany. In: *From Haven to Conquest* (ed. W. Khalidi), 527–548.

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stronger ground than we were.” Eban, *Personal Witness*, 128–131.

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- 37 E.g. Azzam Pasha’s remarks in conversation with Zionist representatives Aubrey (Abba) Eban and David Horowitz, September 1947, discussed and

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7

Israel and the Arab States, 1949–1973

The Palestinian Issue after 1949

The conflict that we saw unfolding in the previous chapters was largely one between Zionists and Palestinians for the control of Palestine/*Eretz-Israel*. After the guns fell silent in 1949, the Palestinians – following a decline that had begun with the suppression of their 1936–1939 revolt – were a spent force, dispersed, leaderless, many living as dependent refugees, and without a territorial base. On maps, what had been Mandatory Palestine disappeared and was replaced by Israel, with smaller pieces of the former Palestine becoming parts of Jordan (the West Bank) and Egypt (Gaza). For the next two decades, specifically Palestinian issues were treated as secondary to a new regional, inter-state conflict involving mainly Israel, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

Because there was no longer a distinct Palestinian people organized in a national movement seeking to create an independent Palestinian state, some people concluded that there was no longer any Palestinian “problem” or “question.” For Israelis, political, military-strategic, and other calculations were now treated in the context of bilateral and multilateral relations among sovereign states. The contest between Zionists/Israelis and Palestinian Arabs – the two rival national communities that had until 1948 been seeking sovereignty over the same territory – became dormant during this period, and would be revived only in the years after 1967 (see [Chapter 8](#)). For several decades after 1949, people spoke of the *Arab–Israeli* rather than the *Israeli–Palestinian* conflict.

In this chapter we examine the changed structure and dynamics of this Arab–Israeli conflict during the quarter-century between 1949 and 1973 – a period marked by three major interstate wars: October 1956 (Israel and Egypt), June 1967 (Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria), and October 1973 (Israel, Egypt, and Syria). The international dimensions of the conflict also changed. Before 1948 the main protagonists had vied with each other under a largely unchallenged British Mandatory power, with the European states and the USA in the background. After World War II, British, French, Americans, and Russians jockeyed with each other in efforts to secure and extend their influence in the region. Indeed, the post-1949 period witnessed a heightened superpower rivalry during the “Cold War” in which the US and the USSR courted states and peoples, seeking alliances in the geostrategically-important Middle East. As was happening elsewhere around the globe, small nations had to make decisions regarding how far to compromise their nominal sovereignty in becoming client states beholden to their American or Soviet patrons for diplomatic, economic, and/or military aid. A new global dimension and new ideological schisms were superimposed onto existing rivalries and conflicts in the region (of which the Arab–Israeli dispute was but one). Powerful external actors pursued their interests in ways that overshadowed and often overrode those of the local parties.

As we have seen, the involvement of the Arab states in the affairs of Palestine that began during the 1936 rebellion brought, in its wake, a series of progressively more adverse consequences for the Palestinians, leading up to and including the Arab states’ ineffective diplomatic performance at the United Nations in 1947 and 1948 and the defeat of their armies (along with Palestinian militias) in 1948–1949. The diplomatic and battlefield victories of the new Jewish state and the loss of Arab Palestine left the post-1948 Arab world marked by political instability, feelings of aftershock and humiliation, but also some self-criticism.¹ The most visible scars could be seen in the loss of territory, the

vanished opportunity to create an independent Palestinian Arab state and – most painfully – the continuing existence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Gaza, mainly in camps run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

In the international arena the “*Palestine* question” was replaced by a relief and humanitarian issue known as “the *Arab* refugee problem.” At the General Assembly, debates on UNRWA’s annual reports and the votes allocating new funding for its refugee relief and educational budgets served as the main platform for considering Palestinian issues. Except for local and regional committees established to represent Palestinian refugees and press for their repatriation (or family reunification), the recovery of their assets (businesses, blocked bank accounts, etc.), or compensation for their abandoned or destroyed property, Palestinians as a community were without recognized or effective leadership.

Two attempts to express Palestinian national consensus and create new political institutions were short-lived and flawed, reflecting the near-total dependency of the Palestinians on their host Arab régimes. In late September 1948, the exiled Mufti and the remnants of his Arab Higher Committee proclaimed the existence of the “All-Palestine Government” based in Gaza, but soon moved its offices to Cairo.² Several months later, a Palestinian congress convened in Jericho to express a “popular” demand – in reality, orchestrated by Abdullah’s supporters – for the Hashemite Kingdom’s annexation of the West Bank (which would come about in 1950).³

The real initiative and responsibility in the political and diplomatic sphere now lay in the hands of the leaders of the Arab states. For the Palestinians, all this amounted to “Arab tutelage”; in the words of Palestinian-American historian Rashid Khalidi, the Palestinians lost their agency:

If they were spoken for at all, they were spoken for by the Arab states, each of which had its own considerations and calculations, all of which were weak ... Even such limited Palestinian efforts to speak for themselves internationally as took place were entirely dependent on the support of the Arab states.⁴

The recovery of Palestine and the return of the refugees became entangled in the inter-Arab politics of the region – the “Arab cold war” described by historian Malcolm Kerr.⁵ Arab politicians and régimes used the Palestine issue as a litmus test of their nationalist and patriotic credentials, or in efforts to boost their regional leadership aspirations. This usually resulted in leaders attempting to “outbid” each other in taking a hard line against Israel, creating additional pressure for radicalization of their political stances.⁶

In the post-1949 period, the phrase “Palestine cause” carried with it both positive and negative associations. On the one hand, the Arab states’ loss in the war against the Jews in 1948–1949 stood out as a badge of shame for the old régimes, several of which were soon replaced. On the other, it represented the Arab states’ pledge to restore Palestinian rights, return the Palestinians to their land, (perhaps) drive the Jews out, and, generally, undo the injustice of 1948.

This heated rhetoric translated into a number of concrete expressions. One was the maintenance of a strict taboo against actions or contacts that would imply recognition of the legitimacy of Israel as a sovereign state. In this spirit, the Arab League created an office in Damascus to promote and monitor an economic boycott (originated by the League in December 1945) of the Jewish state.⁷ During the early 1950s, Arab régimes sometimes found themselves providing limited logistical and military support for cross-border raids (see the section “Low-Intensity Border Warfare, 1949–1956”) carried out by displaced Palestinians living in their midst. These early *feday’un* (guerillas) caused death and injury to Israelis and sabotage of property, periodically provoking

reprisals by Israeli forces against villages and military installations of the host countries – thereby testing the generosity and hospitality of their Arab hosts. The ambivalent and often tense relationships created between the governments of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria and these largely disorganized Palestinians during the 1950s⁸ previewed the even more complicated relations that would develop between guerilla groups that, in later decades, would form the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The escalation of this low-level cross-border fighting during 1954–1956 was also a contributing factor to the outbreak of the second Arab–Israeli war in late 1956.

From Armistice to Non-Peace

On 24 February 1949, on the Greek island of Rhodes, Egypt and Israel signed what would turn out to be the first of four successive General Armistice Agreements (GAAs) governing the belligerent states' military disengagement from the war. At the time, everyone involved in the drawing-up of the armistice accords had anticipated that their duration would be short.⁹ But, as the months and years went by without the expected movement toward peace treaties, the frustrated protagonists would return to wrangle over their interpretations of the 1949 agreements they had signed. Much of the argumentation was legalistic, as the texts of the GAAs offered sufficient ambiguity to allow the parties to draw diametrically opposed conclusions about which side was maintaining or violating the agreements.¹⁰

The inability to transform the 1949 armistice agreements into peace treaties – a deviation from the normal sequence of ceasefire/armistice/peace – was a special feature of the new Arab–Israeli conflict, making it appear more intractable than other similar international disputes. Six issues dominated the tense relations between Israel and the Arab states in the period of “non-peace” following 1949:

1. recognition, legitimacy
2. boundaries, territory
3. refugees
4. Jerusalem
5. freedom of passage through the Suez Canal
6. water.

Given the parties' obstinacy following the signing of the GAAs, Arab, and Israeli positions hardened on these six issues, leaving the leaderless Palestinians sidelined and the refugees without hope of a speedy settlement. From early 1949 to late 1951, the United Nations offered several mechanisms under which the parties were invited to work out their differences. But all efforts undertaken by the Conciliation Commission for Palestine (PCC), created by United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 194 of December 1948, eventually floundered.

Why were the ex-belligerents not able to transform their armistice agreements into peace treaties? And is any party to blame for "missing opportunities" and not converting the temporary armistice into permanent peace? We will look at the second question in [Chapter 12](#), and examine the first here.

In the absence of any progress toward signing Israeli–Arab peace treaties, the UN undertook responsibility for keeping a lid on an inherently unstable situation along the frontiers through the creation of United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization (UNTSO), an umbrella monitoring agency for the Mixed Armistice Commissions (MACs) operating under the terms of each of the four GAAs. Skirmishes and incidents often occurred along the frontiers, especially in disputed areas or zones designated as "demilitarized," leading Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria to submit numerous complaints to their respective MACs, which became inundated with investigations and issuing rulings.¹¹

But it was political, rather than legal or military, considerations that were paramount in characterizing

the nature of the new Arab–Israeli conflict and in explaining the inability of the parties to move from armistice to peace. Predictably, the Arab governments and Israel all adopted hardline positions on the issues of boundaries, refugees, Jerusalem, and recognition during conferences convened by the PCC at Lausanne (1949), Geneva (1950), and Paris (1951). But all United Nations postwar Middle East diplomatic efforts seemed doomed to fail, given the deadlock over the preconditions set down by each party:

- The Arabs regarded the signed armistice agreements as their recognition that the war had ended, but argued that Israel needed to retreat from territory captured beyond the 1947 UN partition map in the 1948–1949 fighting (see [Map 6.2](#)) and allow the return or compensation of refugees *before* they would consider moving to peace and recognizing the new Israeli state, while
- The Israelis viewed their signed armistice agreements as not only having put an end to fighting, but also requiring the next step to be for the parties to negotiate a comprehensive peace package; only in this context would Israel agree to consider territorial adjustments, war reparations, and the question of refugees.

Such was the shape of the stalemate undermining all efforts at negotiation and peacemaking after 1949. For UN purposes, this meant that Arab representatives might cooperate with, and attend conferences convened by, the PCC, but they would refuse to sit at the same table, or affix their signatures to the same document, as Israeli delegates.¹² In these early tests, the only success the Conciliation Commission could record was in the area of its technical work on preparation of the dossier for compensation for refugee assets, the facilitation of some family reunification, and an agreement for the unfreezing of blocked Palestinian bank accounts.¹³

Israel tried to build upon its armistice agreements and its admission to membership in the United Nations in

May 1949, hoping these would lead to recognition by most states and normalization within the world body. By late 1949, 47 states (out of the total 58) had granted recognition and/or established diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.¹⁴ Israeli leaders referred to the GAAs, among other things, as de facto validation of their claims to territory captured during the war and as justification for denouncing Arab actions which implied the continuation of a state of belligerency. Arab spokesmen, for their part, underlined the limited military scope of the documents while bemoaning the imbalance of forces which had produced humiliating or otherwise unsatisfactory agreements.¹⁵ In terms of diplomatic feelers during the 1950s, all overtures from potential Arab negotiators ignored the GAAs and were based either on the November 1947 partition plan or the plan submitted by UN Mediator Count Folke Bernadotte just before his assassination in September 1948.¹⁶ The Israelis, for their part, rejected both these proposals as starting-points, insisting that any negotiations take the status quo, as enshrined in the GAAs, as the appropriate starting-point.¹⁷

The list of post-1949 contested issues, in terms of the six unresolved disputes enumerated above, festered for decades with only unsatisfactory attempts at solutions. Chief among them, the Palestinian refugees became a political football *par excellence*. Their case, along with consideration of the final delineation of mutually recognized frontiers, became stalemated and sidelined as Israel and the Arab states bickered and could not be brought together to negotiate a comprehensive peace. The status of Jerusalem also remained contested, as a PCC subcommittee's recommendations on internationalization and disarmament submitted in September 1949 ran counter to the interests of both Israel and Jordan. The two states that effectively occupied the divided Holy City simply chose to ignore international opinion. Egypt denied free passage through the Suez Canal to ships bound to or from Israel, despite an authoritative UN Security Council ruling in September 1951 backing Israel's interpretation of its

rights to freedom of navigation through this international waterway. United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 95 was never enforced against the Egyptians, who insisted that the armistice had not ended the state of belligerency between themselves and the Israelis but had merely “suspended” the war.¹⁸ On a number of occasions Israel attempted, without success, to test the Egyptian blockade by commissioning a ship to pass through the Suez Canal. On other occasions, it tried, also unsuccessfully, to get the powers to press the issue of Egypt’s non-compliance in the UN Security Council.

Only one diplomatic success can be recorded during this period. A secret and tacit agreement for allocating shares of the Jordan River waters was reached thanks to the laborious efforts of a team of Americans headed by Eric Johnston, a personal emissary of US president Dwight D. Eisenhower. Shuttling between various Middle East capitals between 1953 and 1956, Johnston registered this major practical achievement which had to be kept deliberately low-key and under the political radar during a tense period that would eventually produce the second Arab–Israeli war.¹⁹

Low-Intensity Border Warfare, 1949–1956

One US Secretary of State has quipped: “in the Middle East, peace seems defined as the lull between wars.”²⁰ With Israel and the Arab states in near-permanent diplomatic deadlock after 1949, border friction and bellicose rhetoric escalated from year to year. Each party seemed to be holding firm, not feeling compelled to engage in any peace discussions, waiting it out until such time as the great powers of the United Nations might move to coerce them to consider diplomacy. Some were waiting for a new, more favorable, situation to be created in the wake of the next war which, they felt, was sure to break out sooner or later.

An important backdrop for the 1949–1956 period was a pattern of increasing cross-border Palestinian infiltration and raids by *feday'un* (or *feda'yin*; “self-sacrificers”), mainly from Egyptian-controlled Gaza, matched by Israeli reprisals of increasing severity. Both *feday'un* and Israeli attacks included military and civilian targets, the latter sometimes targeted deliberately, sometimes hit as “collateral damage.” Both Israelis and Arabs suffered civilian casualties and damage to property; the tactics and weapons used by the cross-border raiders were often horrific, seldom as “gentlemanly” as those used in conventional warfare between armies.²¹

Every year thousands of cross-border incidents were reported, along with dozens of deaths and injuries.²² Motives for Arab infiltration into Israel were varied: economic (e.g. harvesting crops on family-owned land that ended up on the Israeli side of the armistice line), sabotage of water pipelines or electricity (politically inspired, to destabilize the new Jewish state), criminal marauding, and terrorist killings of civilians (sometimes “revenge,” sometimes to terrorize). A pattern of unceasing, low-level, cross-border terror attacks increased the level of fear and insecurity in the Israeli public and further hardened existing attitudes in which Arabs were seen as congenital murderers whose aggressive actions had to be countered by stern measures. Among the more gruesome attacks on Israeli civilians were the March 1954 ambush at Ma'aleh Akrabim of a bus traveling from Tel Aviv to Eilat in which the passengers were executed, one by one, and the grenade attack a year later on a wedding party celebrating in the settlement of Patish.

Among Israel's political and military leaders, a policy of retaliation evolved in which the elements of punishment, revenge, and deterrence were all entangled in a primitive “eye-for-an-eye” approach, becoming the latest incarnation of the pattern of violence during the Arab revolt of the 1930s that we explored in [Chapter 5](#), when we examined the core argument: *Is the [Palestinians'] [Arabs'] [Zionists'] [Israelis'] resort to violence justified,*

or is it to be condemned? A series of major Israeli cross-border operations proved to be decisive steps in the countdown to the 1956 Suez/Sinai War: Qibya (October 1953), Nahhalin (March 1954), Gaza (February 1955), as-Sabha (November 1955), Syrian positions along the Sea of Galilee (December 1955), and Qalqilya (October 1956).²³ Each was a response to a provocation (e.g. an attack inside Israel), and each represented a major escalation in terms of death toll, the scale of force used, and the level of military sophistication.

The Qibya raid, a little known but crucial turning-point, offers a good illustration of the security dilemmas and explosiveness of the unstable, no-war-no-peace character of Israel–Arab relations of the 1950s.²⁴ In response to a terrorist attack that killed a mother and two children in the Israeli village of Kfar Yahud, a specially trained Israeli commando force (“Unit 101”) under a young captain, Ariel Sharon, mounted a massive reprisal attack on the West Bank village of Qibya, from which the infiltrators were suspected to have come. During the night of 14–15 October 1953, the Israeli raiders killed between 50 and 60 inhabitants of the village and wounded another 15. Reports disagreed as to whether most of casualties had occurred while people hid in their houses which the Israeli attackers (presuming them empty?) blew up, or whether they had been deliberately massacred by machine-gun fire and grenades, and their houses subsequently blown up.

On the international stage, the scale and brutality of the massacre led to an unprecedented level of condemnation of Israel. Although he loyally used all his rhetorical skills to defend his country’s actions before the UN General Assembly, Israel’s silver-tongued Ambassador Abba Eban admitted privately that he considered Qibya the worst blow to Israel’s standing in world public opinion since the creation of the state, making an even more serious stain on Israel’s reputation than the pre-state massacre of Arabs by Jewish fighters at the village of Deir Yasin.²⁵

But another segment of Israeli opinion was not so critical of the Qibya raid. While regretting the loss of innocent lives, David Ben-Gurion justified the action in a cabinet statement broadcast over Israel Radio. The Israeli prime minister and defense minister (who would shortly begin a brief period of retirement) described the raid as a legitimate retaliation that he hoped would end four years of repeated armed infiltrations, which had by their imperceptible day-by-day nature taken their toll without drawing much serious attention in world capitals.²⁶

The Qibya raid also became the subject of vigorous internal debate and helped propel a crisis within the Israeli political élite, pitting the activist David Ben-Gurion against the (soon-to-be-deposed) foreign minister, Moshe Sharett. In congratulating Ariel Sharon, Ben-Gurion felt that it didn't "make any real difference what [would] be said about [Qibya] around the world. The important thing [was] how it [would] be looked at here in this region." The raid, Ben-Gurion was reported as saying, would "give us the possibility of living here."²⁷ Sharett, who favored diplomacy and the maintenance of world sympathy ahead of knee-jerk, tit-for-tat military retaliations, believed that decisions on reprisals had always to be viewed in the larger context of "the question of peace.... We have to curb our reactions. And the question always remains: Has it really been proven that reprisals bring about the security for which they were planned?" He favored a measured response over excessive retaliation that would only lead, in his view, to inflaming a thirst for revenge and an escalation of violence.²⁸

In the halls of the United Nations Israel's Qibya raid was also the subject of weeks of impassioned speeches and the drafting of resolutions.²⁹ Other border flare-ups followed a similar pattern. Receiving reports of complaints through the channels of UNTSO, the UN Security Council became the scene of dreary and predictable political theater: listening to speeches, complaints, accusations, and counteraccusations, followed by backroom drafting of resolutions and

lobbying among members, sometimes concluded by a vote censuring one or both parties for violating the truce. The United Nations invariably took a critical view of Israel's state-sanctioned retaliations while routinely urging Israel's neighbors to do more to control their frontiers and prevent infiltration. Such attempts at even-handedness did not sit well with many Israelis, who became convinced that the world body was tilting unfairly against them and favoring the Arabs.

The effectiveness of the retaliations policy as a deterrent remained a subject of recurring debate among decision-makers in Israel, among Israel's defenders and detractors abroad, as well as among social scientists.³⁰ Despite the apparent short-term quiet achieved along the frontiers following a particular action, the long-term effect seems to have been to exacerbate the conflict.³¹ One of the few benefits, from an internal Israeli point of view, was that these reprisal actions boosted public morale and relieved the sense of victimization and outrage on the Israeli street. By exacting from the Arabs a "price for spilling Jewish blood," these reprisals contributed to a cycle of revenge and the deepening of mutual animosities.

It has become an enduring pattern of the Arab–Israeli conflict, from the 1950s until today, for Israel's political and military decision-makers to face frequent choices of how to respond to raiders – whether designated "freedom fighters," "martyrs," or "terrorists" – from across the border. Debates over tactics and ethics in the repeating cycles of violence have become a permanent feature of the Israeli–Arab and Israeli–Palestinian conflicts. Each new cross-border raid, bombardment, or attack almost guarantees a future response from the victim, and is also sure to provide more ammunition for those attempting to prove that one party is the aggressor while the other is merely trying to defend itself against the other's aggression. Comically and cynically, it can be seen as a question of complaining: "He hit me back first!"

From War to War, I (1949–1956)

A number of other factors – some external to the region or with little connection to the core struggle for Palestine/Israel – contributed to the outbreak of the second Arab–Israeli war in late October 1956. A crucial change in the regional balance of power came in the summer of 1952 when a bloodless revolution led by a group calling itself the “Free Officers” overthrew the corrupt Egyptian monarch. Led by General Muhammad Neguib and Colonels Gamal Abd al-Nasir and Anwar al-Sadat, a popular new régime began an experiment in Arab socialism, land reform, and realignment away from the West. Following snubs from the Americans and British (who began the process of withdrawing from their bases in the Suez Canal Zone), Nasir became a spokesman of the Non-Aligned Movement of developing countries that did not want to have to choose between the capitalist West and the communist East.

The change of régime in Egypt also afforded a brief, and quickly lost, window of opportunity when secret peace feelers were exchanged between Nasir and Moshe Sharett via Egyptian and Israeli emissaries in Paris. But by mid-1954 Egyptian–Israeli relations soured considerably in the wake of the uncovering of a spy ring in Alexandria and Cairo in which Israeli secret agents and Egyptian Jews attempted to undermine Egypt’s relations with Britain and the US. Following the humiliation of Egyptian troops in Gaza during a heavy punitive Israeli reprisal operation in February 1955, the two countries appeared on a collision course, headed for war. The build-up of the Egyptian military with Soviet armaments (sent via Czechoslovakia) during 1955 and 1956 was a matter of great concern to the Israelis, who appealed to the Western powers to provide the Jewish state with matching defensive weapons, along with a security treaty.³²

The Israelis fared better with France than with others, establishing clandestine cooperation in the areas of arms procurement, intelligence sharing, and nuclear

development. The Americans and British did everything possible to stall their usually negative answers to Israel's pleas for arms or a treaty, hoping at all costs to avoid an arms race in which the USSR backed the Arab world aligned against them and Israel. Their secret attempts during 1955 and 1956 to have Egyptian and Israeli leaders meet to discuss terms of an Anglo–American peace plan known as “Project Alpha” came to naught, as Nasir, Ben-Gurion, and Sharet successfully avoided making commitments, each for his own reasons.³³

Neither Nasir nor Ben-Gurion wished to be seen by the international community as the initiator of a new war, but both sides did everything possible along their common frontier to provoke the other into launching full-scale hostilities. From the Israeli vantage point, the ongoing cycle of infiltration and reprisal – and the absence of significant arms or a security guarantee from the three Western powers – led to internal pressures from activist army officers and politicians to consider a pre-emptive attack on Egypt before it could completely absorb its new Soviet armaments with which to attack Israel. Even while David Ben-Gurion, serving then as prime minister and minister of defense, resisted such pressures, the chief of staff, Moshe Dayan, and others sought ways to provoke Egypt into attacking, hopefully also drawing in the Jordanians, so that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) might have an opportunity also to “straighten out” the West Bank boundaries of 1949 which some of them found indefensible.³⁴

In the context of inter-Arab rivalries, the one-upmanship between Iraqi, Syrian, and Egyptian régimes played upon lingering Palestinian discontent, and during 1956 a slide to war was discernable. Pro-Nasir agents stirred up Arab nationalist feeling and unrest among Palestinian refugees in Jordan, leading to the dismissal by the young King Hussein of General Glubb, the British founder and commander of the (Jordanian) Arab Legion, and further Arabizing his country's army by dismissing almost all of its British officers.³⁵ In January and April of 1956 UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld undertook

personal visits to the region with the aim of restoring both parties' respect for the terms of their 1949 armistice agreement and heading off the feared outbreak.

Meanwhile, in response to Nasir's surprise nationalization of the Suez Canal Company in July, an international crisis developed with maritime states forming the Suez Canal Users Conference that attempted without success to pressure the Egyptian leader into retracting his defiant action. This external development augured well for Israel's top leadership who, historian Benny Morris claims, had already set their own course for war, "prodded by the persistent pinpricks of the infiltrators, by militant public opinion, by an officer corps bent on hostilities, by the vision of the potential 'second round' threat from Egypt and the rest of the Arab world, and by France."³⁶ During a top-secret high-level meeting in Sèvres, outside Paris, on 22–24 October 1956, Britain joined France and Israel in a tripartite plan to recapture the Suez Canal and overthrow Nasir.³⁷

On 29 October Israeli paratroopers were dropped into the Mitla Pass, deep in the Egyptian Sinai Desert, within striking distance of the Suez Canal – providing the first part of a planned pretext for British and French intervention. Under the guise of protecting the Suez Canal from the belligerents, the British and French intervened militarily, destroying almost all of the Egyptian air force and landing paratroops in Port Said. But very quickly the invading troops were obliged by a UN ceasefire resolution to call a halt to their unfinished conquest of the Suez Canal Zone.³⁸

By this time the tripartite collusion had become an open secret and was seized upon by the Soviet Union, whose prime minister issued dire threats in letters to American, French, British, and Israeli leaders. Anti-colonial anger reignited in Egypt, the Middle East, and throughout the developing world, dealing a blow to Israel's efforts to be welcomed among the nonaligned nations, most of whom now clearly identified Israel with the dying colonial powers. The Suez/Sinai war also caused strains in the Anglo–French–American alliance, as the Eisenhower

administration was surprised and felt betrayed by this aggressive behavior on the part of its transatlantic allies.

Fighting between Egyptian and Israeli forces in the Sinai ended on 5 November, with both sides agreeing to a ceasefire brokered through the United Nations. After seven days of fighting, several thousand Egyptians, 500 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, and 190 Israelis had been killed; 800 Israeli soldiers were wounded, and about 4000 Egyptians taken prisoner.³⁹ Frenzied diplomacy undertaken at the UN by Hammarskjöld and Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lester B. Pearson resulted in the General Assembly's creation and dispatch of a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) to take up positions along the Egyptian–Israeli border. After strong pressure from the Americans and the UN, the IDF finally retreated in early March 1957, handing over to UNEF contingents its last positions in the Gaza Strip and Sharm el-Sheikh. Having tried to hold out for firm guarantees, Israelis were left with little choice but to trust in the UNEF's monitoring capabilities to prevent *feday'un* infiltration into Israel from Gaza and to oversee shipping lanes in the Straits of Tiran, and to rely on US promises to assist Israel in assuring free navigation.

From War to War, II (1957–1967)

Following a familiar pattern, each of the series of Arab–Israeli wars since 1948–1949 left a trail of consequences and unfinished business that would carry forth the seeds of the next war. Some issues were those that had not been resolved by the fighting; others were new controversies or irritants created by the warfare.⁴⁰

For eight years following the 1956 Suez/Sinai war, cross-border raiding subsided, providing short-term fulfillment of one of Israel's chief war aims. During the post-1956 period Israel went on to develop and expand economic and political relations with many emerging nation-states in Africa and Asia, as well as solidifying alliances with Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia. But little else changed in ways that promised reconciliation and peace

between the Arab states and Israel. “Paradoxically,” noted Benny Morris, “the political outcome of the [1956] war was a clear and substantial radicalization of the conflict.”⁴¹

Despite humiliation at the hands of British, French, and Israeli military forces, Nasir was acclaimed in Egypt and the Arab world for having registered “a moral and political victory over Israel and imperialism.”⁴² This led to an upsurge in his popularity throughout the Arab world; regaining lost Arab pride became a motive force in Nasir’s new role as anti-colonialist hero.⁴³ A number of Arab states experienced military coups and revolutionary changes, with the threatened pro-Western régimes in Lebanon and Jordan requiring American and British military intervention in 1958. Nasirist elements in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan mobilized public enthusiasm for pan-Arab unity, and there were several short-lived attempts at unification and confederation. Although he cooperated with the UN in keeping Palestinian *feday’un* from resuming their infiltration from Gaza into Israeli territory, the Egyptian leader’s ardor for defeating Israel in a “third round” seemed to grow stronger as he assumed the mantle of pan-Arab savior. His new confidence was based in part on Soviet help in rebuilding, re-equipping, and training his armed forces, as well as providing economic assistance, including the prestige project of the High Aswan Dam to promote industrialization in Egypt.

Skirmishes on the Israeli–Syrian border carried over from pre-1956 patterns, increasing in frequency and seriousness. Unresolved disputes and minor frictions over rights on the Sea of Galilee and usage of the demilitarized zones (DMZs) along the Israeli–Syria frontier periodically exploded into violence involving artillery and mortar exchanges. Israel’s decision to proceed with its National Water Carrier project – and especially to channel water from the Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Kinneret, or Lake Tiberias) through central Israel to help irrigate farms in the Negev Desert – triggered Arab League objections. In a minor “war over

water” between Israel and Syria, Lebanon and Syria began preparing plans to divert the Jordan headwaters on their own Hasbani and Banias Rivers. Threats of violence loomed as both parties declared that the other’s proposed water projects would be considered a “threat to the peace.”⁴⁴

Palestinian activism re-emerged during this period after a hiatus of a decade, finding its way onto the agenda of inter-Arab politics. Each Arab régime offered mostly verbal and some material support to the Palestinian cause as a pan-Arab issue, seeking to protect its own interests and freedom of action. The creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) at the Arab League Summit in Cairo in January 1964 was an important step in returning the Palestinians to a more prominent, if not yet central, role in regional affairs. The Palestine National Council, the PLO’s parliament, convened for the first time in Jerusalem in May 1964 and adopted a National Charter calling for the elimination of Israel and the restoration of Palestine to the Palestinians.⁴⁵ On 1 January 1965, the “Fatah” movement – the largest single constituent group within the PLO – mounted the first of many cross-border raids, an unimpressive sabotage attempt on Israel’s recently inaugurated National Water Carrier. Over the next two and a half years, Fatah and other groups mounted some 122 raids into Israel; without access to Israel from Egypt, they now operated mainly from bases in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.⁴⁶

After the killing of three Israeli paratroops by a mine near the Jordanian border in November 1966, Israeli forces mounted a major reprisal raid on the village of as-Samu. This action had a destabilizing effect on the Hashemite kingdom with its large Palestinian population and contributed to inter-Arab calls for action against Israel.⁴⁷ To these local incidents – pin-pricks adding to Israel’s insecurity and provoking cross-border incursions – were added international and regional factors that would ultimately combine to bring about the next Arab–Israeli war. An arms race had developed between Soviet

clients Syria and Egypt, on the one hand, and Israel as a largely French but now also an American client, on the other. In the pan-Arab context of displaying support for the Palestinian cause, Egypt found itself ridiculed for “hiding behind the skirts of the UNEF” while the rival Syrian régime struck a more militant pose. Syrian shelling of northern Israeli settlements and towns from bunkers perched on the Golan Heights was provoking retaliations and air strikes by Israel. Overflights ended up in dogfights in early April 1967 in which Israeli pilots shot down six Syrian MiG-21 fighter jets, including two over Damascus.⁴⁸

Threats and blood-curdling rhetoric escalated accordingly. Although the Israeli military may have been confident about its superiority, a feeling of panic developed among sectors of the public: as Abba Eban recalls, many people “were afraid that a great massacre was sweeping down upon us. And in many places in Israel there was talk of Auschwitz and Maidanek.”⁴⁹ During May 1967 Israel, Egypt, and Syria mobilized and deployed their troops as open warfare loomed, waiting only for one side to fire the first shot. Soviet intelligence reports transmitted to both Egypt and Syria indicated that Israel was amassing troops on the Syrian border with the aim of invading Syria and toppling the radical Ba’th rulers in Damascus. In fact, no such build-up occurred. In a diversionary effort to threaten Israel’s southern flank, Nasir moved more troops into the Sinai. His subsequent request for the removal of UNEF observers from the frontier with Israel was speedily approved and executed by UN Secretary-General U Thant, to the consternation and surprise of many observers, and possibly even of the Egyptian president himself.

Nasir’s blockade of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping on 23 May 1967 was designated by Israel as a *casus belli*. Blood-curdling rhetoric from Arab capitals contributed to a feeling of siege and doom among Israelis, whose prime minister and minister of defense, the uncharismatic Levi Eshkol, proved unable to inspire

confidence among the public. Last-ditch international efforts to head off an expected outbreak of war through political discussions, or the demonstrative dispatch of a multinational flotilla to the Israeli port city of Eilat, proved fruitless.⁵⁰

In a surprise attack on the morning of 5 June 1967, Israeli fighter jets bombed Egyptian airfields, destroying most of the aircraft on the tarmac while IDF tanks and troops advanced into Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula. Bound by a recently signed mutual defense pact and with its army placed (on paper at least) under Egyptian military command, Jordan opened fire on Israeli positions in and around Jerusalem, leading Israelis to expand their fighting onto two fronts. In lightning fashion, the Israelis destroyed the remaining air forces in Jordan and Syria, and achieved victory after victory against Egyptian and Jordanian ground forces. On 9 June Israeli forces were ordered to undertake a massive assault to conquer the Syrian-controlled Golan Heights. After six days of fighting, Egypt lost perhaps 10 000–15 000 killed and 5000 taken prisoner; Jordan lost 800 killed and over 600 were taken prisoner; Syria lost 500 dead, with 2500 wounded and almost 600 taken prisoner. Israeli casualties totaled approximately 780 dead and 2500 wounded.⁵¹

Historians of the Arab–Israeli wars continue to debate several questions associated with the 1967 outbreak. One is whether, in the high-level consultations between Israeli representatives and the Johnson administration in late May, the Americans had given a “green light” – or an “amber light” – to the IDF to attack Egypt. Another is whether (and, if so, why) the Soviets knowingly provided false intelligence information to the Syrians and Egyptians, wittingly or unwittingly contributing to increasing the belligerence of the Arab states that ultimately provoked Israel’s preemptive strike.⁵²

More important were the impacts felt throughout the region. The lop-sided Israeli victory changed the geopolitical balance and map of the Middle East. The IDF’s rapid conquest of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza

Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights added 430 000 km² to Israel's territory – an area three and a half times the size of the country between 1949 and 1967. The war also altered the shape of the conflict in several ways. Significantly, the new map removed Egypt and Jordan from their “tutelage” over the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, reuniting all the pieces of former Mandatory Palestine under Israeli rule ([Map 7.1](#)).



Map 7.1 Israel and Occupied Territories, 1967.

Some wondered whether an opportunity had now been created for a new partition plan for sharing or redividing the disputed land of *Eretz-Israel*/Palestine between Israelis and Palestinians; this proved illusory and fleeting.⁵³ The dominant mood in Israel was altogether

inimical to such ideas. Following weeks of apocalyptic gloom, the Israeli public savored the thrill and relief of victory – “the instant removal of a prolonged siege,” as Avraham Burg recalled:

The six days of the amazing military victory changed the face of Israel. The war redefined the strong and the weak and changed the face of the Middle East beyond recognition. David became Goliath, the heads of the previous Goliaths of the region were severed, and the Palestinian nation became the sole entity confronting Israel.⁵⁴

For some, the decisive Israeli victory was “the Holocaust that didn’t happen” – largely because, this time, tough Israeli Jews chose not to behave like their supposedly passive diaspora cousins.⁵⁵ Many religious Jews interpreted the victory as a miracle, and viewed the capture of the Holy Places inside the ancient walls of Jerusalem as a sign of divine intervention and approval for the liberation of all of *Eretz-Israel* within its full Biblical boundaries. “A messianic, expansionist wind swept over the country,” noted Benny Morris: “Secular individuals were also swept up.”⁵⁶ A remarkable array of prominent personalities from across the political spectrum signed a manifesto in August 1967 under the name “Land of Israel Movement,” foreshadowing what would develop, several years later, into the *Gush Emunim* (“Bloc of the Faithful”) dedicated to the (re)settlement of Jews throughout the newly acquired territories. None of what they considered *Eretz-Israel ha-Shlema* – the “whole land of Israel,” or “greater Israel” – was to be ceded or subject to negotiation.⁵⁷

Those in the Arab world and elsewhere who regarded Israel’s creation in 1948 as the illegitimate product of colonial implantation, violent conquest, and ethnic cleansing now viewed the triumphant Israelis and the new 1967 map of greatly enlarged Israel as proof of Zionism’s inherent aggressiveness and expansionism. Between 200 000 and 250 000 Palestinians, almost a quarter of the West Bank’s population, were displaced

during and immediately following the war, many becoming refugees for the second time since 1948. Some expulsions, like those from four villages in the Latrun Salient, displayed what one scholar has called “an element of revenge for 1948.”⁵⁸ Those who remained in their homes came under Israeli military occupation, which would prove to be more than temporary as, once again, deadlock set in between the belligerents of the third major Arab–Israeli war.

For a host of reasons, the June 1967 war proved to be a watershed in the history of the Middle East.⁵⁹ Arabs in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine, having experienced the shock of Israel’s lightning victory and their inability to hold their ground despite a generation of post-1948 modernization efforts, engaged in a new round of intellectual debate and self-criticism.⁶⁰ Some Muslim jurists, clerics, and politicians, looking for an optimistic long-term context to put on the Arab states’ failures in the recent war, invoked parallels between Israel’s ultimate fate and that of the Crusader Kingdom defeated by Salah al-Din in 1187.⁶¹

Israel’s conquest of the Egyptian Sinai, the Jordanian West Bank, and the Syrian Golan Heights created, at least in theory, potential bargaining situations – but no post-1967 bilateral agreements were reached.⁶² Nevertheless, several months of international backroom negotiations would give rise to the formula of exchanging “land for peace” – subsequently elevated into a sacred principle as the required starting-point for seeking ways to end the Arab–Israeli conflict. The dispute, in its revised form, also cast Israel as the new regional superpower, waiting smugly for a “phone call” suing for terms of peace from Nasir in Cairo, Hussein in Amman, and/or Salah Jadid in Damascus. In the international arena, Egypt, and Syria (backed by the USSR) and Israel (backed by the US) each sought to bring appropriate United Nations pressure to bear on the other party.

After months of public debate and backroom negotiations at the United Nations, the Security Council

on 22 November 1967 adopted Resolution 242, based on a consensus of what the drafters considered would make possible some movement toward peace. The resolution, built on the land-for-peace idea, would become a benchmark for all future efforts to resolve the conflict. In the immediate months and years following November 1967, officials of the UN, the US government, and the Soviet Union undertook diplomatic efforts to get each of the parties to declare its acceptance of the resolution's principles and recommendations.⁶³

From War to War, III (1967–1973)

Often cited as a masterpiece of diplomatic ambiguity, UN Security Council Resolution 242 called for the “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict,” but (significantly, some would argue) not the “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from *the* [i.e. *all the*] territories occupied in the recent conflict.” This omission of the definite article “the” gave tremendous bargaining leverage to the Israelis, who did not consider themselves obliged to withdraw from every inch of territories captured during the war. Arab interpretations stressed the resolution's firm reiteration of the principle of the inadmissibility of acquiring territory by war and, given their view of Israel as the unquestioned aggressor in June 1967, they believed Israeli withdrawal from *all* territories captured should be unconditional, and not related to any diplomatic quid pro quo. None of the Arab leaders, especially after the humiliation of their battlefield defeats, was about to “pick up the phone” to call Tel Aviv to begin peace talks. All this signaled the prospect of more years of boycott, nonrecognition, diplomatic stalemate, and possible future wars.

Resolution 242 also affirmed the necessity of tackling three longstanding sore points, namely: (i) freedom of navigation (backing Israeli complaints since 1949 about Egypt's refusal to allow passage of Israeli shipping through the Suez Canal); (ii) “achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem”; and (iii) guaranteeing “the

territorial inviolability and political independence of every State in the area.” Equipped with this resolution, Swedish diplomat Gunnar Jarring accepted the job of UN Special Representative and attempted to move the ex-belligerents along a path to peace. Given the tough stance adopted by the Arab states at their Khartoum Summit to offer nothing until Israel committed itself to full withdrawal from territories seized in the June 1967 war,⁶⁴ Jarring was unable to get the parties to meet face-to-face and his mission took the form of shuttling between Middle Eastern capitals. His efforts, in the end, came to naught, as did those of US Secretary of State William Rogers.⁶⁵

Beginning in December 1968, Egypt and Israel found themselves locked into increasingly deadly exchanges of artillery fire along the Suez Canal. Israeli planes carried out many sorties, sometimes deep into Egyptian territory, resulting in the Egyptian deployment of new Soviet missile batteries along the Canal and the use of Soviet pilots to bolster Egyptian air defenses. Between March 1969 and August 1970, this low-level Egyptian–Israeli “War of Attrition” kept the pot boiling, with many fragile ceasefires negotiated only to be broken. In the end, this mini-war cost the lives of thousands of Egyptians (military and civilian) and 367 Israeli soldiers. It demonstrated Arab dissatisfaction with the status quo and kept postwar tensions high, not only between the main protagonists on the ground but also between their Soviet and American patrons.⁶⁶ It also helped to position Israel and Egypt for one more major war.

The non-resolution of the post-1967 stalemate and the legal ambiguities about the status of the territories captured by the Israelis became fertile ground for the development of the tenth of our core arguments, one that remains part of the Arab–Israeli conflict to this day: *Is the land conquered by Israel in June 1967 on the West Bank of the Jordan to be considered “occupied territory,” and does Israel have the right to build Jewish settlements there?*

For religious Zionists, the answer is clear. The territories in question are, for them, an integral part of the Biblically promised *Eretz-Israel*. The residence there by non-Jewish inhabitants for centuries or millennia was considered a temporary “occupation” which the state of Israel had now corrected by “liberating” those territories and returning them to their rightful Jewish owners. *Gush Emunim* and other settlers’ movements proceeded to implement their own “return to Zion” by moving into these territories and lobbying for active government support for what they considered a supreme endeavor commanded by the Lord. These groups claimed to be continuing the pioneering work of Zionism begun during the first and second (pre-1914) *aliyot* but, in their view, abruptly and artificially stopped by the borders of 1949; this ideological/theological stance appealed to some and was criticized by others. Israeli governments had their own secular or tactical rationales for allowing or encouraging the settlement enterprise.⁶⁷

Arab, Palestinian, and other spokesmen challenged Israeli settlement activities by invoking the Fourth Geneva Convention, under which (Art. 49) the “Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.” Most nations of the world support this straightforward reading of the situation and of the international convention, accepting that the lands in question are indeed “occupied” by Israel as a result of the 1967 war and should be treated accordingly.⁶⁸

The official Israeli interpretation, however, is based on a different understanding of the legal status of the West Bank as being “disputed” but not “occupied” territory. The reasoning behind this stance stems from the status of the lands that devolved from the termination of the British Mandate, with Israel being seen as the only state to inherit sovereignty over (most of) those lands in 1949. Sovereign authority over the West Bank and Gaza is less clear-cut from a legal point of view because (i) Jordan’s 1950 annexation of the West Bank was never internationally recognized, except by two countries

(Britain, Pakistan), and (ii) Egypt never claimed or assumed sovereignty over the Gaza Strip, but chose only to administer the area.⁶⁹

Based on this interpretation, successive Israeli governments have authorized the acquisition of lands and the building of new settlements in the territories primarily on the basis of its own domestic political and economic considerations, often invoking debatable security imperatives. Relatively less heed was given to the impact of expanding settlements on the indigenous Palestinian population, on the neighboring states, or on international (or American) public opinion. At first “dovish” Israeli leaders did not object to the creation of new settlements, seeing them as bargaining chips and levers with which to pressure the Arabs into agreeing to negotiate. But as the occupation continued with no political agreement in sight, the growth of Jewish settlements in the territories continued apace, bringing in their wake not only human rights abuses (see also [Chapter 9](#)) but also the necessary infrastructure that signaled a certain permanency rather than a temporary occupation: road networks, electricity grids, water access, and adequate security and protection.

Adding uncertainty to the local, regional, and international tensions during the post-1967 period were leadership changes in Israel (hardline Golda Meir replacing the dovish Levi Eshkol), Egypt (pragmatic Anwar al-Sadat replacing charismatic ideologue Gamal Abd al-Nasir), and Syria (military strongman Hafez al-Asad replacing Ba’athist functionary Nureddin al-Atasi). A kind of internal coup also occurred in 1969 within the recently created PLO, when Fatah’s Yasir Arafat was elected chairman, effectively ending Egypt’s manipulation of the organization. The latter development testified to the growing centrality and autonomy of the Palestinians as an actor in inter-Arab and Israeli–Arab relations, a trend we shall examine in [Chapter 8](#).

The battle of Karameh, Jordan, in March 1968, was an important engagement during which Palestinian fighters,

with the support of the Jordanian Army, held out against units of the IDF, leading to a new self-confidence which in turn contributed to an increased radicalization and militarization of the conflict. An excess of Palestinian assertiveness subsequently led to the bloodshed of “Black September” of 1970. Some radical Palestinian groups went too far in challenging the authority of the Jordanian régime, provoking violent confrontations in which the King’s army killed between 3000 and 5000 Palestinians (of whom only some 1000 were fighters), wounding or expelling many more. In the years following, PLO factions were forced to relocate and conduct their operations against Israel from bases in Lebanon.⁷⁰

Following the death of Gamal Abd al-Nasir in 1970, President Anwar Sadat sought to wean Egypt away from its dependence on the Soviet Union and to create a new relationship with the Americans, who, he felt, might offer, among other things, diplomatic leverage on Israel to return occupied Sinai to Egypt. After some unanswered peace feelers in 1970 and 1971, Sadat and the Syrians prepared instead to force a break in the stalemate by military means. Their forces were initially successful in launching a surprise attack on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur (which fell on 6 October 1973), against thinly manned Israeli lines along the Suez Canal and on the Golan Heights, driving the IDF back and recapturing some of the land occupied by Israel in the previous war.

Soviet and American resupply of weaponry during the war was crucial to the three belligerents. Other Arab states briefly exercised their new economic clout by announcing a total embargo on oil sales to the US and on other states according to their support for Israel. After three weeks of fighting, Israeli troops regained their ground and a ceasefire was established with the intimate involvement of the US and USSR – neither of whom wished to see any of the protagonists decisively humiliated. Losses of war matériel and human casualties were high on all sides: more than 2800 Israelis died, almost 9000 wounded; Arabs lost about 8500 dead and

20 000 wounded.⁷¹ Soviet and American diplomatic efforts produced a new Security Council Resolution (338), one that reaffirmed 242 but called additionally for “negotiations ... between the parties concerned under appropriate auspices aimed at establishing a just and durable peace in the Middle East.”⁷²

The shock of being caught off-guard caused much soul-searching in Israel, just as the early successes of Syrian and Egyptian forces allowed them a renewed sense of honor and victory, creating an entirely new psychological environment for postwar diplomatic efforts.⁷³ The impact of the oil embargo also signaled a new factor enhancing inter-Arab cooperation and giving the Arabs an improved bargaining position. The US announcement of a nuclear alert in the eastern Mediterranean during the fighting had sent a chilling message not only to the Soviet Union but also to the local actors. As a near-miss, it was a sobering warning for all concerned of the dangers of allowing regional warfare to explode into something more ominous.

Notes

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² Shlaim, A. (1990). The rise and fall of the All-Palestine Government in Gaza. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20 (1): 37–53; Khalidi, R. (2006). *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, 135–136. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

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1960, foreword by Samuel W. Lewis, 40–43. Boulder, CO/San Francisco/Oxford: Westview Press.

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8

Back to the Core: Israel and the Palestinians

Primal Fears, New Militancy

The decades of no war/no peace following 1949 left both Palestinians and Israelis feeling embittered, uneasy, and emotionally battered. The non-resolution of the refugee problem contributed to Palestinian feelings of dejection and despair as second and third generations were born into statelessness, without authentic or effective political leadership, dependent on the machinations of cynical or bombastic politicians. Palestinian anger was aimed in three directions: the Israelis whom they accused of expelling them in 1947–1949, the Arab host governments for their begrudging hospitality and less-than-generous support, and the international community for its indifference to their plight, except for the UN’s annual philanthropic handouts.¹ Memories of pre-1948 home and homeland were passed down from parents to children. Poetry and education inculcated dreams of “the Return” – *al-awda* – with a mystique and power akin to the hopes and longings promoted earlier among diaspora Zionists for their *Eretz-Israel*. Why, it was asked, should the world expect the Palestinian refugees to forget in several decades what the Jews had failed to forget in two thousand years?²

Such deep-seated feelings of helplessness would soon give way to a new generation of Palestinians willing to martyr themselves in efforts to end their diaspora existence and refugee status by regaining their homeland through their own actions. We get a vivid sense of this generational change in the self-view of Palestinians during this period through the fictional protagonist of Ghassan Kanafani’s novella, *Returning to Haifa*, published in 1969. Said and his wife, who had been

forced to flee in April 1948, return to their family home which is now occupied by an Israeli couple (Holocaust survivors, as it happens). Comparing himself disparagingly to his son who is about to run off to join the *feday'un*, Said comes to the end of his emotionally charged visit to Haifa:

At that moment he felt a deep longing for [his son] Khalid [back in Ramallah] and wished he could fly to him and embrace him and kiss him and cry on his shoulder, reversing the roles of father and son in some unique, inexplicable way. “This is the homeland.” He said it to himself, smiling....

Out loud, Said continues, to his wife Safiyya:

... I’m looking for the true Palestine, the Palestine that’s more than memories.... I was just saying to myself: What’s Palestine with respect to Khalid? He doesn’t know the vase or the picture or the stairs or Halisa or Khaldun [in the Haifa being revisited after 19 years that Khalid, born in exile, has never seen]. And yet for him, Palestine is something worthy of a man bearing arms for, dying for. For us, for you and me, it’s only a search for something buried beneath the dust of memories.... We were mistaken when we thought the homeland was only the past. For Khalid, the homeland is the future. That’s how we differed and that’s why Khalid wants to carry arms. Tens of thousands like Khalid won’t be stopped by the tears of men searching in the depths of their defeat for scraps of armor and broken flowers. Men like Khalid are looking toward the future, so they can put right our mistakes and the mistakes of the whole world....³

At the same time, a toughness and aggressiveness developed among Israelis that would prove to be another obstacle to de-escalating the conflict. Despite the successes of the heroic generation that was victorious in 1948, fear of destruction had become a central factor in the self-image of the Israelis as “weak—victimized but righteous.” In the Israeli psyche was buried “the belief—at times hidden, at times overt—that ‘the whole world is

against us’,” as well as a “strange admixture of a sense of power accompanied by a willingness to defy the entire world with the sense of helplessness and profound apprehension.”⁴ During the 1950s and 1960s, many Jews looked back on the *Shoah* and saw a stark dichotomy: on the one hand, the previously defenseless, passive diaspora “sheep” who had supposedly been herded to their slaughter without resisting; and, on the other, the proud, macho *sabras* – native-born Israelis – around whom a new mystique of militancy was built.⁵

Relations with the Palestinians and the Arabs were seen through this prism, which was in many ways a cover for primal insecurity. Far from being a forgotten chapter of history, the Holocaust, noted veteran journalist Amos Elon in 1971, continued to help explain “the fears and prejudices, passions, pains, and prides that spin the plot of public life [in Israel] and will likely affect the nation for a long time to come. The lingering memory of the holocaust makes Arab threats of annihilation sound plausible.” The memory of the Holocaust “accounts for the prevailing sense of loneliness, a main characteristic of the Israeli temper since Independence. It explains the obsessive suspicions, the towering urge for self-reliance at all cost in a world which permitted the disaster to happen.”⁶

As noted in [Chapter 7](#), the Israeli victory in June 1967 was for many Jews and Israelis “the Holocaust that didn’t happen” – thanks, they believed, to the new Israelis’ initiative and assertiveness, qualities that had been presumably lacking among the Jews of Europe a generation earlier.⁷ Both prior to and even following its lightning victory, Israel continued to see and portray itself as little David facing the Arab giant Goliath – a stereotypical caricature at variance with the superiority demonstrated by the Israeli army and air force on the battlefield and in the skies. The post-1967 reality of Israeli prowess managed to coexist, however incongruously, with this persisting self-image as endangered and besieged victims.

In the Arab world, the unexpectedly humiliating defeat in 1967 after a decade of development, modernization, and Soviet aid gave rise to both increased feelings of bitterness against the alien usurpers of Palestine and also new soul-searching about the deeper societal ills revealed by this second *Nakba*.⁸ Only the relative success of Egyptian and Syrian forces in October 1973 seemed to offer a new climate of self-esteem that might prove more conducive to fruitful negotiations between Israel and the Arab states.

The Re-Emergence of the Palestinian National Movement after 1967

The re-emerging Palestinian Arab national movement received new impetus from the Arab defeat in the 1967. The recently created Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) channeled and gave new voice to the accumulated grievances and resentments of a dispersed people who had, before 1948, been the majority indigenous population of British Mandatory Palestine and, before that, of the provinces and districts of the Muslim Ottoman Empire. A surge of Palestinian national self-awareness and militancy was nourished by solidarity with other liberation movements around the world. Exploiting the mystique of revolutionary armed struggle with its freedom fighters, the *kufiyah*-clad Palestinian *feda'yun* generated an enthusiasm that counteracted the despair and humiliation of the recent military defeat of three Arab armies. For a short period after June 1967 the PLO attempted to establish cells of fighters to attack Israeli targets from forward bases on the West Bank recently occupied by Israel, but this effort collapsed,⁹ leaving Palestinians forced to revert to their previous pattern of launching attacks from external bases that depended on the hospitality of Arab states for logistical and political support.

The 1970s witnessed changes to the shape of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and an important refocusing on its specifically Palestinian–Israeli core. The immediate

issues on the agenda were Israeli withdrawal to June 1967 lines and Arab recognition and peace with the Jewish state, as called for in the land-for-peace formula promoted by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 242 (1967) and reinforced by 338 (1973). Yet, despite the fact that neither of these international documents mentioned the Palestinians by name, the Palestinians managed during the 1970s to bring their quest for recognition of their right to national self-determination to the world's attention, using both violence and political means.

The decade began with a number of acts of international terrorism undertaken against Israeli and Jewish targets by factions within and outside the PLO. Airplane hijacking became the weapon of choice in the arsenal of Palestinian groups attempting to hit Israeli targets abroad and draw the world's attention to their cause. As with earlier forms of violence used by both sides, the terror of the 1970s also performed vital inner-directed functions as well, establishing a pecking order among competing factions but, above all, restoring the morale and self-esteem of exiled Palestinians everywhere.¹⁰ On 6 September 1970, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) simultaneously hijacked three Western commercial aircraft (from TWA, Swissair, and Pan Am) and flew two of them to an unused airfield outside Amman, Jordan – eventually freeing most of the hostages and blowing up the planes. By one count, between 1968 and 1977, Palestinian groups hijacked or attempted to hijack 29 aircraft.¹¹

May 1972 brought two daring assaults to Israel's Lydda (Ben-Gurion) Airport, one a hijacked plane (which was stormed and recaptured with minimal loss of life) and the other a bloodbath perpetrated by Japanese Red Army terrorists, acting on behalf of the PFLP, on passengers (mostly Christian pilgrims) in the arrivals lounge. The most sophisticated and spectacular attack of the period was on the Israeli athletes' apartment at the Olympic Games in September of that year in Munich, West Germany; a rescue attempt botched by German police

resulted in the deaths of all nine Israeli captives and five kidnapers.

Although international targets were usually “softer” than those inside Israel proper, terrorists from across the Lebanese border were periodically able to penetrate defenses, inflict destruction, and sow panic inside Israel. In May 1974, for example, attackers belonging to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) entered the nursery in the northern kibbutz of Ma’alot, holding 90 children hostage until a gun battle ended with the deaths of the terrorists and 20 of their hostages.

One factor contributing to the surge in recruitment and operations of these terrorist/guerilla groups was the fact that many Palestinians had, by this time, despaired of ever finding satisfaction of their claims and grievances through the standard avenues of international diplomacy. Those channels were, they argued, the very ones responsible for creating (illegitimately, they believed) the state of Israel in 1948, following which the United Nations and its member-states had relegated Palestinians to the status of a pitiful “Arab” refugee population, offering them no standing as primary participants in world affairs. Most recently, the newly created PLO had watched the members of the UNSC draft and endorse Resolution 242 which – like the Balfour Declaration exactly 50 years earlier – made no reference at all to Palestinians’ national existence or national rights, referring to them only indirectly in the phrase about “achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem.”

Within Palestinian institutions at this time much internal debate was devoted instead to questions regarding the delicate web of Palestinian relations with various Arab states; means versus ends, tactics versus strategy; politics versus revolutionary armed struggle; legitimacy of targeting Israeli and/or Jewish civilians or military personnel, inside or outside of Palestine/Israel; and the true meaning and application of various articles in the National Charter. Splinter groups, like the Marxist PFLP under George Habash and the DFLP under Nayef

Hawatmeh, prioritized armed struggle over politics, making common cause with other revolutionary liberation movements that favored the tactics of kidnapping, bombing, and hijacking of civilian aircraft. Activists debated ideology, tactics, strategy, and the role of armed struggle within their factions and under the PLO as umbrella organization, displaying the same intensity and passion as the Zionist splinter groups had done with the mainstream *Hagana* during the 1930s and 1940s. Some actively rejected the compromising stances sometimes adopted by mainstream Fatah leaders, resulting in much disunity within the ranks and also competitive “outbidding” that only intensified the pattern of terrorism and violence.¹²

Many Palestinians, of course, rejected the “terrorist” label, feeling justified in engaging in armed struggle in the same manner that other liberation movements had done and were doing. They viewed violence as a perfectly legitimate tool for resisting the occupation of lands they lost in 1948 and again in 1967, as well as for drawing the world’s urgent attention to their neglected cause – even if the chances of physically destroying the usurping Zionist state seemed remote.¹³ In choosing this route, radicals and rejectionists were being true to the words of the PLO’s 1968 National Charter, which called for the “elimination of Zionism in Palestine” by “armed struggle” as the only method (“strategy,” not “tactics”) of regaining Palestine as an Arab state for its original Palestinian inhabitants, using “fedayeen action” as “the nucleus of the popular Palestinian liberation war” (Arts. 15, 9, 10).¹⁴

During this period, Israelis and their supporters highlighted the violent and what some called the “politicidal” nature of the PLO and its National Charter, condemning and refusing to deal with a “terrorist organization.” Going beyond statements of denunciation, Israeli responses included violent reprisals and special operations, including assassinations of suspected terrorists, attacks on the offices and headquarters of militant groups, and the bombing of refugee camps

(mostly in Lebanon) in which terrorists were said to be hiding and from which they were operating.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, these Israeli counterinsurgency measures and aerial attacks only increased the level of Palestinian determination and thirst for revenge, and had dubious deterrent effect.

The violent cycles of the 1970s and 1980s unleashed an updated version of the unresolved core argument that we examined in the 1936–1939 Arab Rebellion and the Israeli reprisals in the 1950s over the resort to force, its effects, and its justification. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) historian Netanel Lorch denounced PLO violence as just a continuation of Arab aggressiveness based on “principles that had been laid down several decades before.” In his view, Zionist and Israeli responses were in no way symmetrical. “From the outset,” he argued, Zionist military organization

came as a reaction to the Arab resort to violence, in self-defense against attacks from both irregular and regular military forces. The very names of the successive organizations—Hashomer (“The Watchman”), Haganah (“Defense”), I.D.F. (“Israel Defense Forces”)—denote their basic mission. It may thus be paradoxical that a movement, and subsequently a State, which has never envisaged violence as a means for the achievement of its objectives, has been engaged almost continuously in violent struggle.¹⁶

In the decades following the 1967 war, the Americans generally supported Israel’s position that the PLO should be excluded from the diplomatic process until it signed on to Resolution 242, recognized Israel’s right to exist, and explicitly renounced terrorism.¹⁷ Ostracizing the PLO involved many awkward incidents over the coming years, during which Israelis or Americans tried to promote and deal with “non-PLO” Palestinians as part of a campaign to discredit the PLO’s claim to be the legitimate spokesman for the Palestinian people. For their part, Palestinians rejected references to their struggle as “terrorism”; the American/Israeli

precondition for them to renounce it seemed grossly unfair. As Rashid Khalidi observed sarcastically, Palestinians “were required by the United States and Israel to cease their resistance to an illegal occupation as a precondition for being allowed to negotiate for an end to that occupation.”¹⁸ For the next decade and a half, the PLO stood firm in officially rejecting Security Council Resolution 242 for its not addressing Palestinian needs and the minimum requirements of a just and lasting peace.¹⁹ Almost as stubbornly as the Israelis and Americans kept it excluded from the diplomatic game, the PLO drew a clear red line, until 1988, against any compromise or acceptance of Resolution 242 and seemed committed to regaining Palestine almost exclusively by armed struggle.

During the early 1970s there emerged faint signals that the PLO might abandon the categorical rejection of Israel inherent in its National Charter and, according to some analysts, move “gradually [to] accept ... a two-state solution.”²⁰ Yet, as Rashid Khalidi acknowledges, this shift was either imperceptible to, or seen differently by, the US and Israel, who looked at other evidence – continuing armed struggle on the ground and the fighting words of new Palestine National Council (PNC) resolutions – to arrive at more negative conclusions about Palestinian intentions. This brings us to consider the last on our list of unresolved core arguments besetting the contested histories of Israel and Palestine: *to eliminate the Jewish state of Israel and replace it with an Arab state of Palestine; or to create a Palestinian Arab state in part of historic Palestine, to coexist alongside an Israeli Jewish state?*

For years much of the debate centered round Resolution 2 of the PNC Political Program adopted in Cairo on 9 June 1974: “The PLO will employ all means, and first and foremost armed struggle, to liberate Palestinian territory and to establish the independent combatant national authority for the people over every part of Palestinian land that is liberated.”²¹ Many commentators have interpreted this last phrase as signaling the PLO’s

willingness to accept a mini-state in the West Bank and Gaza alongside Israel – i.e. a two-state solution and something less than total liberation of all of Palestine. The earlier reference to employing “all means” was seen to hint at a retreat from the uncompromising goal of eliminating Zionism only through armed struggle.

Many writers today look back to this moment uncritically as if it constituted an unambiguous shift in PLO policy.²² At the time, however, the reality of the change was not at all obvious; indeed, it was hotly contested. Former military intelligence analyst, Yehoshafat Harkabi – who after 1978 would radically modify his deterministic and negative reading of Arab hostility and intentions²³ – argued vigorously at the time that this formulation was nothing but a clever deception cloaking the PLO’s unchanged goal of liberating *all* of Palestine. If not all in one go, then the Palestinians would do so in “stages,” beginning with any pieces of territory acquired by armed struggle or through negotiation.²⁴ Those who accepted this interpretation of Palestinian intentions pointed to the unceasing campaign of violent attacks inspired or organized by the PLO or its offshoots against Israelis and Jews around the world. They also cited the 1968 National Charter and the uncompromising character of its goals as expressed, *inter alia*, in Article 21: “The Arab Palestinian people, expressing themselves by the armed Palestinian revolution, reject all solutions which are substitutes for the total liberation of Palestine.”

Yezid Sayigh does not share this interpretation, or the argument that the 1974 resolution disguised a strategy of total liberation by stages. In his detailed examination of the history of the movement, he credits the PLO for showing diplomatic flexibility in “its willingness to modify its objectives and strategy,” but admits that this “fell far short of offering recognition to the Jewish state, let alone coexistence.” It did, however, imply a “readiness both to enter into indirect negotiations and to put off the total liberation of Palestine, if not abandon it altogether.” This tentative diplomatic opening was, however, to be accompanied by “demonstrative military

action against Israel” in order to “underlin[e] the ability of the PLO to spoil any peace initiative that excluded it.”²⁵

There are many who believe, like Sayigh, that the true goal of the Palestinians is coexistence with Israel. The bellicose rhetoric, they point out, is intended chiefly to placate militant factions. They argue that a close reading of internal Palestinian debates shows a gradual evolution of Palestinian goals in the direction of an accommodation with Israel. These changes are expressed through subtle wording changes in the authoritative resolutions adopted by meetings of the Palestinian parliament-in-exile, the National Council.²⁶

Unfortunately, these ambiguous changes of phrasing fail to convince skeptics, with the result that both parties and their supporters resort to much inconclusive parsing of phrases and hairsplitting squabbles over the true meaning of various PNC resolutions.²⁷

The November 1988 PNC meeting in Algiers (see [Chapter 10](#)) would be an important marker in the evolution of Palestinian attitudes, although it would still not be enough to lay to rest, once and for all, the core argument over Palestinian intentions. The question remains among the most troubling unresolved questions, and would re-emerge again to obstruct a breakthrough in generating mutual trust among the parties during the Oslo period after 1993.

The Palestine Question at the United Nations

During the 1970s the PLO and the Palestinian cause continued to benefit from greater attention and solidarity in the regional and international arena. The Arab summit meeting in Rabat, Morocco, in October 1974 affirmed not only “the right of the Palestinian people to return to their homeland and to self-determination,” but (echoing the recent PNC resolutions) also their “right to establish an independent

national authority, under the leadership of the PLO in its capacity as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestine people.” The latter phrase represented an important achievement for the PLO, undermining Jordan’s self-proclaimed trusteeship over the Holy Places of Jerusalem and the Palestine issue through its occupation of the holy city and the West Bank between 1948 and 1967.²⁸

During this period Palestinian leaders scored their greatest successes at broadening support for their cause in the international arena. In November 1974, PLO chairman Yasir Arafat was invited to deliver an address to the UN General Assembly,²⁹ which proceeded afterwards to adopt Resolution 3236, expressing its deep concern that no just solution had yet been achieved for the problem of Palestine, which continued “to endanger international peace and security.” The landmark resolution, going beyond recent UN declarations favoring Palestinian rights,³⁰ reaffirmed by a vote of 89 in favor, 7 against, with 37 abstentions, the “inalienable rights” of the Palestinian people to “self-determination without external interference” and to “national independence and sovereignty.” Reinforcing its routine annual calls since December 1948, the General Assembly further reaffirmed “the inalienable right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property from which they have been displaced and uprooted, and call[ed] for their return.”³¹ In an accompanying resolution, the UN granted the PLO “observer status” and in 1975 went on to establish a “Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People” which continues to serve, with its secretariat (the Division for Palestinian Rights), as an international base for documentation and pro-Palestinian advocacy.³²

The Israeli Ambassador was almost alone in denouncing the world body for its invitation to Arafat, thereby “capitulat[ing] to a murder organization which aims at the destruction of a Member State of the UN” and “prostrat[ing] itself before the PLO, which stands for premeditated, deliberate murder of innocent civilians,

denies to the Jewish people its right to live, and seeks to destroy the Jewish State by armed force.”³³ Adding to Israel’s feelings of alienation and isolation, the General Assembly in November 1975 adopted an omnibus resolution against racial discrimination containing a closing line determining that “zionism” was “a form of racism and racial discrimination.” To Jews and Zionists, this UN stance was an example of egregious bias, selectively singling out and chastising the Jews and their national liberation movement and associating it with the unmitigated evils of South Africa’s apartheid régime. The political machinations involved in mobilizing votes for this resolution in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) were also criticized for their crass cynicism.³⁴

Among its various pronouncements, UNGA Resolution 3626 of 1974 had recognized the Palestinian people as “a principal party in the establishment of a just and durable peace in the Middle East.” While this (re-) “Palestinization” of the conflict enjoyed a sympathetic hearing at the UN and especially among its developing member-states, the UN’s focus on the specifically *Palestinian*–Israeli core was not without its critics. One professor complained, for example, about “a cascade of pro-Palestinian sentiments and the ‘PLO-ization of the U.N.’ which intensified invective against Israel and efforts to isolate it.”³⁵ Legal scholar Julius Stone devoted an entire volume to a scathing attack on these developments at the UN from an international law perspective.³⁶ For these critics, the crux of the conflict was not the unfulfilled Palestinian quest for self-determination but rather the inability of the Arabs to accept the reality and legitimacy of Israel’s very existence.

Official spokesmen, media commentators, advocates, and academics alike went on the counterattack, broadening the debate to cast doubt on the authenticity of Palestinian nationalism generally. Some members of the American Academic Association for Peace in the Middle East, for example, sought to undermine or delegitimize any forms of distinct Palestinian national

claims.³⁷ In many publications and public forums the following arguments, some of which relate to familiar core arguments we have seen in earlier years, were adapted to the circumstances of the 1970s and 1980s:

1. Historically, there was no such thing as a separate, distinct Palestinian people, who after World War I were calling themselves “southern Syrians.”
2. There was never much positive content to Palestinian nationalism, which was based primarily on negative reactions to the efforts and successes of the Zionists.
3. The Arab states’ support for the PLO and the demand for the creation of a Palestinian state were self-serving and only a tool to be used (like the refugees) in their battle against Israel – “the continuous exploitation of these questions as a weapon of Arab belligerency against Israel,” in the words of Israel’s ambassador to the UN in November 1974.³⁸ If Arab support for this claim to independent Palestinian statehood were genuine, it was asked, why didn’t Jordan and Egypt, who controlled parts of Mandatory Palestine between 1949 and 1967, move to create a Palestinian state in those areas while they had the power to do so?
4. There was no current need for a separate Palestinian state, as Jordan was already a Palestinian state. Again, as the Israeli ambassador proclaimed before the UN General Assembly: “Geographically and ethnically Jordan is Palestine.”³⁹ To support this claim, reference is made to the fact that greater Mandatory Palestine was originally partitioned by Winston Churchill in 1922, to create Abdullah’s Amirate of Transjordan east of Jordan River, with the Jewish national home policy thereafter reduced in its application to Palestine west of the Jordan.⁴⁰
5. The creation of a Palestinian state would be giving a state structure and forward bases to a terrorist organization dedicated to the destruction of Israel:

“The question,” quoting Israel’s ambassador again, was: “should there be peace between Israel and its eastern neighbour [i.e., Jordan/Palestine], or should an attempt be made to establish a Palestine Liberation Organization base to the east of Israel from which the terrorist campaign against the Jewish State’s existence could be pursued?”⁴¹

These arguments were advanced against the backdrop of almost daily Palestinian guerilla/terrorist incursions into Israel or against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad; frequent Israeli reprisal attacks on Palestinian targets in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, often with devastating “collateral damage” to civilian populations; and periodic complaints, and defenses, brought before the UN about Israeli violations of human rights in the territories occupied since 1967.

Going beyond these day-to-day concerns, heated discussions and learned treatises not only second-guessed the legitimacy of UN decisions regarding Israel’s creation, but also reopened the contested narratives over basic Palestinian and Jewish rights to sovereignty and national self-determination.⁴² Just as many Jews and Israelis took offense at Arab and Palestinian denials of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state,⁴³ so too were Palestinians and other Arabs offended by Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir’s 1969 remarks – however moderately expressed or interpreted in subsequent years – that

There were no such thing as Palestinians. When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? It was either southern Syria before the First World War, and then it was Palestine including Jordan. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.⁴⁴

Palestinians and Jordanians, each for different reasons, also recoiled at the implications of both the Israel Labor

Party's "Jordanian option" and the Likud Party's harsher "Jordan is Palestine" political slogan. Considering Jordan already a Palestinian state, Likud leader Yitzhak Shamir proclaimed in 1982 that there was no room west of the Jordan River for a *second* Palestinian state; it would be "a prescription for anarchy, a threat to both Israel and Jordan, and a likely base for terrorist and Soviet penetration."⁴⁵ Seen from a Jordanian perspective, this was nothing less than an Israeli "conspiracy ... to establish a Palestinian state outside the Palestinians' historical homeland in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—against Palestinians' wishes and at Jordan's expense."⁴⁶

Those who rejected the five arguments listed above found appropriate counterarguments to promote Palestinian efforts to be recognized as legitimate claimants to national self-determination on the soil of the contested territory of Palestine west of the Jordan River. Some of these counterarguments were based on positions adopted by the UNGA and developed in publications of the newly created UN Division for Palestinian Rights.⁴⁷ For example:

1. Palestinian advocacy of the "southern Syrian" option after World War I does not contradict their authentic Palestinian national identity focused on the country called "Palestine," but was rather a strategic and transitory episode seeking to develop ties with neighboring Arab countries.
2. Palestinian nationalism is an authentic expression of an indigenous people seeking sovereign control over the land they have considered their homeland for centuries, despite the colonial imposition on them of an alien people claiming rights to the same land.
3. The non-creation of a Palestinian state between 1949 and 1967 can be explained by a number of internal Palestinian and external Arab-state causes that combined to make such a plan unworkable, rather than being attributed to cynical manipulation of an inauthentic national cause.

4. Most of the Palestinians living in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan are there because they were displaced from their real homes in Palestine west of the Jordan River. The land between the Mediterranean Sea and the western boundary of Iraq was arbitrarily labeled “Palestine” by the British after World War I; the land east of the Jordan River has never been viewed by Palestinian Arabs as their national home, nor seriously conceived by the British as part of a future Jewish national home. The indigenous population of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, to which Palestinians emigrated or fled after 1948 and 1967, is made up of Bedouin, Circassians, Chechens, Armenians, and other Arabic-speaking groups.
5. The creation of a Palestinian state would bring an end to the need for armed struggle. In the context of a peace settlement, the new government would be absorbed in the creative work of building up a state and restoring Palestinian society and infrastructures that were destroyed in 1948.

Point 5 on both lists was, and has remained to this day, problematic, bringing us back, full circle, to the 11th core argument highlighted above – whether the true aim of Palestinians and the PLO is the ultimate elimination of Israel and its replacement by an Arab Palestinian state, or rather the creation of a Palestinian Arab state on only *part* of historic Palestine/*Eretz-Israel*, to coexist alongside a Jewish Israeli state as part of a two-state solution.

Finally, it should be noted that, despite firm US support of Israel in its refusal to recognize or deal with the PLO until certain conditions were met, American opinion during this period did show signs of movement toward greater recognition of a central role for the Palestinians⁴⁸ – although many were still averse to any official contact with or recognition of the PLO. Those arguing for the rights of the Palestinians to be treated on at least equal footing with those of Israelis in the diplomatic arena had to overcome the negative fallout from two sources: the

continued acts of international terrorism perpetrated by Palestinians during this period, and the bellicose anti-Zionist rhetoric in the Palestine National Charter. The frequent association between the words “PLO,” “Palestinians,” and “terrorism” made it difficult for pro-Palestinian advocates to plead their case for a PLO seat at the negotiating table to discuss the future of their contested homeland with the Israelis or at an international conference in which the US was involved. While the “Palestinianization of the Arab Israeli conflict”⁴⁹ continued unabated after the 1970s, the political positions of PLO, American, and (to a lesser extent) Israeli leaders gradually evolved to open a way for a US–PLO dialogue in 1988, which would be followed by the inclusion of a Palestinian subdelegation at the Madrid peace conference in 1991 (see [Chapter 10](#)).

Notes

- ¹ For an eloquent firsthand account of these times and mood, see Turki, F. (1974). *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile*, 2e. London/New York: Monthly Review Press.
- ² Tibawi, A.L. (1963). Visions of the return: The Palestine Arab refugees in Arabic poetry and art. *Middle East Journal* 17 (5): 507–526.
- ³ Kanafani, G. (2000). *Palestine’s Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories* (transl. B. Harlow and K.E. Riley), 186–187. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- ⁴ Shapira, A. (1999). *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (transl. W. Templer), 369–370. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- ⁵ On the evolution of this phenomenon, see Rubinstein, A. (1984). *The Zionist Dream Revisited: From Herzl to Gush Emunim and Back*. New York: Schocken Books, ch. 8; Wasserstein, B. (2008). *Israelis and Palestinians: Why Do They Fight? Can They Stop?*

3e. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press/London: Profile Books, 32–37.

- [6](#) Elon, A. (1971). *The Israelis: Founders and Sons*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 199. See also Lustick, I.S. (2017). The Holocaust in Israeli political culture: Four constructions and their consequences. *Contemporary Jewry* 37: 125–170.
- [7](#) Morris, B. (1999). *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist Arab Conflict, 1881–1999*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf (London: John Murray, 2000), 311.
- [8](#) See e.g. Hillal Dessouki, A.E. (1973). Arab intellectuals and al-Nakba: The search for fundamentalism. *Middle Eastern Studies* IX: 187–195 and sources cited there; Patai R. (1973). *The Arab Mind*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 258–267.
- [9](#) Sayigh, Y. (1997). *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993*. Oxford: Oxford University Press/Washington, DC: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 207–210 (quotation from p. 210); Morris, B, *Righteous Victims*, 365–370.
- [10](#) Lustick, I.S. (1995). Terrorism in the Arab–Israeli conflict: Targets and audiences. In: *Terrorism in Context* (ed. M. Crenshaw), 537–547. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- [11](#) Details in this and the following paragraph are from Morris, B. *Righteous Victims*, 376–381.
- [12](#) Sayigh, Y. (*Armed Struggle*, 339–357) discusses “Political Rivalry, Military Outbidding” and “Military Jockeying for Diplomatic Position.”
- [13](#) E.g. Quigley, J. (2005). *The Case for Palestine: An International Law Perspective* (rev. and updated ed.). Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, chs. 26–27. For a detailed discussion of internal Palestinian debates over the use of guerilla warfare,

both inside and outside Israel/Palestine, see Sayigh, Y. *Armed Struggle*, ch. 8.

14. For the text of the Palestine National Charter, Resolutions of the Palestine National Council, Cairo, 17 July 1968, see *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, 290–301; *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 117–121; available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-20.html>.
15. Fictional and semi-autobiographical portrayals of these battles (and the motivations of their complex protagonists) became very popular in novels and films, notably John Le Carré’s spy novel, *The Little Drummer Girl*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983, and George Jonas’ cloak-and-dagger journalistic account, *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team* (1984), reissued New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005. Both were made into successful Hollywood films, the first in 1984, directed by George Roy Hill and starring Diane Keaton, and the latter, released as *Munich* in 2005, directed by Stephen Spielberg and starring Eric Bana.
16. Lorch, N. (1976). *One Long War: Arab versus Jew Since 1920*, xiv–xv. New York: Herzl Press.
17. Washington’s commitment was made as part of a package leading to the 1975 Israeli–Egyptian disengagement in Sinai. See Spiegel, S.L. (1985). *The Other Arab–Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 300–303. For a critical assessment of this US commitment to Israel, see Neff, D. (1995). Nixon’s Middle East policy: From balance to bias. In: *US Policy on Palestine from Wilson to Clinton* (ed. M.W. Suleiman). Normal, IL: AAUG Press, 156. The US commitment was reiterated, inter alia, in the US–Israel Memorandum of Understanding, 1 September 1975, reproduced in *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record*,

1967–1990, 60–61; available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-31.html>.

- 18 Khalidi, R. (2006). *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, 156. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- 19 PLO Statement rejecting UN Resolution 242, Cairo, 23 November 1967, reproduced in *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, 290–291. The PLO’s position was reiterated regularly in resolutions adopted at subsequent meetings of the PNC.
- 20 Khalidi, R. *The Iron Cage*, 154–156; Sayigh, Y. *Armed Struggle*, 684; Agha, H., Feldman, S., Khalidi, A., and Schiff, Z. (2003). *Track-II Diplomacy: Lessons from the Middle East*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 10.
- 21 PNC Political Programme for the Present Stage, Cairo, 9 June 1974, translation reproduced in Harkabi, Y. (1979). *The Palestinian Covenant and Its Meaning*, London: Valentine Mitchell. 147. Cf. other translations in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 162–163; *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, 308–312; Netanyahu, B. (2000). *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place among the Nations* (rev. ed.). New York: Warner Books, 441–442, where it is printed as an appendix under the title “The Phased Plan.”
- 22 E.g. “Palestinians want an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza, and to live in peace and cooperation with Israel. This has been the paramount Palestinian national objective since the mid-1970s and has not changed since.” Shikaki, K. (2002). Ending the conflict: Can the parties afford it? In: *The Israeli–Palestinian Peace Process: Oslo and the Lessons of Failure: Perspectives, Predicaments and Prospects* (ed. R.L. Rothstein, M. Ma’oz, and K. Shikaki), 45; also 39. Brighton, UK/Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press.

- [23](#) Nisan, M. (1979). Harkabi's despair. *Midstream* XXV (5): 9–17; Harkabi, Y. (1988). A policy for the moment of truth. *Jerusalem Post International Edition*, w/e 13 February, 9–10; Harkabi, Y. (1996). The last reminiscence, January 14, 1994, an interview with Pinhas Ginossar and Zaki Shalom, *Israel Studies* I (1): 171–195.
- [24](#) Harkabi, Y, *The Palestinian Covenant*, 86–87. The incremental intention of the quoted Article 2, “aimed at Israel’s demise,” becomes clearer when read together with Articles 3 and 4 of the Program (reproduced in *The Palestinian Covenant*, 147–148). See also Harkabi’s detailed essays “The Meaning of ‘a Democratic Palestinian State’” (April 1970) and “The Debate at the Twelfth Palestinian National Council” (July 1974), in his collection, *Palestinians and Israel*, New York: John Wiley (Halsted Press), 1974, 70–106 and 269–283. The 1970 essay cited above was also reprinted, with a postscript, in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 182–194.
- [25](#) Sayigh, Y. *Armed Struggle*, 322. Sayigh further notes that to “placate rejectionist sentiment and prevent an open split, the mainstream inserted a militant tone into the concluding statement.” *Armed Struggle*, 342–343.
- [26](#) Muslih, M. (1990). Towards coexistence: An analysis of the Resolutions of the Palestine National Council. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 19 (4): 3–29; reprinted in *From War to Peace: Arab–Israeli Relations 1973–1993*, (ed. B. Rubin, J. Ginat, and M. Ma’oz), 265–291. New York: New York University Press, 1995; Khalidi, R. *The Iron Cage*, 154–156, 169–170, 192–195.
- [27](#) See e.g. Harkabi, Y. *Palestinians and Israel*, and *The Palestinian Covenant*, for critiques of the deceptive meanings of ostensibly positive resolutions of various PNC meetings and statements of Palestinian leaders.
- [28](#) Arab Heads of State Declaration at Rabat, 28 October 1974, available online at <https://naip->

- documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-27.html. Cf. Abu-Odeh A. (1999). *Jordanians, Palestinians and the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 209–213; Khalidi, R. *The Iron Cage*, 144.
- 29** UNGA Address, 13 November 1974, reproduced in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 171–182; available online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-28.html>.
- 30** Growing out of the annual deliberations on renewing the mandate and budget of UNRWA, UNGA Resolutions became more and more explicit and extensive in defining and affirming Palestinian rights. See the wording changes in Resolutions 2535 (XXIV), 10 December 1969; 2672 (XXV), 8 December 1970; 2787 (XXVI), 6 December 1971; 2963 (XXVII), 13 December 1972; and 3089 (XXVII), 7 December 1973. Texts available in *United Nations Resolutions on Palestine and the Arab–Israeli Conflict*, vol. I: 1947–1974 (rev. ed.) (ed. G.J. Tomeh). Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1988; Cattán, H. (1976). *Palestine and International Law: The Legal Aspects of the Arab–Israel Conflict*, 2e, foreword by W.T. Mallison, Jr. London: Longman, appendices.
- 31** UNGA Res 3236 (XXIX), 22 November 1974, “Concerning the Question of Palestine,” at <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/o/o25974039ACFB171852560DE00548BBE> (accessed 2 June 2018).
- 32** The website of the Division for Palestinian Rights, part of the UN Department of Political Affairs, is at <https://www.un.org/undpa/en/palestinianrights>.
- 33** Speech to the UN General Assembly, 13 November 1974, in Tekoah, Y. (1976). *In the Face of the Nations: Israel’s Struggle for Peace* (ed. D. Aphek), 145–152. New York: Simon and Schuster; available online at <https://naip->

documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-29.html.

34. Text of UNGA Resolution 3379 (XXX), “Elimination of all forms of racial discrimination,” 10 November 1975, was adopted by a vote of 72 in favor, 35 against, with 32 abstentions at <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/o/761C1063530766A7052566A2005B74D1> (text accessed 2 June 2018). Discussions available in Lewis, B. (1976). The Anti-Zionist Resolution. *Foreign Affairs* 55 (1): 54–64; Eban, A.. (1976), Israel, anti-semitism and the United Nations. *Jerusalem Quarterly* no.1: 110–120; Rubinstein, A.Z.. (1991). Transformation: External determinants. In: *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: Perspectives 2* (ed. A.Z. Rubinstein), 83. New York: HarperCollins; Fishman, J. (2011). “A Disaster of Another Kind”: Zionism = Racism, its beginning, and the war of delegitimization against Israel. *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 5 (3): 75–92; Troy, G. (2013). *Moynihan’s Moment: America’s Fight against Zionism as Racism*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press. The determination about Zionism was revoked sixteen years later. For text and commentary on UNGA Resolution 46/86 of 16 December 1991 and Statement by Israeli President Herzog, see <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook8/Pages/260%20General%20Assembly%20Resolution%2046-86-%20Revocation.aspx> (accessed 25 January 2019).
- 35 Rubinstein, A.Z Transformation, 83.
- 36 Stone, J. (1981). *Israel and Palestine: Assault on the Law of Nations*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 37 Curtis, M., Neyer, J., Waxman, C.I., and Pollack, A. (eds.) (1975). *The Palestinians: People, History, Politics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books [prepared under the auspices of the American Academic Association for Peace in the Middle East]—

especially essays by Marie Syrkin (199–208) and Terrence Prittie (213–227). See also Syrkin, M. (1971). Who are the Palestinians? In: *People and Politics in the Middle East* (ed. M. Curtis), 93–110. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books/E. P. Dutton [proceedings of the annual conference of the American Academic Association for Peace in the Middle East].

- [38](#) Tekoah, Y remarks, UNGA debates, 13 November 1974, *In the Face*, 154.
- [39](#) Tekoah, Y. *In the Face*, 155–156; Riebenfeld, P.S. (1975). The integrity of Palestine. *Midstream*: 7–27; Stone, J. *Israel and Palestine*, 22–25.
- [40](#) For a legal presentation of this claim, see Gerson, A. (1978). *Israel, the West Bank and International Law*. London/Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, 44–45. Cf. the counterarguments of Wasserstein, B. *Israelis and Palestinians*, 102–106.
- [41](#) Tekoah, Y. *In the Face*. remarks, UNGA debates, 13 November 1974, 161.
- [42](#) Cattan, H. (1976). *Palestine and International Law: The Legal Aspects of the Arab–Israel Conflict*, 2e, foreword by W.T. Mallison, Jr. London: Longman, ch. 6; Stone, J. *Israel and Palestine*.
- [43](#) Palestine National Charter, Arts. 19, 20 (cited above, p. 18), 22 (cited below, p. 188).
- [44](#) Interview in the *Sunday Times*, London, 15 June 1969, quoted in Muasher, M. (2008). *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 292 (n. 11). Cf. Kimmerling, B. and Migdal, J.S. (2003). *The Palestinian People: A History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, xxvi–xxvii.
- [45](#) Shamir, Y. (1982, Spring). Israel’s role in a changing Middle East. *Foreign Affairs* 60 (4): 791; cf. Muasher, M. *The Arab Center*, 21.

- 46 Muasher, M. *The Arab Center*, 21. On the politics and polemics of the Jordan–Palestine debates, see, e.g., Israeli, R. (2003). Is Jordan Palestine? In: *Israel, the Hashemites and the Palestinians: The Fateful Triangle* (ed. E. Karsh and P.R. Kumaraswamy), 49–66. London: Frank Cass; Susser, A. (2012). *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative*. Waltham MA: Brandeis University Press, 79–80, 171–198.
- 47 E.g. United Nations, Division for Palestinian Rights, “The Origins and Evolution of the Palestine Problem: 1917–1988—PART I, 1917–1947,” posted 30 June 1990 at <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/o/57C45A3DD0D46B09802564740045CCoA> (accessed 2 June 2018).
- 48 Two important markers were the statement of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near East and South Asian Affairs, Harold Saunders, to the US Congress House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, 12 November 1975, reproduced in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 203–206, and the Brookings Institution Report of a Study Group, *Toward Peace in the Middle East*, December 1975 at <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocument/Yearbook2/Pages/144%20Toward%20Peace%20in%20the%20Middle%20East-%20report%20of%20the.aspx> (accessed 2 June 2018). Several coauthors would soon become Middle East advisers to incoming US president Jimmy Carter.
- 49 Kelman, H.C. (2018). *Transforming the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: From Mutual Negation to Reconciliation* (ed. P. Mattar and N. Caplan), ch. 5. London/New York: Routledge.

9

From Camp David to the West Bank to Lebanon

Camp David and the Israel–Egypt Peace Process

In the wake of the October 1973 war, with its near-miss of a superpower nuclear confrontation, the main actors of international diplomacy went into high gear in pursuit of a settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict – although without inviting the Palestinians, as now represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), to join the process. Despite the perception of victory in surprising the Israelis, crossing the Suez Canal, and overrunning their front lines, Egypt and the Arab states were beginning to realize that there might be no purely military solution to their dispute with Israel and that diplomatic means needed to be employed as well. The Arab states meeting in Algiers in late November 1973 reiterated earlier declarations demanding full Israeli withdrawal from lands occupied in 1967 and affirming support for the Palestinians, but also hinted that the long-stymied movement from ceasefire to peace might be possible if two preconditions were met: (i) the evacuation by Israel of the occupied Arab territories, including Jerusalem, and (ii) the re-establishment of full national rights for the Palestinian people.¹

International efforts toward a settlement during this period were stage-managed by the United States, more specifically by its energetic Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. With unusual tenacity and cleverness, Kissinger made the US the pre-eminent broker and mediator in the Middle East, effectively sidelining the USSR which was, under a United Nations façade, a co-convener of the December 1973 Geneva Conference. This

conference, at which the Arab states and Israel were invited to sit down to discuss peace, opened with some predictably stiff and formulaic statements, and was promptly adjourned *sine die*. The idea of getting the parties to resume discussions in an international conference at Geneva or elsewhere was periodically floated without result until 1991 (see [Chapter 10](#)).

Under the umbrella of the adjourned Geneva Conference, Kissinger went on to perfect the art of “shuttle diplomacy” between Middle Eastern capitals, hammering out the terms of two disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt (signed 17 January 1974 and 1 September 1975), and one between Syria and Israel (31 May 1974). Not unlike the General Armistice Agreements brokered by Ralph Bunche in 1949, these accords were limited to military matters but nonetheless served as the basis for future attempts to negotiate peace. Although Israeli leaders were not always pleased with the concessions Kissinger pressed them to make, they did benefit from (and the Arab states were correspondingly disappointed by) his acceptance of two of Israel’s preferred negotiating strategies: to deal with each of the Arab states one by one, rather than together in a multilateral or multinational conference, and to exclude the PLO, despite its growing standing and popularity at the United Nations.

Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat engaged in negotiations with Kissinger with an eye to maneuvering Egypt closer to the US, in hopes of getting the Americans to exert some pressure on Israel. Correspondingly, Kissinger’s mediation activities positioned the US for the first time as the ideal “honest broker” between the Arab states and Israel. Following his inauguration as president in 1977, Jimmy Carter became personally involved in meeting individually with Israeli and Arab leaders in hopes of bringing them together in the search for peace. But when he started to coordinate efforts with the USSR for reconvening the Geneva Conference, he found himself upstaged by Israel’s new right-wing prime minister, Menachem Begin, and Egypt’s president, both

of whom preferred to open their own bilateral channel so as to avoid bringing in a wider circle of outside players.

After some top-secret diplomatic feelers with Israelis via Morocco, Sadat surprised friends and foes alike by dramatically announcing in the Egyptian National Assembly on 9 November 1977 that he was prepared to go anywhere – even the Israeli Knesset – to discuss the return of occupied Arab lands, a solution to the Palestinian problem and peace. Prime Minister Begin immediately issued an invitation. With the stalemate of 1967 broken and some measure of Arab dignity restored by the 1973 war, Sadat felt confident enough to break the taboo of direct dealings with the enemy and to engage in some daring diplomacy.

The dramatic visit of Sadat to Jerusalem (19–21 November 1977) included eloquent speeches in the Knesset,² broadcast throughout the region, and important backroom discussions which served as preliminary clarifications of the parties' positions on the issues in dispute. The bold gesture posed by Sadat had the effect of breaking some psychological barriers, and provided an important opening and direct contact that had been previously lacking. But the visit and the initial exchanges of views could not, in themselves, bring the parties closer together on many of the concrete and existential issues in dispute, illustrating the truth of Yehoshafat Harkabi's 1974 remark:

The day negotiations start will indeed be a great occasion for celebration. Yet let us remember the lessons psychologists teach—that direct contacts between human groups do not always draw them together, but may make them realize how far apart they are and thus lead to further estrangement.³

Difficult negotiations, in venues alternating between the two countries, ensued over the coming months and revealed some common ground but also frequent deadlocks and misunderstandings. It was becoming clear that there were two levels of difficulty to overcome: those bilateral issues between Egypt and Israel, on the one

hand, and the wider and deeper ones between the Arab world, the Palestinians, and Israel, on the other.⁴ As talks began to bog down, each party turned more and more to the US to lean on the other to behave more reasonably. When the negotiations seemed stalled and in danger of collapse, President Carter invited both heads of state to the secluded presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland, in September 1978 for what turned out to be eight days of intensive high-level talks.⁵

Reflecting the dichotomy between Israeli–Palestinian and broader Israeli–Arab issues, on the one hand, and more limited Israeli–Egyptian concerns, on the other, the historic breakthrough that became known as the Camp David Accords consisted of two documents: “A Framework for Peace in the Middle East” and “A Framework for the Conclusion of a Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel,” accompanied by a series of short American–Egyptian and American–Israeli side-letters in which additional conditions and commitments were laid out. The signatories were hoping (in vain, as it turned out) that the first framework document would serve as an opening for other Arab states and representatives of the Palestinians to come on board and expand the peace process beyond the bilateral. This document became the vehicle for launching “autonomy talks” dealing with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the outcome of which talks was supposed to “recognize the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and their just requirements. In this way, the Palestinians will participate in the determination of their own future.” The second framework document was translated into a formal treaty of peace, signed on the White House lawn on 26 March 1979 amid much festivity and joy, but not without some heckling from protesting supporters of the Palestinians outside the gates.⁶

Sadat’s “separate peace” was denounced by most Arab leaders and was seen as a blow to Palestinian national goals.⁷ But it was an understandable outcome of Egypt’s weariness for having shouldered more than its fair share of the Arab world’s burden of fighting the Palestine cause

in three major wars, and signaled the country's temporary disengagement from the pan-Arab fold. Sadat was immediately vilified for breaking ranks and treasonous behavior.⁸ But he had succeeded, unlike his more rhetorically militant brothers, in liberating at least some Arab soil from Israeli control. For going it alone, Egypt was ostracized for a decade from pan-Arab forums, while Sadat paid the supreme personal price of being assassinated while reviewing a military parade in October 1981.⁹

In April 1982, the Israeli army completed the forced evacuation of resisting Jewish settlers from the Sinai settlement of Yamit, fulfilling the main territorial obligations under the treaty. Despite a number of external pressures on Egypt and complaints of non-compliance with treaty commitments, this first ever Israel–Arab peace treaty has endured to this day. But the quality of the people-to-people relations between the two countries – diplomatic, economic, touristic – has been uneven, mostly described as a “cold peace.” It would only be in Madrid in 1991 that the original Camp David participants would see other Arab states and the Palestinians agreeing to join in their “circle of peace.”

The West Bank and Gaza after Camp David

In retrospect, it may seem easy to criticize the authors of the Camp David Accords for not finding a successful formula for including the Palestinians. Yet, given the firmly entrenched positions of both Israel (and its US backers) and the PLO (and its Arab, Soviet, and other backers) regarding their conditions for agreeing to recognize and negotiate directly with each other, it is likely that no amount of creative diplomacy at Camp David could have brought the Palestinians into the framers' chosen “Framework for Peace in the Middle East.”

In the West Bank and Gaza, captured by Israel in the June 1967 war, relations were becoming increasingly strained as the number of settlers jumped sharply under Likud prime minister Menachem Begin from 3200 Israelis living in 24 settlements in 1977, to 16 200 in 68 settlements in 1981, and 42 600 in over 100 settlements by 1984. This increase involved further encroachment on Palestinian lands and required enhanced protection from army and border police.¹⁰ By this time many of the more than 1 million Palestinians in these areas had become dependent on work as day laborers traveling back and forth from their towns and villages to sites inside Israel. The quality of these Israeli–Palestinian relationships on the ground – between occupier and occupied, between boss and worker – was problematic, harsh, and sometimes brutal.¹¹ Years continued to go by, nullifying initial expectations that the occupation would end after a few years with politicians sitting down to work out the details of a land-for-peace arrangement. Human rights abuses became common as the Israeli authorities, military in essence but with a civilian veneer, ruled over a largely peaceful, but resentful, population.¹²

Despite the necessities of public relations to portray the occupation as enlightened and benign to the Israeli public and to the world, and despite Israelis’ desire to behave and be perceived as sensitive and respectful, the truth, as Israeli historian Benny Morris described it, “was radically different”:

Like all occupations, Israel’s was founded on brute force, repression and fear, collaboration and treachery, beatings and torture chambers, and daily intimidation, humiliation, and manipulation. True, the relative lack of resistance and civil disobedience over the years enabled the Israelis to maintain a façade of normalcy and implement their rule with a relatively small force....¹³

American political scientist Alan Dowty agrees: “Military occupation was still military occupation, even when carried out by a democratic state and even if it included

material benefits.”¹⁴ Many of the measures required by military occupation are, by definition, inconsistent with the usual rights and freedoms espoused by democratic states and enjoyed by their citizens. Although limited by certain international legal norms, the occupying power is allowed considerable leeway for security measures if deemed necessary for the protection of the (supposedly temporary) occupation forces and the maintenance of general public order. And so expulsions, curfews, checkpoints, restrictions on movement, deportations, school or business closures, administrative detention, house demolitions, requisitioning of land for often questionable “military” purposes – all these became part of the daily lives of Palestinians under Israeli rule on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip.¹⁵

Given the absence of negotiation and the continuation of the occupation into the 1970s, through the 1980s, and beyond, tensions were further aggravated by two factors. One was the rise of a violent form of vigilantism among a portion of the Jewish settler population; the other was a basic ambiguity regarding Israel’s ultimate intentions. Generating a cycle of attacks and counterattacks, Palestinians terrorized Jewish settlers by targeting their vehicles traveling to and from West Bank settlements and by occasional ambushes on them when they entered towns like Hebron, where Jewish and Muslim holy places overlapped.¹⁶ Jewish settlers depended not only on protection from the military, but they also carried their own arms. Often these armed settlers became an unruly and intimidating presence, taking revenge as they saw fit. The army was called upon to intervene to rein in some of the more aggressive settlers who took to bullying Palestinian farmers, villagers, and townspeople near their settlements.¹⁷

In the early 1980s some radical settlers formed an underground gang named “TNT” (Hebrew acronym for “terror against terror”) which planted bombs on Palestinian buses and targeted the vehicles of several prominent mayors. Justifying the vigilante violence were the familiar arguments of deterrence (especially where

the army was criticized for failing to provide adequate protection) and retaliation. The latter was given additional religious sanction by some rabbis who regarded the land as Biblically promised to Jews; strangers (i.e. Arabs), therefore, should leave or be made to leave. Some fundamentalist settlers also came to view Palestinians as modern-day embodiments of Amalek of the Bible – the tribe mentioned in the Bible as deserving to be forever pursued until they were wiped off the face of the earth.¹⁸

A deeper and broader contributor to the tensions was a basic ambiguity regarding Israel's intentions. Would the government, especially (but not only) if the right-wing nationalist Likud Party was in power, accede to the wishes of a vocal fundamentalist minority of its citizens and, happy to enjoy the fruits of additional real estate, move gradually toward annexing the territories and making them part of the Greater Land of Israel (*Eretz-Israel ha-Shlema*), as per Biblical prophecies? Or would the government – moved by the secular worldview of the majority of its citizens under a left-leaning Labor government employing pragmatic, strategic calculations – ultimately agree to return most of the occupied areas, withdrawing its troops, settlers, and other presence as soon as acceptable peace arrangements could be made with Jordan? (Israeli leaders preferred dealing with the Hashemite Kingdom, rather than the PLO, still viewed as a terrorist organization.) In other words, was Israel treating the territories captured in 1967 as future parts of an expanded Land of Israel, or as bargaining chips to be traded for peace in accordance with Resolution 242? Government policies and statements seemed, at times, to be saying both.

In the absence of clear or consistent signals from Israel's leaders, time did not stand still, and facts – notably the expansion of Jewish settlements and the infrastructure needed to maintain and protect them – continued to be created on the ground. Tension and violence became the common language between Israelis and Palestinians in the occupied territories, while Israel and the PLO

maintained their mutual boycott in the political sphere. There was, however, the occasional maverick in both camps who risked legal, political, or physical sanctions and dared to talk to the enemy secretly or on neutral ground, in defiance of the national consensus. Conflict fatigue and the quest for reconciliation motivated dialogue efforts by these “peaceniks,” some of whom, like Palestinian activists Issam Sartawi and Said Hamami, took an assassin’s bullet for their treason and willingness to talk to the enemy. In a way, these precursors of the 1970s and 1980s¹⁹ helped to pave the way for higher-level Israeli–Palestinian dialogue when that taboo would finally be broken in Oslo in 1993 (see [Chapter 10](#)).

The main Palestinian-related follow-up of Camp David was the attempt to conduct negotiations about Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank – known to most Israelis by their Hebrew Biblical names, *Yehuda ve-Shomron* (Judaea and Samaria) – and the Gaza Strip. For two years from the middle of 1980, about 20 meetings were convened among Israeli, Egyptian, and US delegates. But these dissolved with no real Palestinian involvement and no result other than increased bitterness and cynicism on the part of participants. The whole enterprise was plagued by a wide gap of interests and interpretations, underlying which was a determined pattern of Israeli–Palestinian mutual non-recognition, expressed in the following ways:

1. The Israeli, Egyptian, and Palestinian concepts of autonomy and definitions of self-rule were wildly divergent in spirit and in application. By recognizing only autonomy of the *people*, but not applying to the *land*, Begin’s autonomy plan deliberately sought to avoid treating the Palestinians as a national community. To Egyptians and Palestinians, the very idea of self-rule presupposed an evolution toward self-determination – if not a Palestinian state, then an entity of some kind – precisely the red line that Begin would not cross.²⁰

2. The Israeli insistence on excluding the PLO and people affiliated with it was matched by the PLO's refusal to participate in these talks, which it denounced as a "Camp David plot" to co-opt Palestinians in a sham autonomy that would never lead to self-determination.
3. Those Palestinians who showed any interest in this process were treated as traitors, as the PLO managed to enforce, sometimes using brute intimidation, a boycott against participation.
4. Arab and Palestinian bitterness hung like a cloud over the talks as it became clear that the Begin government – contrary to what both President Carter and Anwar Sadat had understood at Camp David – had no intention of freezing plans for building new Jewish settlements in the territories.

Fifteen years later, the difficult transition to creating a "Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority" called for under the 1993 Israeli–Palestinian "Declaration of Principles" (see [Chapter 10](#)) would display some uncanny parallels to the deadlocks and attitudes encountered during these preliminary discussions about Palestinian autonomy. Some commentators would also look back to Palestinian rejection of the Begin plan as a "missed opportunity" for advancing their goal of statehood.

The episode of the autonomy talks overlapped with ongoing Israeli policies in the territories that sought to strengthen leaders from rural villages into an anti-PLO political force known as the "Village Leagues." This effort was seen as fostering so-called moderates against extremists, and recalled Zionist support for anti-Mufti political groups during the 1920s in Mandatory Palestine.²¹ These Israeli tactics fed into existing political rivalries within the Palestinian community. As in earlier periods, struggles among competing factions and individuals claiming to speak on behalf of all Palestinians constituted a weakness of the national movement in its confrontation with both the pre-1948 *yishuv* and Israel. Ultimately, pro-PLO forces won the credibility and

leadership battle among West Bank and Gaza Palestinians.²² This evolution was, for many Israelis, a slow and unwelcome lesson about the impossibility of selecting one's peace-partner, and the need to make peace with one's enemies, however unworthy or detestable their official representatives may appear.

Operation “Peace for Galilee”: Israel Invades Lebanon, 1982

With southern Lebanon serving as the main staging area both for Palestinian raids into and shelling of Israel after 1970, the Israeli–Lebanon frontier became a war zone with a steady escalation of attacks and counterattacks. After completing its evacuation of Sinai in April 1982, Israel actively considered forceful military action to remove the military threat from “Fatahland,” as some called the southern zone of Lebanon – which seemed to be ruled by PLO forces rather than by the Lebanese government in Beirut.

The assassination attempt on an Israeli diplomat in London was the provocation Israel used for launching a full-scale invasion of southern Lebanon on 6 June 1982. Beyond the declared military goal of driving back Palestinian bases and artillery to a distance of 40 km from Israel's northern boundary, an important political aim was to expel the PLO from Lebanon altogether. Some Israelis hoped also to engineer a régime change in Beirut, realigning internal Lebanese politics (with its heavy Syrian influences) in a way more favorable to Israeli interests, and to sign a peace treaty with Lebanon's future rulers.

In an effort to force the departure of PLO and other Palestinian offices and fighters from Beirut, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) laid siege to the Lebanese capital for seven weeks. The precise end date of the war is difficult to pin down (perhaps late August or early September). Numerous ceasefire agreements, partial redeployments, and tactical arrangements resulted in the retreat, some three years later, of Israeli forces south of a

line several kilometers north of the international frontier. In the name of protecting its towns and settlements in the north, Israel declared these Lebanese border areas to be a security zone, which the IDF controlled for the next 15 years with the help of a proxy force, the South Lebanese Army, created expressly for the purpose of excluding or controlling Palestinian fighters and artillery.²³

The 1982 war cost Israel 650 deaths initially; the toll had risen to 1000 by the time Israel finally withdrew its last soldiers from the security zone in mid-2000. According to official Lebanese statistics, 17 825 Lebanese and Palestinians, 84% of whom were civilians, were killed in what Israel called “Operation Peace for Galilee.” It had several significant political ramifications and aftershocks, including:

1. The evacuation of more than 14 000 Palestinian activists and fighters from southern and central Lebanon, and the transfer of PLO offices from Beirut to Tunis.
2. The intensification of a longstanding tacit Israeli alliance with a faction of the Maronite Christians, leading to an Israeli–Lebanese peace agreement, signed on 17 May 1983 but abrogated by the Lebanese within a year.²⁴
3. Unprecedented sharp polarization within Israel. A large portion of the population remained unconvinced about the security and moral justifications for the war, and questioned the wisdom of the country’s political and military leaders.²⁵
4. The massacres at Sabra and Shatilla. Taking advantage of the departure of PLO fighters, Lebanese Christian militias on 16–18 September settled old scores by entering these two refugee camps and massacring between 800 and 2000 Palestinians (estimates vary widely), mostly civilians. The complicity of the Israeli forces in assisting the Phalangist marauders led to much

criticism of the political or moral responsibility of individual Israelis, and collectively of the IDF.²⁶

Righteous Victimhood in the 1980s

With the expulsion of the PLO headquarters from Beirut and guerilla bases from south Lebanon, Palestinian political and military affairs were directed from Tunis and elsewhere. Although Israel's northern frontier areas remained relatively quiet, terrorist operations continued to be directed at Israeli and Jewish targets, largely by rejectionist factions defying the PLO's caution and efforts at respectability (see [Chapter 10](#)). After September 1982, the names Sabra and Shatilla were added to Deir Yasin (1948) and Kafr Qasem (1956)²⁷ on the list of atrocities that have been seared into the memories of Palestinians, increasing their sense of vulnerability and victimhood at the receiving end of Israeli power, and as a fragmented community, many of whose members lived as unwelcome refugees dispersed throughout the Arab world.

This latest victimization of Palestinians in Lebanon serves to remind us of the important undercurrent of righteous victimhood that animates both Israelis and Palestinians, contributing to each party's almost unique focus on its own suffering, in effect reducing its ability to empathize with and recognize any legitimate claims or fears of the other. Paradoxically, Israelis continued – even while on the offensive and displaying great military superiority during the latest war – to perceive themselves as endangered victims, still as little David facing the mighty Arab Goliath. Not accepted by a resentful Arab world bent on justice or revenge for Israel's victories in the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973, Israelis were entering a fourth decade of economic boycott, hostility, and relentless cross-border terrorist attacks, producing attitudes labeled by some psychologists as siege mentality, “Masada complex,” or “Samson syndrome.”²⁸ Strangely, perhaps, the Israeli Jewish self-perception of *powerlessness* coexists along

with the reality of near-hegemonic Israeli *power* when measured comparatively or in regional and global perspective.²⁹

As a survivor of the Holocaust, Prime Minister Menachem Begin made a major contribution to this particularly Jewish Israeli way of viewing the world – not only believing “the whole world is against us,” but also saying “to hell with the Goyim” [non-Jews].³⁰ Begin introduced into Israeli foreign relations his own personal testament, making it almost a policy objective during his tenure that “never again” would Jews – and especially Israeli Jews living in their own sovereign state – be allowed to become victims.³¹ In his public utterances Begin was not averse to plainspoken displays of Holocaust remembrance, whether on ostensibly joyous occasions, such as the signing of the Egypt–Israel peace treaty in March 1979, or on menacing ones, e.g. when justifying Israel’s risky bombing of the Osirak nuclear facility near Baghdad in 1981.³²

Both sides have also crassly resorted to what may be called “nazification” of the enemy. In the course of defining Zionism, Article 22 of the PLO’s National Charter referred to the movement’s “essentially fanatical and racist” nature and described its methods as being “those of the Fascists and the Nazis.”³³ In the wake of Israel’s battlefield victories, Arabs and their supporters often depicted the Israelis as behaving toward them as the Nazis had behaved toward the Jews of Europe, with political cartoonists cleverly twisting the Star of David into the shape of a swastika. This motif was also present in the 1982 portrayals of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon as cruel Nazis in their treatment of Lebanese and Palestinian civilians during Israel’s invasion of Lebanon. Likewise, the 1988 Charter (Covenant) of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) explicitly refers to the Nazi-like qualities and behavior of the Jews.³⁴

Zionists and Israelis, for their part, focused on the wartime record of the exiled Mufti of Jerusalem. Even today, some publications, websites, and journalists are

obsessed with presenting the ex-Mufti as a demonic, Hitler-like figure, suggesting an equation between Hitler's all-out war against world Jewry and the contemporary Palestinian and Arab nationalist struggles against Zionism and Israel.³⁵ In 1982, Prime Minister Begin viewed "Operation Peace for Galilee" not as an aggressive attack on a neighboring country but rather as a defensive war in which Jewish soldiers were not only defending the northern villages of their homeland by driving back the PLO, but also entering Lebanon to protect defenseless Christians from their Muslim – "Nazi" – oppressors. For Begin, Yasir Arafat was "a latter-day Hitler" and the Palestine National Charter was another *Mein Kampf*. The pre-1967 borders of Israel were, in Begin's rhetoric, "Auschwitz borders," and the PLO was "the Arab S.S." Failure to launch a massive Israeli attack on the PLO in Lebanon in June 1982, the prime minister reportedly told his Cabinet colleagues, would have been nothing less than "Treblinka" – "and we have decided that there will not be another Treblinka." Similarly, the IDF's siege of the PLO's Beirut headquarters was likened by Begin and others to the 1945 bombardment of Hitler's Berlin bunker.³⁶

These deeply felt, parallel Israeli and Palestinian feelings of victimhood remain inextricable psychological obstacles to resolving the conflict. To an outside observer they may seem far-fetched, and those who employ genocidal motifs may appear to be fear-mongers and demagogues. Yet our efforts to understand the conflict will not be advanced by wishing away these ingrained perceptions of victimhood, or by advising the parties to get over them, move on, and put the past behind them. We will return to grapple with this obstacle again in [Chapter 13](#).

Notes

- ¹ Declaration of the Arab Summit Conference at Algiers, 28 November 1973 at http://cns.miis.edu/nam/documents/Official_Docum

[ent/4th Summit FD Algiers Declaration 1973 Whole.pdf](#) (accessed 9 May 2018).

- 2 Sadat's speech before the Israeli Knesset ("Peace with Justice"), 20 November 1977, reproduced in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 207–215, and available online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-33.html>; Begin's reply in *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, 147–153, and available online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-34.html>.
- 3 Harkabi, Y. (1974). *Palestinians and Israel*, 209. New York: John Wiley. Cf. Kelman, H.C. (2005). The psychological impact of the Sadat visit on Israeli society. *Peace and Conflict* II (2): 111–136.
- 4 One scholar has argued that there is a third, perhaps more important, dimension of the Israel–Egypt relationship, namely a cultural divide, which meant that their negotiations efforts resembled a "dialogue of the deaf." See Cohen, R. (1990). *Culture and Conflict in Egyptian–Israeli Relations: A Dialogue of the Deaf*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- 5 Two of the best treatments of this historic episode are Touval, S. (1982). *The Peace Brokers: Mediators in the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1948–1979*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, ch. 10, and Quandt, W.B. *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. Additional insights into the minds of the participants can be gleaned from Wright, L. (2014). *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. For firsthand accounts, see: Quandt, W.B. (1986). *Camp David*; Kamel, M.I., *The Camp David Accords: A Testimony*. New York: KPI; Boutros-Ghali, B. (1997). *Egypt's Road to Jerusalem*. New York: Random House; Dayan, M. (1981). *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt–Israel Peace Negotiations*. London: Weidenfeld and

Nicolson; Weizman, E. (1981). *The Battle for Peace*. New York: Bantam; Carter, J. (1982). *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*. New York: Bantam; Bzrezinski, Z. (1983). *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977–1981*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Vance, C. (1983). *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy*. New York: Simon and Schuster. See also: *The Legacy of Camp David: 1979–2009*. Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2009 at <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Legacy-Camp-David.pdf> (accessed 16 October 2018); Golan, G. (2015). *Israeli Peacemaking since 1967: Behind the Breakthroughs and Failures*. London/New York: Routledge, ch. 2; Podeh, E. (2015). *Chances for Peace: Missed Opportunities in the Arab–Israeli Conflict*. Austin: University of Texas Press, ch. 12.

6 The frameworks and the treaty are reproduced, in abridged form, in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 222–228; more complete versions can be found in Quandt, W.B. *Camp David*, 376–387, 397–401 and online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-37.html>. and <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-39.html>.

7 See Anziska, S. (2018). *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

8 For excerpts of Arab and Palestinian statements denouncing Sadat's moves at the time, see *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*, 335–337, and *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 228–231; Arab League Summit Communiqué, Baghdad, 31 March 1979, in *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, 463–467, and online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-40.html>. For a critique of Israel's negotiation strategy at Camp David, see Anziska, S. (2018). How Israel undermined

Washington and stalled the dream of Palestinian Statehood. *New York Times*, 20 September.

- 9 For a retrospective discussion and tribute to the late Egyptian president by eighteen scholars and diplomats, see *Sadat and His Legacy: Egypt and the World, 1977–1997* (ed. and introduced by J.B. Alterman). Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998.
- 10 Peleg, I. (1987). *Begin's Foreign Policy, 1977–1983: Israel's Turn to the Right*, 110–111, 137. Westport, CT: Greenwood; Shafir, G. (2017). *A Half Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine, and the World's Most Intractable Conflict*, 59. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- 11 See e.g. the Karp Report: An Israeli Government Inquiry into Settler Violence on the West Bank, 7 February 1984, extract in Peleg, I. (1995). *Human Rights in the West Bank and Gaza: Legacy and Politics*, 147–151, discussed 90–91. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press; Shulman, D. (2007). *Dark Hope: Working for Peace in Israel and Palestine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 12 See e.g. Sfard, M. (2018). *The Wall and the Gate: Israel, Palestine, and the Legal Battle for Human Rights* (transl. M. Johnston). New York: Metropolitan Books.
- 13 Morris, B. (2000). *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist–Arab Conflict, 1881–1999*, 341. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999/London: John Murray.
- 14 Dowty, A. (1998). *The Jewish State: A Century Later*, 221. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.
- 15 For a sampling of descriptions of Palestinian life and Israel's behavior in the territories, especially during the first two decades of Israeli occupation, see: Tawil, R.H. (1979). *My Home, My Prison*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Shehadeh, R. (1984). *Samed:*

Journal of a West Bank Palestinian. New York: Adama Books; Dowty, A. *The Jewish State*, 217–226; Peleg, I. *Human Rights in the West Bank and Gaza*; Shafir, G., *A Half Century of Occupation*; Mallison, W.T. and Mallison, S.V. (1986). *The Palestine Problem in International Law and World Order*, 240–275. Harlow, UK: Longman; Quigley, J. (2005). *The Case for Palestine: An International Law Perspective* (rev. and updated ed.), 168–188. Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press. For pro-Israeli perspectives, see: Bruno, M. (1972). Israeli policy in the “Administered Territories”. In: *Israel, the Arabs and the Middle East* (ed. I. Howe and C. Gershman), 249–265. New York: Bantam; Dershowit, A. (1978). Civil liberties in Israel: The problem of preventive detention. In: *Israel, the Arabs and The Middle East* (ed. I. Howe and C. Gershman), 266–299; Gerson, A. (1978). *Israel, the West Bank and International Law*. London/Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, ch. III; Dershowitz, A. (2003). *The Case for Israel*. New York: John Wiley, chs. 19, 22, 24, 25.

- 16** See e.g. Shipler, D.K. (2002). *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land* (rev. ed.). New York: Penguin, ch. 3.
- 17** For a disturbing and credible eyewitness account of this pattern of violence, see Shulman, D. *Dark Hope*. See also the following websites: Ta’ayush: Arab-Jewish Partnership, at <https://www.taayush.org>; Btselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories at <https://www.btselem.org>; Breaking the Silence [soldiers’ testimonies] at www.breakingthesilence.org.il (websites accessed 17 October 2018).
- 18** Exodus 17:14–16, Deuteronomy 25:17–18. On the fundamentalist religious basis for claims to the land and justification for violence against Arabs, see e.g. Tal, U. (1985). Foundations of a political Messianic trend in Israel. *Jerusalem Quarterly* 35: 36–45; Lustick, I.S. (1988). *For the Land and the Lord*:

Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel. New York: Council on Foreign Relations; Sagi, A. (1994). The punishment of Amalek in Jewish tradition: Coping with the moral problem. *The Harvard Theological Review* 87 (3): 323–346; Siegman, H. (1988). The perils of Messianic politics. In: *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish–American Responses to the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict* (ed. and introduced by T. Kushner and A. Solomon), vol. 2003, 114. New York: Grove Press; Cromer, G. (2001). Amalek as Other, Other as Amalek: Interpreting a violent biblical narrative. *Qualitative Sociology* 24 (2): 191–202; Wasserstein, B. (2008). *Israelis and Palestinians: Why Do They Fight? Can They Stop?*, 3e, 165–167. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press/London: Profile Books.

19. See e.g. Flapan, S. (ed.) (1979). *When Enemies Dare to Talk: An Israeli–Palestinian Debate* (5/6 September 1978). London: Croom Helm; Avnery, U. (1986). *My Friend, the Enemy*. Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill; Heikal, M. (1996). *Secret Channels: The Inside Story of Arab–Israeli Peace Negotiations*, 321–325. London: HarperCollins; [PLO] Committee for the Occupied Homeland Report on Contact with Jews, Damascus, 21 April 1981, in *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, 357; Agha, H., Feldman, S., Khalidi, A., and Schiff, Z. (2003). *Track-II Diplomacy: Lessons from the Middle East*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, ch. 2; Salem, W. and Kaufman, E. (2006). Palestinian–Israeli Peacebuilding: A Historical Perspective. In: *Bridging the Divide: Peacebuilding in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict* (ed. E. Kaufman, W. Salem, and J., Verhoeven), foreword by N. Chazan and H. Siniora, 22–31. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

20. Begin’s ideas on autonomy were given for the first time in a Knesset speech, 28 December 1977, in *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, 153–155, available online at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-35.html>

(extracts in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 218–220). An Egyptian and a later Israeli autonomy proposal can be found in *The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Documentary Record, 1967–1990*, 160–170. For critical discussions, see Peleg, I. *Begin’s Foreign Policy*, ch. 4; Maoz, Z. (2006). *Defending the Holy Land: A Critical Analysis of Israel’s Security and Foreign Policy*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 436–442. For a participant’s view of the work of the Israeli–Egyptian autonomy committee, see Dowek, E. (2001). *Israeli–Egyptian Relations, 1980–2000*, foreword by Yitshak Shamir. London: Frank Cass, ch. 15.

[21](#) For background, see e.g. Caplan, N. (2015). *Palestine Jewry and the Arab Question, 1917–1925*. London: [Frank Cass, 1978] Routledge RLE, ch. 7, and Caplan, N. (1977). Arab–Jewish contacts in Palestine after the First World War. *Journal of Contemporary History* XII (4): 635–668; Cohen, H. (2008). *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917–1948* (transl. Haim Watzman). Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.

[22](#) For an insider Israeli account of these developments, see Gazit, S. (2003). *Trapped Fools: Thirty Years of Israeli Policy in the Territories*, introduced by Shimon Peres, 208–238. London: Frank Cass. For a critical look at the Village Leagues, see Tamari, S. (1983). In league with Zion: Israel’s search for a native pillar. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12 (4): 41–56; Sayigh, Y. (1997). *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993*, 483–484. Oxford: Oxford University Press/Washington, DC: The Institute for Palestine Studies; Nusseibeh, S., with David, A. (2007). *Once upon a Country: A Palestinian Life, 197–201*, 208–209. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. See also Statement of West Bank Palestinians, 30 August 1981, reproduced in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 235–236; Ma’oz, M. (1984). *Palestinian Leadership on the West Bank: The Changing Role of the Mayors under*

Jordan and Israel, with a contribution from Mordechai Nisan, 176–183. London: Frank Cass.

- 23** On the 1982 war, see Ze'ev, S. and Ya'ari, E. (1984). *Israel's Lebanon War* (ed. and transl. I. Friedman). New York: Simon and Schuster; Khalidi, R. (1986). *Under Siege: P.L.O. Decisionmaking during the 1982 War*. New York: Columbia University Press; Peleg, I. *Begin's Foreign Policy*, ch. 5; Morris, B. *Righteous Victims*, ch. 11; Zisser, E. (2004). The 1982 "Peace for Galilee" War: Looking back in anger—Between an option of a war and a war of no option. In: *A Never-Ending Conflict: A Guide to Israeli Military History* (ed. M. Bar-On), 193–210. Westport, CT/London: Praeger.
- 24** Eisenberg, L.Z. and Caplan, N. (2010). *Negotiating Arab–Israeli Peace: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities*, 2e. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, ch. 2, and at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-44.html>; Morris, B. *Righteous Victims*, 549–550.
- 25** For the Government's justifications, see M. Begin's speech, "The Wars of No Alternative and Operation Peace for Galilee," in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 253–256. See also Zisser, E. The 1982 "Peace for Galilee" War and Peleg, I. *Begin's Foreign Policy*, 165–175.
- 26** Kahan, Y., Barak, A., and Efrat, Y., *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the atrocity carried out by a unit of the Lebanese Forces against the civilian population in the Shatilla and Sabra camps*; Jerusalem, 7 February 1983. Extracts in *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 269–273. Full text available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-43.html>. For a recent study revealing secret annex documents to this report, see Anziska, S. (2018, 17 September). Sabra and Shatila: New revelations. *New York Review of Books Daily* at <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/09/17/sabra->

[and-shatila-new-revelations](#) (accessed 21 September 2018). In 2000, using new international conventions for the punishment of war criminals, pro-Palestinian and human rights workers would initiate action to pursue the minister of defense at the time (and later prime minister), Ariel Sharon, in the courts, but without success.

27. On the Deir Yasin massacre, see [Chapter 6](#), note 54. In October 1956, during a build-up of tension along the Israeli–Jordanian frontier and as Israel was secretly preparing for war against Egypt, farmers returning to their village of Kafr Qasem were gunned down by IDF troops for violating a curfew that was imposed on short notice without their knowledge. For recent revelations of the massacre and subsequent cover-up by historian Adam Raz, see Ofer Aderet. (2018, 5 July) Residents of Arab village demand Israel open archives on 1956 massacre. *Haaretz*. Ofer Aderet. (2018, 11 October). General’s final confession links 1956 massacre to Israel’s secret plan to expel Arabs. *Haaretz*.

28. Gonen, J.Y. (1975). *A Psychohistory of Zionism*. New York: Mason Charter, ch. 13; Kedar, B.Z. (1982). Masada: The myth and the complex. *Jerusalem Quarterly* 24: 57–63; Ben-Yehuda, N. (1995). *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press; Hareven, S. (1995). Identity: Victim. In: *The Vocabulary of Peace: Life, Culture and Politics in the Middle East*, 148–154. San Francisco: Mercury House; Grossman, D. (2006). *Lion’s Honey: The Myth of Samson*. London: Canongate; Diski, J. (2006). Heaps upon heaps. *London Review of Books* 28: 14, 20; Sasson, T. and Kelner, S. (2008). From shrine to forum: Masada and the politics of Jewish extremism. *Israel Studies* 13 (2): 146–163.

29. See e.g. Biale, D. (1986). *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*. New York: Schocken; Shapira, A. (1999). *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force*,

1881–1948 (transl. William Templer), 369–370. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- 30 Bar-On, M. (1998). Historiography as an educational project: The historians' debate in Israel and the Middle East peace process. In: *The Middle East Peace Process: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (ed. I. Peleg), 27–28. Albany: State University of New York Press. A similar, more elegantly expressed sentiment was attributed to David Ben-Gurion, whose dictum was “What matters is not what the *goyim* say, but what the Jews do.”
- 31 For a discussion of the impact of the Holocaust on Begin's thinking and political behavior, see Peleg, I. *Begin's Foreign Policy*, 63–68.
- 32 Caplan, N. (1999). The Holocaust and the Arab–Israeli conflict. In: *So Others Will Remember: Holocaust History and Survivor Testimony* (ed. R. Headland), 90–92. Montreal: Véhicule Press.
- 33 Palestine National Covenant (or Charter), Cairo, 17 July 1968, reproduced in Harkabi, Y. (1979). *The Palestinian Covenant and Its Meaning*. London: Valentine Mitchell, 123, following the English translation given in a volume produced by the Institute for Palestine Studies in 1971. Another translation, published by the PLO Research Center in 1969, offers a different phrasing: viz., “fascist in its methods,” omitting the word “Nazi.” See *The Palestinian Covenant and Its Meaning*, 117; *The Israel–Arab Reader*, 119; <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-20.html>. For other examples, see Harkabi, Y. (1972). *Arab Attitudes to Israel*, 176–177. Jerusalem: Keter.
- 34 Articles 20 and 31. For the text of the Hamas Charter, see Mishal, S. and Sela, A. (2000). *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 188, 195; available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.ca/2009/09/document-52.html>.

- 35 E.g. Netanyahu, B. (2000). *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place among the Nations* (rev. ed.), 206–216. New York: Warner Books; Pryce-Jones, D. (2002, 23 July). Some Arabs bandy Hitler anti-Semitism. *National Review* at <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/926940/Some-Arabs-bandy-Hitler-anti-Semitism.html>; http://www.zionism-israel.com/dic/Haj_Amin_El_Husseini.htm (accessed online 25 June 2018); http://www.palestinefacts.org/pf_mandate_grand_mufti; Morse, C. The Faisal–Weizmann Agreement, the Mufti and Hitler. The Nazi connection to Islamic terrorism. *The Jewish Magazine* at <http://www.jewishmag.com/116mag/chuckmorse/chuckmorse.htm> (accessed 25 June 2018); “Hitler, the Mufti of Jerusalem and modern Islamo Nazism” at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d51poygEXYU> (accessed 25 June 2018); Dalin, D.G. and Rothmann, J.F. (2008). *Icon of Evil*. New York: Random House, reviewed by David Pryce-Jones (2008, 26 June). Malevolence and the Mufti. *Wall Street Journal* at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121443841364405405> (accessed 25 June 2018).
- 36 Schiff, Z. and Ya’ari, E. (1984). *Israel’s Lebanon War*, vol. 39, 220. New York: Simon and Schuster; Peleg, I. *Begin’s Foreign Policy*, 65, 67; Morris, B. *Righteous Victims*, 514. For criticism of Begin’s use of the Holocaust by leading Israeli intellectuals at the time, see Morris, B. *Righteous Victims*, 514–515; Yehoshua, A.B. (1981). The Holocaust as junction. In: *Between Right and Right*, 1–19. New York: Doubleday.

10

From Mutual Boycott to Mutual Recognition, 1982–1995

The longstanding mutual boycott between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Israel and most of the Arab world, continued to be the dominant pattern of their relations throughout the 1980s. This major taboo of non-recognition had been broken in the case of the largest Arab state, Egypt, leading to the resolution, albeit slow and halting,¹ of many specific bilateral issues. But a residue of unresolved core (pre-1948) and post-1967 grievances continued to fester among the Palestinians and Israel's other Arab neighbors. The spillover effects of the non-resolution of the Palestinian aspects of the conflict were felt mostly in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, as well as by Israeli civilians and Palestinian refugees, both suffering their toll from cross-border attacks and reprisals. Nonetheless, the parties during the 1980s and early 1990s inched closer toward mutual recognition – a minimal prerequisite for any attempt at resolving their century-old conflict.

Peace Plans and Planting Seeds

The 1980s witnessed several international and regional efforts to engage the parties in discussing peace plans. Although there was no immediate result from the succession of proposals, a number of ideas considered and rejected or abandoned during the 1980s would resurface in the following decade with more positive results.

On 1 September 1982 US president Ronald Reagan sought to transform the debris of Israel's Lebanon war into a resumption of the unfinished business of broadening the Camp David peace process. Reagan called upon the Arab states, Palestinians, and Israelis to

begin discussions under American mediation, but his suggestion for an autonomous West Bank federated with Jordan was unacceptable to Palestinians and anathema to Israel's Likud government, leading to the quick failure of his initiative.² Not wishing to be outdone, Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev issued his own peace plan for the Middle East several weeks later.³ At the same time, leaders of the Arab states at a summit meeting in Fez, Morocco, considered proposals by Saudi Arabia's King Fahd to fine-tune their conditions for peace with Israel.⁴ But there was little new or attractive enough to elicit a positive Israeli response that would open up a diplomatic process at this time.

During the mid-1980s the Israel–Lebanon frontier cooled down somewhat, but the Arab–Israeli conflict continued to simmer with cross-border violence, punctuated by the occasional high-profile international terrorist and counterterrorist operations. For example, Israeli planes attacked PLO headquarters in Tunis on 1 October 1985, and one radical Palestinian faction (working to outbid rivals with spectacular operations) followed shortly thereafter with the hijacking of an Italian cruise liner, throwing overboard a wheelchair-bound American Jewish tourist in the process.⁵ In 1988, Israeli hit squads also penetrated PLO leaders' compounds in Tunis and assassinated high-ranking PLO official Khalil al-Wazir, aka Abu Jihad. Members of the United Nations Security Council found themselves again handling complaints dealing with breaches of, or threats to, the peace submitted by, or against, Israel, Arab states and the Palestinians.

During the 1980s US Secretary of State George Shultz continued the American policy of considering the Palestinians on two levels: one, the population living under Israeli occupation and in refugee camps, and the other, the shunned PLO, although it was now recognized by an increasing number of countries as the “sole legitimate representative” of the Palestinian people. At various times Shultz visited the region in attempts to engage Jordanian, Israeli, and unofficial (“non-PLO”)

Palestinian leaders from Jerusalem and the West Bank in American-sponsored discussions about peace.⁶ During 1987 he tried to resuscitate plans to convene an international conference under joint US–USSR chairmanship, and in March 1988 sought to defuse the Palestinian *Intifada* (see the section “The First *Intifada* and the Gulf War, 1987–1991”) by having the parties consider his own plan, known as the “Shultz initiative.”⁷ Although none of his proposals bore immediate fruit, a number of his ideas would reappear several years later during the George H.W. Bush presidency in the Madrid Conference format.

During this period, informal interpersonal contacts – illegal for Israelis, dangerous for Palestinians, and unpopular for both – multiplied, mainly outside the Middle East. A growing number of academics and public figures came to see the futility and the damage of continuing their mutual boycott and non-recognition. The circle widened of those who dared to talk to the enemy, gradually including people near the center of power in Tunis and Jerusalem. Some of these dialogue projects were conducted in academic settings and behind the curtains of anonymity⁸; others were indirectly connected with Palestinian efforts to foster better relations with the US administration. Imperceptibly, below the radar of high politics and military confrontations, individuals did what they could to prepare the ground for eventual reconciliation and mutual recognition between longtime foes.⁹

The 1980s also witnessed Jordanians engaging in difficult negotiations with the PLO in attempts to fashion a common strategy regarding the ultimate destiny of the West Bank.¹⁰ In April 1987 Israel sought to repeat its success with Egypt when acting Foreign Minister Shimon Peres met secretly with Jordan’s King Hussein to discuss conditions for bilateral negotiations under the diplomatic cover of an American-sponsored international conference. Both the Hussein–Arafat (Amman) accord of February 1985 and the Peres–Hussein initiative (known also as the “London

Document”)¹¹ were short-lived episodes, overtaken by events and with no immediate results. But they too would turn out, in retrospect, to be markers for future gradual progress, contributing eventually to the Madrid Conference of 1991 and the Israel–Jordan peace treaty of 1994.

The First *Intifada* and the Gulf War, 1987–1991

As the end of the decade approached, several important events on both the local and global levels significantly altered the structure of the Israeli–Arab and Palestinian–Israeli conflicts and helped to create, for the first time since the mid-1970s, some movement toward their resolution. One was the outbreak of a popular uprising by Palestinians against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in December 1987, taking the Arabic name *intifada* (for “shaking off” the occupation). The other was the end of the Cold War between the world’s superpowers, followed by the first Gulf War in early 1991.

Economic and social conditions on the ground in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank had been deteriorating for the Palestinians – despite rosy official statistics published by the territorial administration. If we juxtapose the self-congratulatory Israel Ministry of Defense official twentieth anniversary publication on the administration of “Judaea, Samaria [i.e., the West Bank] and the Gaza District” with the almost simultaneous eruption of the *Intifada*, we can see, as Alan Dowty demonstrates, “the hollowness of the occupation’s social and economic benefits.... [M]ore refrigerators and more schools would not buy Arab acquiescence to continued Israeli control of their lives.”¹² Once again, we see evidence of the longstanding unfulfilled Zionist assumption and expectation (see [Chapter 4](#)) that bringing ostensible material blessings to the Palestinians would win their hearts and eliminate their resistance to having their homeland taken over by another people.

With no relief or political solution imminent, popular disillusionment now extended also to the ineffectual Fatah and PLO leadership working from exile in Tunis. New, more radical, popular, and Islamist forces began to emerge inside the occupied territories as active competitors for the loyalty of the Palestinian public. Notably, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (founded in 1986) and Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement, founded in 1988) appealed to Palestinians' religious identity while simultaneously filling a much-neglected gap by providing social, educational, and health services in the territories. Drawing on the lessons of Muslim struggle against the Crusaders, the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood (founded in Egypt in the 1920s) and the example of anti-British resistance offered by Shaikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam in the 1930s, these movements offered a new hope and a different worldview, with a clearly defined objective: the removal of Israel by whatever means necessary, and its replacement by an Islamic Palestinian state.¹³

On 8 December 1987 an accident in which an IDF tank transport vehicle in Gaza killed four Palestinians and wounded seven as they were returning from work was followed by anti-Israel demonstrations and rioting that spread rapidly throughout the territories. Stone-throwing youth came face to face with Israeli soldiers and police on a daily basis, with curfews and closures leading to hardship but also greater defiance among the population, especially the disaffected youth. The level of violence quickly escalated from stones and slingshots to incendiary devices ("Molotov cocktails") which brought Israeli responses in the form of tear gas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition. Tens of thousands were arrested; hundreds of homes were blown up or sealed. During the first year almost 300 Palestinians were killed and more than 11 000 wounded in violent confrontations with Israeli troops and police; by the end of 1991 the Palestinian death toll had risen to more than 800.¹⁴

The regular appearance of communiqués indicated that actions by local committees were coordinated by an

effective grass-roots rebel leadership. The determination and degree of organization among the protesters and rioters surprised everyone, even the PLO itself and Israelis, and drew extensive international media attention. This, in turn, moved the conflict from the back burner to the front, providing dramatic clashes on television screens around the world. A young generation of Palestinians who had lived their whole lives under occupation stepped forward to take control of the *intifada*, introducing a new element and presenting a challenge to the traditional PLO leadership based in faraway Tunis.¹⁵

Caught off-guard, Palestinian leaders abroad sought to take political and diplomatic advantage of the popular uprising in the territories, and the Palestine National Council (PNC) meeting in Algiers on 14–15 November 1988 became the scene of important new formulations of PLO policies. Significantly, the PNC adopted resolutions finally accepting UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, thereby acceding to one of the American and Israeli conditions for the PLO to be recognized as a viable diplomatic partner. The PNC also issued a Palestinian Declaration of Independence – symbolic, in the absence of control over any sovereign territory – implying coexistence with the state of Israel.¹⁶ Shortly after this historic meeting, Yasir Arafat addressed a special session of the UN General Assembly in Geneva. Responding to a somewhat awkward application of US pressure, and with the involvement of some American Jewish peace activists, Arafat also read out a carefully prepared press statement renouncing the use of terrorism – thereby opening the door to a US–PLO dialogue.¹⁷

This was another juncture at which the 11th of our unresolved core arguments reappears: What were the Palestinians’ and the PLO’s true intentions vis-à-vis Israel? Skeptical Israelis wondered whether “the leopard had really changed its spots,” and found the PLO’s formula for acceptance of two states “convoluted.”¹⁸ By contrast, Palestinian commentators at the time

underlined the significance of this “new Palestinian diplomacy,” with veteran historian Walid Khalidi welcoming the decisions as the product of “intensive Palestinian soul-searching” and a “long drawn-out trend toward pragmatism.” On the basis of a “mature reading of local, regional and international realities,” he declared, the Algiers PNC decisions were

a triumph of compassion for one’s people over hatred of one’s enemy. It thus opened wide the gate towards a historic reconciliation while spelling out its irreducible minimum condition of statehood. It offers an integrated cluster of ideas on which an infrastructure of peace can be built through quiet and purposeful dialogue, preferably with Israel, but otherwise with Washington.¹⁹

Another Palestinian academic went further, hailing the Declaration of Independence as containing “the first official Palestinian recognition of the legitimacy of the existence of a Jewish state, and the first unequivocal, explicit PLO endorsement of a two-state solution to the conflict.”²⁰ While these pronouncements may have been historic in terms of the evolution of PLO thinking, the flow of diplomatic activity in their wake did not create any major breakthrough. Israelis on the ground, led by a right-wing government under Yitzhak Shamir, continued to focus on quelling the unrest of the *Intifada* without being lured into any negotiations with a newly revised PLO.

Despite Israeli attempts to put down the *Intifada* by repressive military measures and police action, the uprising continued at decreasing levels of intensity until 1993. Its overall impact on Israeli public opinion was significant.²¹ Along with the embarrassment and outrage at the damaging international media coverage depicting cruel Israeli soldiers beating protesting women and children, on a deeper level more and more Israelis began to recoil from the idea of continuing the occupation which did terrible damage to IDF morale and Israel’s own democratic value system. This change of heart affected even Yitzhak Rabin and other leading figures

who had initially advocated the use of maximum force to crush the rioters.

Indeed, for many Israelis, this first *Intifada* was a wake-up call. Under the impact of seething Palestinian bitterness and daily violence, many Israelis now felt forced to make a choice: either annex the territories, or leave them. If one chose the annexation option, then there were three possibilities regarding the large Palestinian Arab population living there:

1. They could continue to reside there and become full citizens of the state of Israel, with full democratic rights – at some point in the foreseeable future becoming a majority vis-à-vis the country's Jewish population and undoing the *raison d'être* of Zionism, a demographically "Jewish" state.
2. They could remain as residents but not be granted citizenship in the state of Israel, living as a separate second-class people with limited rights, as in South Africa's former apartheid régime – thereby abandoning any semblance of Israel being a democratic state.
3. They could be encouraged, or forced, to leave their homes and relocate in one of the neighboring Arab countries – i.e. expulsion, or as the proposal was known in Hebrew, "*transfer*."²²

The third, drastic, option enjoyed a growing popularity among a minority of Israeli Jews during this period, seeming to promise a logical, if brutal, way around the contradictions in options #1 and #2. But the unattractiveness of any of the three alternatives led a far greater number of Israeli Jews to the realization that, sooner rather than later, Israel should contemplate abandoning many of the settlements and disengaging itself – whether by negotiation or unilaterally – from those territories.

The *Intifada* helped many (but not all) Israelis reach the conclusion that the settlements had been a strategic mistake from the point of view of Israel's vital interests.

Against those who advocated annexation and/or transfer as a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian impasse, an increasing number of Israeli political and military figures began calling for “separation” of the two populations – a return to the idea of partition that we examined during the 1930s and 1940s. Public discussion of the idea of separation (and subsequently of “disengagement”) would become widespread and more intense over the coming decade, laying the seeds for a possible “two-state solution.”²³

In July 1988, wishing to extricate his kingdom from the complications of dealing with a rebellious Palestinian population that bore him no particular loyalty, King Hussein announced the severance of Jordan’s legal and administrative ties with the West Bank, handing over to local committees and municipal authorities most of the administrative functions and budgets that had been Amman’s responsibility since the June 1967 war. The King’s motives seem to have been a combination of frustration over Palestinian ingratitude and a resignation that, in the end, only the PLO could really speak for Palestinian concerns.²⁴ Whatever his motives, King Hussein’s dramatic act clearly signaled to the Israelis that they could no longer consider the Jordanian leader as an *interlocutor valable* for discussing the future of the West Bank; neither could they continue to consider solutions built around the slogan that “Jordan is Palestine.” Instead, Israel – despite the firm ideological stances of Likud prime minister Yitzhak Shamir on settlements, territories, and terrorism – might soon find itself having to engage the Palestinians directly via the “terrorist” PLO.

In response to Saddam Hussein’s claim to Kuwait being a province of Iraq and his invasion of the pro-American sheikdom in late 1990, the US created an American-led coalition of Arab and other armed forces and set up bases in Saudi Arabia. During an air and ground war that lasted several weeks in January and February of 1991, allied forces drove Saddam’s troops out of Kuwait. The subsequent invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam’s

régime opened a radically new and problematic chapter in American involvement in the region.

A sidelight in retrospect, the promise of greater US involvement in finding a satisfactory solution to the unresolved Palestine problem was one of the quid pro quos offered to gain the Arab states' cooperation in dealing this blow to Iraq. With the recent collapse of the Soviet Union as protector and patron of Syria and other Arab states, the US became an especially worthy target of courtship as it was seen at this time as the world's "sole remaining superpower" – and the only one with any influence over the government in Tel Aviv.

As for the PLO itself, it had encountered setbacks in its diplomatic dialogue aimed at winning American understanding and sympathy. During 1989 and 1990, it was unable to curb terrorism by some of its rebellious factions. During the Gulf crisis in 1990–1991, Yasir Arafat committed a serious tactical blunder by siding with Saddam – thereby losing precious pan-Arab funding for his own coffers and also undermining the standing of the Palestinian diaspora communities that had been living and working in Kuwait and other Gulf states, many of whom were expelled to Jordan and elsewhere.

Madrid and Oslo: A New Peace Process

In the months following the Iraqi defeat, US Secretary of State James Baker returned to the 1970s path taken by Henry Kissinger and, seeking to reconvene the international conference adjourned in Geneva in 1973, engaged in some strenuous shuttling among Middle Eastern capitals. Using diplomatic and economic pressure, borrowing some of the ideas floated by his immediate predecessor, and offering letters of assurances to create procedures and conditions that would satisfy each party's minimal conditions, Baker succeeded in getting each of the main parties to commit itself to attending an international conference.

Additional advance efforts had to be devised for Palestinian participation, including a formula (including making the Palestinians officially part of the Jordanian delegation) for bridging Prime Minister Shamir's insistence on *not* meeting with any PLO representatives, on the one hand, and the unwillingness of any credible Palestinian to appear at the conference *unless* he or she had the tacit blessing of PLO headquarters in Tunis, on the other.

Amid much fanfare, a historic gathering opened on 30 October 1991 in Madrid's Royal Palace, breaking decades of taboos about Arabs and Israelis never appearing in the same room or at the same negotiating table. Following the opening speeches, several of which were inflammatory and hardly conciliatory, the plenary adjourned into smaller parallel bilateral working sessions where the ice was broken and key issues of contention laid out on various tables. After several days delegates left Madrid with nothing in the way of substantial breakthroughs, except the dramatic fact of having met, along with procedures for follow-up talks elsewhere.²⁵

For more than a year thereafter, delegations continued to meet bilaterally under US State Department auspices in Washington, while a number of multilateral committees convened in different venues around the world to discuss topics of regional concern, including water resources, economic development, arms control, environmental issues, and refugees. Only slight progress could be reported from the many rounds of bilateral Israeli–Syrian and Israeli–Jordanian (which quietly gave birth to separate Israeli–Palestinian) talks in Washington. Minor advances were made at the cost of much frustration, stalling, and posturing for the media back home.²⁶

It took an unorthodox gambit by the senior PLO and Israeli leadership – the opening of a secret “back-channel” in Oslo, unknown even to the official delegations meeting in Washington – before a real breakthrough took place in 1993. Under Norwegian

mediation, Israelis and Palestinians secretly broke another historic taboo by agreeing to recognize and negotiate with each other. Much careful word-crafting went into the texts of an exchange of brief letters between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, along with an agreed 17-article “Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements” [DOP].²⁷

The historic signing ceremony and exchange of letters took place on 13 September 1993 on the White House lawn, hosted by a beaming US president, Bill Clinton, who would remain an active third-party facilitator and guarantor of subsequent Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. The DOP was soon followed by interim Palestinian–Israeli agreements signed in Jericho and Cairo, while the toughest bones of contention – designated at the “permanent status” issues (borders, settlements, refugees, Jerusalem, security arrangements) – were reserved for a final series of negotiations scheduled to begin once the interim arrangements were in place. Along the way, the process of Israeli redeployments from West Bank and Gaza population centers, to be replaced by Palestinian administration and new security forces, was expected to create some momentum and help the parties develop a sense of mutual trust.²⁸

One of the earliest positive spin-offs of the signing of the Palestinian–Israeli DOP was the green light it gave to Israel and several Arab states to openly devote themselves to drafting and concluding treaties of peace to end the state of war between them. An Israeli–Syrian peace process that was opened and led to several rounds of negotiation with heavy US involvement, eventually collapsed amid disappointment and recrimination and without successful consummation.²⁹ By contrast, reflecting a much more positive background of previous secret negotiating experience, a Jordanian–Israeli peace treaty was drafted and duly signed, also in the presence of the US president, along the Israeli–Jordanian border on 26 October 1994.³⁰

The 1990s – captured in the tale of two European cities, Madrid and Oslo – turned out to be a period of hope and heightened expectations after decades of stalemate, resentment, fears, and frequent explosions of violence. While the post-1978 Camp David peace process had failed in its day to widen the circle of peace, the changed global and regional circumstances, and perhaps a certain level of conflict fatigue among the parties, seemed to augur well for progress under the new peace process begun at Madrid and Oslo.

The very fact that talks had begun reduced Israel's sense of isolation and vulnerability, with a noticeably beneficial spin-off effect on Israeli attitudes. Labor Party leader Yitzhak Rabin defeated his right-wing Likud rivals in June 1992, elected on a platform promising a breakthrough on the stalled negotiations. Reviewing his first year in office, the prime minister expressed his optimism and a determination to overcome all obstacles:

The train that travels towards peace has stopped this year at many stations that daily refute the time-worn canard—"the whole world is against us." The United States has improved its relations with us.... In Europe, our dialogue with the E[uropean] C[ommunity] has been improved and deepened. We have been inundated by visiting heads of state—and we have responded to them with friendship and with economic and other links. We are no longer "a People that dwelleth alone."³¹

Indeed, in December 1991 "a completely different constellation of forces at the United Nations" voted to revoke the 1975 "zionism equals racism" resolution and, within two years of Madrid, 34 countries established (or re-established severed) diplomatic relations with the Jewish state.³² Reflecting the new spirit of international acceptance, Rabin's appeals to his countrymen began to incorporate some of the rhetoric previously confined to peace activists and liberal spokesmen who had been arguing that Israelis should stop thinking like outnumbered and beleaguered ghetto fighters, but

should rather visualize themselves as strong and secure enough to take some calculated risks for peace.³³ One manifestation of this new positive atmosphere was that visiting foreign dignitaries were no longer obliged, as before, to stop at the country's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, although most continued to make the recommended pilgrimage. Unimpressed, critics of Oslo and its land-for-peace formula invoked the Holocaust analogy to warn of the consequences of Israel making territorial and other concessions in talks with Palestinian leaders.³⁴

There was also cause for optimism on the Palestinian side. The transition from the Madrid Conference format to the Washington talks and the Oslo back-channel meant that, for the first time, the Palestinian issue was not being ignored, sidetracked, or handled by others. Diplomatic players were now working with – rather than trying to work around – the Palestinians and their recognized leaders in the PLO. And now that the Cold War was over, the absence of superpower rivalry meant that local conflicts might be managed or settled better without being manipulated or magnified to serve the needs of external powers.

In this context many Israelis and Palestinians envisaged the future in terms of partitioning the area of former Mandatory Palestine between themselves. But much had changed on the ground since partition plans were first floated in the 1930s and 1940s. After decades of blood and strife, all the area to be divided was now in Israeli hands; indeed, areas claimed by the Palestinians were being populated by growing numbers of Jewish settlers. The populations of the rival communities were now approximately equal in number, but the two societies were hardly of equal strength or vibrancy – the Palestinians having been dispersed and exiled for almost half a century, while Israel had grown, consolidated, and evolved into a dynamic and highly developed society, a success story by many yardsticks. It would be no easy task for the Oslo peace process to work through many scheduled steps of implementation to produce the two-

state solution apparently desired by many (not only peace advocates) on all sides.³⁵ Despite the radically changed circumstances, the partition concept seemed to offer better prospects than any of the alternatives.

Unfortunately, after a few years of attempts to implement the commitments outlined in the DOP, it became painfully obvious that the new Israeli–Palestinian peace process was in trouble. Many deadlines were missed, talks frequently broke down, and cooperation lapsed. More serious were the erosion of mutual trust and the spread of deeper suspicions.³⁶ Israel continued to build new and expand existing Jewish settlements in the territories that were supposedly subject to final negotiation. The size and shape of the “cake” was, in the words of one Palestinian observer, “quickly shrinking while the two sides negotiated its fate,” leading the “overwhelming majority of Palestinians” to lose “all confidence in the peaceful intentions of Israel.”³⁷

Terrorism returned with a vengeance, in more deadly forms and more often in Israeli population centers. “Anti-Oslo militants on both sides discovered a dirty little secret: they had virtual veto power over the negotiations, because every outrageous act that they perpetrated brought yet another interruption, another setback to the peace process.”³⁸ Among the Palestinians, the Islamist factions of Hamas and Islamic Jihad gained popularity as they accused the official leadership of the Palestine National Authority [PNA] of serving as “Israel’s policeman” in the territories, having shamefully sold out their legitimate rights to the powerful Israelis and their American backers. Charges of corruption, nepotism, and anti-democratic suppression of dissent plagued the new PNA administration, undermining its credibility internationally and public confidence domestically.³⁹

Neither Arafat nor the multiple security forces created after 1994 seemed able, or willing, to take effective action to rein in extremists still bent on terrorizing, killing, and injuring Israelis. Rashid Khalidi was among critics of the “strategic incoherence” between PLO policy and action,

the leadership's "equivocation about a two-state solution and an end to armed violence long after that course had supposedly been conclusively decided upon," and its inability "to understand the limits of violence."⁴⁰ Arafat's failure to control the violence contributed to growing Israeli doubts as to the sincerity of their designated peace partner under Oslo. Israeli opponents of the peace process used the upsurge in Palestinian terror to agitate against further troop redeployments, prisoner releases, or other concessions to the Palestinians.

In November 1995 a Jewish religious fanatic assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as a punishment for having ostensibly turned over Jews to their enemies and to prevent him from continuing negotiations with the PNA.⁴¹ This high-profile murder sent the nation into shock, and leaders reverted from optimistically and self-confidently engaging the world at large to once again drawing on negative lessons of the Holocaust in their public utterances. Against the backdrop of Islamic Jihad and Hamas suicide bombers terrorizing Israeli cities, the new PM Shimon Peres reminded his listeners on Holocaust commemoration day that the establishment of the state of Israel was "the Jewish people's victory over Nazi Germany." Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu went further, reflecting and playing up public fears by referring to Israel's 1949 frontiers as "Auschwitz borders."⁴²

In retrospect we can see the late 1990s as a time bomb waiting to explode. For many Israelis, the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin would turn out to be emblematic of the collapse of peace hopes that were being undermined and undone on a daily basis by numerous negative encounters and experiences associated with the Oslo process. For Palestinians, both in the occupied territories and in exile, Oslo's dubious achievements quickly paled in comparison to its disappointments and drawbacks, validating many of the critiques of the accords issued by Edward Said on "the morning after" in 1993.⁴³

As the deadline for moving from transitional arrangements to serious negotiations on the permanent

status issues approached, many steps remained unfulfilled or partially completed, engendering mistrust and dissatisfaction among the negotiators and their publics. Rapid turnover among Israeli prime ministers – Yitzhak Rabin (d. 1995), Shimon Peres (1995–1996), Benyamin Netanyahu (1996–1999) – contributed to delays, backtracking, and unfulfilled promises of redeployment of troops and handover of territory, in turn increasing Palestinian frustration and suspicions of Israeli intentions. The Clinton administration, fearing a complete breakdown of the peace process, tried to save the day by convening Israelis and Palestinians for top-level negotiations at the Wye Plantation in Maryland, pressing them to recommit themselves to fulfilling their lapsed Oslo obligations. Despite a heavy investment of energy and resources, results were mixed; the Wye Memorandum bought some time, another year of continuing dissatisfaction, stalemate, and uncertainty.⁴⁴

Notes

- ¹ For a firsthand account of an Israeli diplomat posted to Cairo during the difficult early years, see Dowek, E. (2001). *Israeli–Egyptian Relations, 1980–2000*, foreword by Yitshak Shamir. London: Frank Cass.
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11

From Breakthrough to Breakdown, 1995–2018

In retrospect, the signing of the detailed “Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip” in Washington DC on 28 September 1995 proved to be the high-point of the Oslo process.¹ It was followed on 31 October by a framework agreement signed by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Yossi Beilin² – another important “paper” achievement, but one which was quickly overtaken several days later by the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. From that point on, the process which was supposed to move Israelis and Palestinians from their formal declarations of mutual recognition to final treaty arrangements proceeded to unravel.

The whole philosophy behind the Oslo process was based on incremental steps of interim arrangements toward resolving final status issues, building confidence along the way. But, as we saw in [Chapter 10](#), this process was undermined by what one disappointed Israeli minister called a “fatal symmetry” between the continued expansion of Israeli settlements, on the one hand, and an upsurge in Palestinian violence, on the other. By the “creation of a dense map of settlements throughout the territories that narrowed the living space of the Palestinian people” – an activity which had *not*, Shlomo Ben-Ami reminds us, been explicitly excluded by the drafters of the Declaration of Principles – “Israel destroyed beyond repair the faith of its Palestinian partners in the peace process.... The Palestinians,” he wrote, “responded with terrorism.”³ For their part, Palestinians after Oslo experienced a tightening rather than loosening of Israel’s “matrix of control” over their movements and daily life in the territories. Their frustration and bitterness grew as the settler population

jumped from 247 000 in 1991 to 370 000 by 1999 without American criticism – despite pre-Madrid written assurances that the US believed that “no party should take unilateral actions that seek to predetermine issues that can only be resolved through negotiations” and further opposing settlement activity in the territories occupied in 1967 as constituting “an obstacle to peace.” Palestinian negotiators felt deceived when they realized that “Israel was allowed by the United States ... to help itself to huge bites of the pie that the two sides were supposed to be negotiating about.”⁴

In the wake of Oslo’s euphoria, many Israelis became disenchanted at the mounting evidence of Yasir Arafat’s inability – or unwillingness – to rein in terrorists. They soon concluded that he was untrustworthy, speaking about peace with Israel (mostly in English or French translation) while encouraging his followers (in Arabic) to regard his Oslo commitments as no more than tactical steps toward an expected total victory of regaining all of Palestine. His frequent invocation of historical Muslim motifs and battles, and his increasing focus on the Jerusalem issue, did not inspire confidence in Israel nor augur well for progress toward resolving final-status issues.⁵ “Spoilers” on both sides resorted to sporadic acts of violence, further contributing to the breakdown of the fragile process and often precipitating wider outbreaks in a chain reaction of deadly escalation and retaliation.⁶ As the parties moved from signed documents and public declarations to the nitty-gritty of implementation, it became clear that they had in mind different definitions of “peace” and “normalization,” and different visions of what the final “end of conflict” would look like.⁷

Continuing Diplomatic Efforts

But, even as would-be peacemakers experienced a pronounced “downward spiral” in Palestinian-Israeli relations,⁸ the 25 years following the Oslo Accords were nonetheless witness to more than half a dozen serious diplomatic initiatives aimed at rescuing the process from

post-1995 deadlocks. None of these initiatives would bear fruit, but it is noteworthy that leaders did make efforts on the following occasions, taking risks in attempts to repair an unstable status quo:

1. the US-convened summit at Camp David (11–25 July 2000),
2. meetings between Israeli and Palestinian delegations at Taba (January 2001),
3. the Saudi regional plan of 2002, later adopted by Arab League and re-issued as the Arab Peace Initiative (API),
4. great power efforts to move Israelis and Palestinians along a “Roadmap” to peace (from April 2003),
5. ex-negotiators’ fashioning of the model Geneva Accords (late 2003),
6. year-long, high-level negotiations begun at Annapolis, MD, in November 2007, and
7. shuttle diplomacy led by US Secretary of State John Kerry (March 2013–March 2014).⁹

Subsequent to these seven initiatives, while this volume was in preparation, the US administration under President Donald Trump was working behind the scenes and shuttling between the parties in pursuit of a new deal to be presented to Israel and the Palestinians.

We begin here with an overview of the first two of the negotiation episodes, namely Camp David II and Taba.

Camp David II

During the mid-1990s the Madrid–Oslo peace process faltered over a series of attempts to move from interim arrangements to completing unfulfilled commitments that were expected to lead eventually to a final agreement. Benjamin Netanyahu’s election in 1996 reflected disenchantment among Israelis with what the Labor Party was doing with Oslo, but Labor returned in

June 1999 under a new leader. Ehud Barak won the elections on a pledge to bring back Israeli troops from southern Lebanon and to fulfill Rabin's legacy by delivering the unconsummated peace deal with Syria, as well as negotiating the remaining permanent status issues with the Palestinians. After failing with the Syrians at Shepherdstown in January 2000,¹⁰ Barak convinced the US president that the situation was so critical that a high-level Israeli–Palestinian summit was worth the risk of failure.

The July 2000 summit at Camp David, like the earlier version, was full of dramatic tension, went on for 15 days, but did not replicate the historic success achieved by Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin, and Jimmy Carter in 1978. The task was now much more daunting: how to bridge gaps between the principal parties on unresolved final-status issues: refugees and their right of return, Jerusalem, territory, borders, settlements, and security. Despite the narrowing of some gaps and the drafting of maps of proposed land swaps, the results were disappointing – especially in light of unrealistic expectations that this conference was a “make-or-break” event aiming for a final, end-of-conflict agreement. Camp David ended with a bland trilateral statement laced with good intentions, but there was no disguising the summit's failure.

Barak and Arafat returned home from the US empty-handed and a mood of tense disillusionment set in. As one researcher quipped, Camp David II had not produced “an agreement, but it produced ... quite a flow of ‘what-went-wrong’ literature.”¹¹ A new set of contested narratives was quickly created to explain who was to blame for the failure at Camp David. According to one version, Ehud Barak made Yasser Arafat an unprecedented “generous” offer for ending the conflict, which the Palestinian leader rejected without counterproposals, proving he was not a serious partner for peace. According to the second version, Barak, backed by an unquestioning American team acting as “Israel's lawyer,” pressured Arafat unsuccessfully in

efforts to dictate an unacceptable deal. Both versions include differing sorts of criticism of the Americans for their poor performance as mediators and facilitators.¹²

Taba Talks

Despite the collapse of the July 2000 summit and the outbreak of violence in September (see below), Barak and Arafat allowed their lead negotiators to continue talking in attempts to further bridge remaining gaps. In late December, just before leaving office, Bill Clinton made an 11th-hour attempt to push the parties toward an agreement by outlining a set of “Parameters” based on his own personal understanding of where they stood apart and where they might find common ground.¹³

Teams of Palestinian and Israeli negotiators reconvened several weeks later in the Egyptian resort town of Taba to discuss Clinton’s latest suggestions. By most accounts, gaps were further narrowed on several issues during six days at Taba, but still without enough for an agreement to be initialed or signed.¹⁴

Despite post-Taba claims by some participants of having “never been so close” to an agreement, negotiators were truly stymied on two fundamental issues: Palestinian refugees and their “right of return,” and sovereignty over Jerusalem. The thorny refugee issue continued to touch the heart of Palestinian and Israeli identity and survival. While the “1967 file” (i.e. conquered/occupied territories, settlements, security, recent refugees) might have been brought closer to resolution through continued talks, such was not the case for the “1948 file” on repatriation of the original refugee families and their claimed “right of return” under UNGA Resolution 194 to former homes now in Israel. On a collision course were the core questions of the degree of Israeli responsibility for causing the Palestinians to become refugees, on the one hand, and the recognition of Israel’s right to continue to exist as the homeland of the Jewish people, on the other. These two questions became inextricably entwined; for Israelis, their right to exist as the homeland of the Jewish people could not be negated by the mass return of

descendants of the 1948 refugees.¹⁵ Adding another complication to an already difficult stalemate were the increasingly vocal claims of Jewish refugees from Arab lands since 1948 who wanted Israeli negotiators to include compensation for *their* lost property on the agenda, thereby presenting the Jewish and Palestinian refugee questions as parallel stories to be resolved in tandem.¹⁶

Negotiators at Camp David and Taba were equally unable to overcome the sensitivity of Israeli and Palestinian opinion on the Jerusalem issue, both as the site of Jewish and Muslim holy places and as a national capital. Most were caught by surprise and as Jerusalem (re-)established itself as one of the most difficult issues to resolve – notwithstanding a plethora of creative proposals, on paper, for sharing or dividing the Holy City.¹⁷

The Al-Aqsa *Intifada*

In the aftermath of the high expectations and disappointments at Camp David, leaders on both sides retreated into self-serving justifications of their recent activity, escalating the “blame game” and heaping doubt upon the good faith and intentions of their erstwhile peace partners. Hopes for reviving the diplomatic process were soon overtaken and overshadowed by an outburst of violence, a second Palestinian *Intifada*.

In September 2000, opposition leader Ariel Sharon of the Likud Party undertook a visit to the Temple Mount to provocatively demonstrate Jewish rights to pray there. The site, as we know from the events of 1928–1929, is also holy to Muslims as *al-Haram al-Sharif* (the Noble Sanctuary), the plaza on which stand the golden-domed Mosque of Omar and the nearby (less photographed, but holier) al-Aqsa Mosque. On the following day, angered by the visit, a crowd of rock-throwing Palestinian protesters confronted Israeli police, who dispersed them with tear gas and live ammunition, killing four and

wounding 160 of the demonstrators. Some accounts suggest that Palestinian militants had already been preparing for such a clash, and that Sharon's visit was an opportune spark rather than an independent cause of the uprising.

The Second *Intifada* was marked by widespread rioting, attacks, and counterattacks of a much bloodier nature than the First *Intifada* (1987–1993) whose hallmark was stone-throwing, Molotov cocktails, and rubber bullets. From September 2000, Israeli troops and police used lethal force, even against solidarity rallies organized by Israel's own Palestinian Arab citizens. As was the case in the late 1920s, Muslim fears of Jewish encroachment on their holy places added to the intensity of the confrontations during what became known as the "al-Aqsa *Intifada*."

Efforts between Israel and the Palestine National Authority (PNA) to resume negotiation over outstanding issues languished as the toll of dead and wounded mounted, victims of daily stabbings, shootings, suicide terrorism, and harsh military repression. By early 2005 some 3135 Palestinians and 1137 Israelis had lost their lives, with thousands more wounded. Palestinian fighters fielded a steady flow of suicide bombers, mainly youngsters willing to detonate themselves against Israeli civilian targets on buses and in shopping areas, while Israel used home demolitions, its control of the roads at checkpoints, and its superior air and ground forces in actions against terrorists that also severely disrupted the day-to-day lives of many innocent noncombattants.¹⁸ The American Ambassador to Israel at the time recalled that PNA President Yasir Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon each "came to see the defeat of the other as the only acceptable outcome. The killing would only diminish when both sides exhausted themselves. All those years of terrorism and violence destroyed any semblance of trust between Israelis and Palestinians."¹⁹

Two controversial Israeli responses to the Palestinian violence were the targeted assassinations of militants and terrorists, and the construction of a security barrier

(in many places fences, in others high concrete walls) to separate the Jewish and Palestinian populations. Israel justified its separation wall as a legitimate form of self-protection against suicide bombers, and pointed to the resultant drop in terrorist infiltrations in areas where the barrier was in place. Palestinians protested against the great inconveniences and disruptions caused by the wall which crisscrossed villages, towns, and access roads. Advocacy groups helped to submit legal complaints regarding many places where the wall allegedly encroached on Palestinian-owned land, or where the wall stretched beyond Israeli territory as defined by the 1949 armistice boundaries (the “Green Line”). Some commentators saw the path of the security fence/wall as a possible preview of the de facto final borders between Jewish Israel and Arab Palestine, as a preparation for Israel’s eventual disengagement from the territories. Many Israelis came to conclude that, in the existing climate of mistrust and hostility, and in the absence of useful negotiations, their government should carry out a separation of populations unilaterally to suit Israel’s own interests and immediate security needs.

Partly due to its high degree of militarization, the al-Aqsa *Intifada* proved to be a costly and politically unproductive rebellion for the Palestinians.²⁰ The escalation of violence against Israeli targets helped bring to power a hardline prime minister, Ariel Sharon, a soldier-politician known for a brutal 1953 retaliatory raid on Qibya, anti-terrorist operations in Gaza in 1970–1971 that bulldozed civilian housing, fields and orchards, and the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Sharon responded to the Second *Intifada* by destroying a large part of the PNA’s security apparatus, administrative offices, and infrastructure, and by besieging a humiliated President Arafat in the ruins of his personal compound in Ramallah. Palestinian suicide bombers wreaked havoc inside Israeli towns and cities, and created a negative impact on international opinion – very different from the sympathy garnered during the First *Intifada* a decade earlier, when daily photos and news-clips showed Palestinian *shabab* (youth) whirling slingshots, throwing

stones, and rolling flaming tires at heavily armed Israeli soldiers. While the exploits of the new martyrs may have stirred the hearts of militant nationalists, the net result was a combination of intensified Israeli security-consciousness and a loss of worldwide support for the Palestinian struggle for statehood, especially when violent expressions of the latter were conflated with the attacks of “9/11” directed against Americans on US soil.

Changes in the Geo-Strategic Environment

Among other things, the aircraft hijackings and suicide attacks by *al-Qa’ida* terrorists on New York and Washington DC on 11 September 2001 changed the context in which the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict would be viewed. US leaders, along with those of a number of Western European countries, were henceforth forced to take seriously the security threats to their own populations posed by religious extremists, especially those labeled “Islamists.” American presidents now gave greater priority to prosecuting a global “war on terror” against transnational groups based in or operating from Middle Eastern and African states. During the ensuing two decades, Western leaders gradually stopped treating the unresolved Israel–Palestine conflict as the number-one “hot-spot” requiring their urgent political attention or military resources.

Indeed, there were a number of more complex, more volatile and largely unrelated problems on other fronts in the wider Middle East that came to dominate international attention, resulting in a partial eclipse of the Israel–Palestine question. These included:

- US and Western involvement in a protracted war against the Taliban in Afghanistan,
- the Iraq War launched by President Bush in March 2003, dragging on for years despite various attempts to declare “mission accomplished,”

- Iran’s nuclear development and its militant foreign policies in the region, sometimes threatening Israel and often challenging the rival Saudi régime,
- a resurgence of Sunni-Shi’a sectarian tensions and violence across the region,
- grass-roots uprisings in a number of Arab countries during and after 2011, known as “the Arab Spring,”
- brutal and protracted battles involving the insurgent movement known as the “Islamic State in Syria,” aka “ISIS” (*Da’esh* in Arabic),
- a Western-supported uprising against Libyan dictator Mu’ammar Qaddafi, and Libya’s subsequent descent into anarchy, turning it into a failed state,
- a civil war in Syria which resulted in a major humanitarian disaster, killing and displacing millions, spilling over into neighboring Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, and contributing to a steady stream of refugees making their way into the European Union,
- a civil war in Yemen, pitting proxy factions supported by a US-backed, Saudi-led coalition against rebels supported by Iran, with devastating damage to millions of civilians.

Within the narrower Israel–Palestine arena, several other important events occurred in the wake of the al-Aqsa *Intifada*. On 11 November 2004, Yasir Arafat died in a Paris hospital of a mysterious ailment and was replaced by the less militant but also less charismatic Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as President of the PNA. In August of the following year Israel unilaterally disengaged from Gaza, removing more than 8000 settlers under vigorous protest, a dramatic move seen by many as a possible precedent for future Israeli steps to evacuate settlements from the West Bank. This withdrawal was (?mis-)interpreted by many Palestinians as a victory for armed resistance, helping to secure a decisive victory for Hamas in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in late January 2006.

Having dealt a severe blow to the declining old-school politics and leadership of Fatah and the PLO, Hamas fighters in June 2007 staged a coup d'état following which the fundamentalist Islamist movement effectively ruled Gaza as a separate province. The successes of Hamas – which rejected the PLO-signed Oslo Accords and was ideologically committed to non-recognition of the Jewish state – created new uncertainties for both the peace process and the future of Palestine as a stable state under a unified national leadership. At the time of writing a decade-old bitter rivalry persists between Hamas, ruling over (but blockaded inside) Gaza, and the Fatah-ruled PNA in the West Bank, despite periodic reconciliation efforts mediated by Egypt and other third-parties.²¹

On the Israeli side, the loss of a reliable Palestinian peace-partner continued to propel a shift in popularity toward right-wing parties and policies, and an increased preference for unilateral government action in the military, security, and settlement spheres. The disillusionment and breakdown of mutual trust²² that had begun to set in after 1995 continued to grow, undermining the accepted wisdom of, and optimistic hopes for, a negotiated two-state solution (see [Chapter 13](#)).

A worldwide resurgence of religious extremism also contributed to the derailment of the already faltering peace process. As we suggested in [Chapter 2](#), the injection of a *religious* dimension into what we consider to be a mainly *national* conflict makes reconciliation ever more remote, especially because these religious dimensions have become, in recent decades, increasingly fundamentalist. While the Islamist Hamas movement has ruled and radicalized Gaza Palestinians since 2007, across the border the ultranationalist political party *Yisrael Beiteinu* (“Israel is Our Home”) under Avigdor Lieberman and the religious-nationalist *HaBayit HaYehudi* (“The Jewish Home”) led by Naftali Bennett have risen in the polls and have become power-brokers in Israel’s coalition politics. Building on the mobilization

promoted by the *Gush Emunim* movement since the 1970s, West Bank settlers have in recent decades “managed to place themselves at the center of politics, ideology, and the economy. Jewish national fundamentalism moved from the periphery to the political mainstream” of Israeli life.²³ Apart from widening the gaps in the political platforms and beliefs of the new leadership in Jerusalem and in Gaza, their activities and new-found success have helped polarize and radicalize the views of an increasing number of ordinary Palestinians and Israelis, expanding the growing circles of hard-liners and true believers. As Bernard Lewis reminded us, when “contending forces are defined, not by politics, not by economics, but by religion,” the conflict becomes one “not between rival beliefs, rival truths or rival interests” but rather between “truth” and “falsehood” – and

the upholders of falsehood have no rights in the present and no hope for the future. The unequivocal duty of the upholders of truth is to gain power and use it to promote and enforce that truth.... [R]eligious parties tend to become fundamentalist, and fundamentalism, by its very nature, is ruthless and uncompromising.²⁴

Three Gaza Wars, Three Blueprints for Peace

Against the backdrop of spiraling violence that had erupted during the al-Aqsa *Intifada*, the chances for a peaceful resolution to the Israel–Palestine conflict seemed meager and were becoming more remote with every passing month. The Gaza–Israel frontier would become the main flashpoint; cross-border rocket fire, shelling, incursions, kidnapping, and bombing provoked Israel into three massive assaults on the Strip. The first, dubbed Operation “Cast Lead,” lasted from 26 December 2008 until 18 January 2009 and included a ground invasion. The war left some 1400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis killed, with thousands of Palestinians and over

900 Israelis wounded. Thousands of private homes and public buildings in Gaza were partially or fully destroyed during the Israeli offensive.²⁵

A second major war (aka Operation “Pillar of Defense”) was launched by Israeli forces against Gaza on 14 November 2012 in response to a dramatic increase in rocket fire from the Strip into Israel. The heavy bombardments across the frontier lasted only 8 days and resulted in 174 Palestinian and 6 Israeli deaths. In a sense, this brief war was a test of new and improved military hardware and more sophisticated defense systems on both sides.

A shaky truce, lasting 20 months, was followed by a third Gaza war, which erupted on 8 July 2014. The immediate trigger was the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers on the West Bank, an act which Israel blamed on Hamas operatives. Operation “Protective Edge” began with Israeli air and artillery strikes on targets in Gaza, followed on 16 July by a full-fledged ground offensive that lasted more than two weeks. After a further three weeks of fighting, a ceasefire came into force on 26 August. The death toll from this round of fighting was high and destruction very extensive: over 2200 Palestinians and 72 Israelis killed, and many thousands wounded.²⁶

Faced with the prospect of recurring and ever worsening flare-ups, a number of outsiders took initiatives in attempts to resuscitate or replace the moribund Oslo peace process, the “dynamic” of which both Palestinian and Israeli leaders seemed to be steadily, if not deliberately, sending into “reverse.”²⁷ From the onset of the *Intifada*, American diplomats and CIA officials had traveled frequently to the Middle East, becoming embroiled in efforts to arrange ceasefires with hopes of creating calm and thereby paving the way to renewed political negotiations.²⁸

While trying to distance himself from his predecessor Bill Clinton’s active pursuit of a Palestinian–Israeli breakthrough, President George W. Bush found it

impossible to remain detached from the deadlock and ongoing violence affecting Israelis and Palestinians. US policy statements became more unequivocal about supporting a two-state solution. On the international diplomatic front, the US subscribed to UN Security Council Resolution 1397 (2002) which embodied “a vision of a region where two States, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognized borders” (the two-state solution),²⁹ and collaborated with Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations to create the “Quartet” which produced, in April 2003, a “Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict.”³⁰ The Roadmap, reinforced by UNSC Resolution 1515 of November 2003, guided the parties for a brief period, and was built on the logic – never fulfilled – of incremental steps forward and reciprocal confidence-building measures in preparation for a two-state solution. Original deadlines have all long since expired, but the concept and precedent remain, on paper at least, as a potential building block upon which to resume the search for peace. It also served as a precursor to the Annapolis negotiations of 2007.

Another possible basis for producing a breakthrough of the unresolved Israel–Palestine deadlock came from the conflict’s regional players. A peace initiative promoted by Saudi Arabia received the backing of the Arab League during its Beirut meeting in late March 2002. The Saudi initiative was more explicit than previous Arab overtures in offering Israel full diplomatic recognition in exchange for full withdrawal from the territories captured in June 1967.³¹ Israel’s initial response to the initiative was cool; the Saudi plan remained on the back burner for several years, waiting for new promoters and new opportunities for breaking the deadlock.

And indeed, another version of what has become known as the “Arab Peace Initiative” [API] surfaced at the Arab summit in Riyadh in March 2007.³² While the terms offered to Israelis by the Arab world represented some further concessions when compared to earlier demands,

official Israeli reaction remained skeptical, with no politicians prepared to risk engagement on the basis of this plan. One analyst has argued that, despite ambiguities in phrasing and public statements suggestive of flexibility, Israel's rejection was warranted because of the plan's insistence on a full Palestinian "right of return" to original homes inside Israel.³³

Notwithstanding Israel's reluctance, the API helped set the stage for the US-convened international conference at Annapolis in late 2007.

The idea of a regionally endorsed solution to the local impasse over Palestine/Israel has historic roots, dating back to Lawrence, Faysal, and Weizmann in 1918–1919, and to Philby, Weizmann, and Ibn Sa'ud during World War II. It appears also to have inspired Barack Obama in 2016.³⁴ It remains a possible framework for regional cooperation and new peace efforts, favored by some Israeli analysts who argue that:

as the conflict has always been characterized by involvement on the part of the Arab states, it is reasonable to mobilize their involvement, existing in any event, in the attempt to move forward on the regional track, especially after such a long period in which the bilateral Israeli–Palestinian track has been deadlocked.

In light of growing tensions and confrontations among Iran, Turkey, the US, and their Middle East allies, this approach has become appealing to some players for its strategic potential to open doors to normalization and alliances between Israel and the "pragmatic Sunni camp."³⁵

A third possible blueprint for peace in the early 2000s was the product of a group of Palestinians and Israelis, mostly former negotiators now working in their own personal capacity without government authority. The Geneva Accord was an ambitious document synthesizing, with detailed provisions, the various partial agreements that had been reached during the official negotiations at Camp David and Taba, but also containing the very same

seeds of deadlock that had stymied official negotiations in January 2001. At one point its proponents sought grassroots support by actively marketing the Accord among the Palestinian and Israeli populations in hopes (unrealized) of turning public opinion against reluctant leaders and encouraging them to take political risks for peace.³⁶

The Annapolis Process and Kerry's Shuttle Diplomacy

In hopes of breaking the potentially explosive Israel–Palestine stalemate, three successive American presidents mounted new efforts. Not unlike his predecessor, Bill Clinton, who had tried to achieve an 11th-hour breakthrough just before leaving the Oval Office in 2000, George W. Bush launched a year of multi-track Israeli–Palestinian talks by holding an international conference at Annapolis MD in late 2007. At the start of his second term, in March 2013 Barack Obama sent his Secretary of State, John Kerry, on a year-long peace mission which required exhausting shuttling between the parties in the region. Finally, after assuming office in 2017, Donald J. Trump tasked his son-in-law Jarred Kushner and a handpicked team with the ambitious goal of producing a peace deal where all his predecessors had failed.

Annapolis

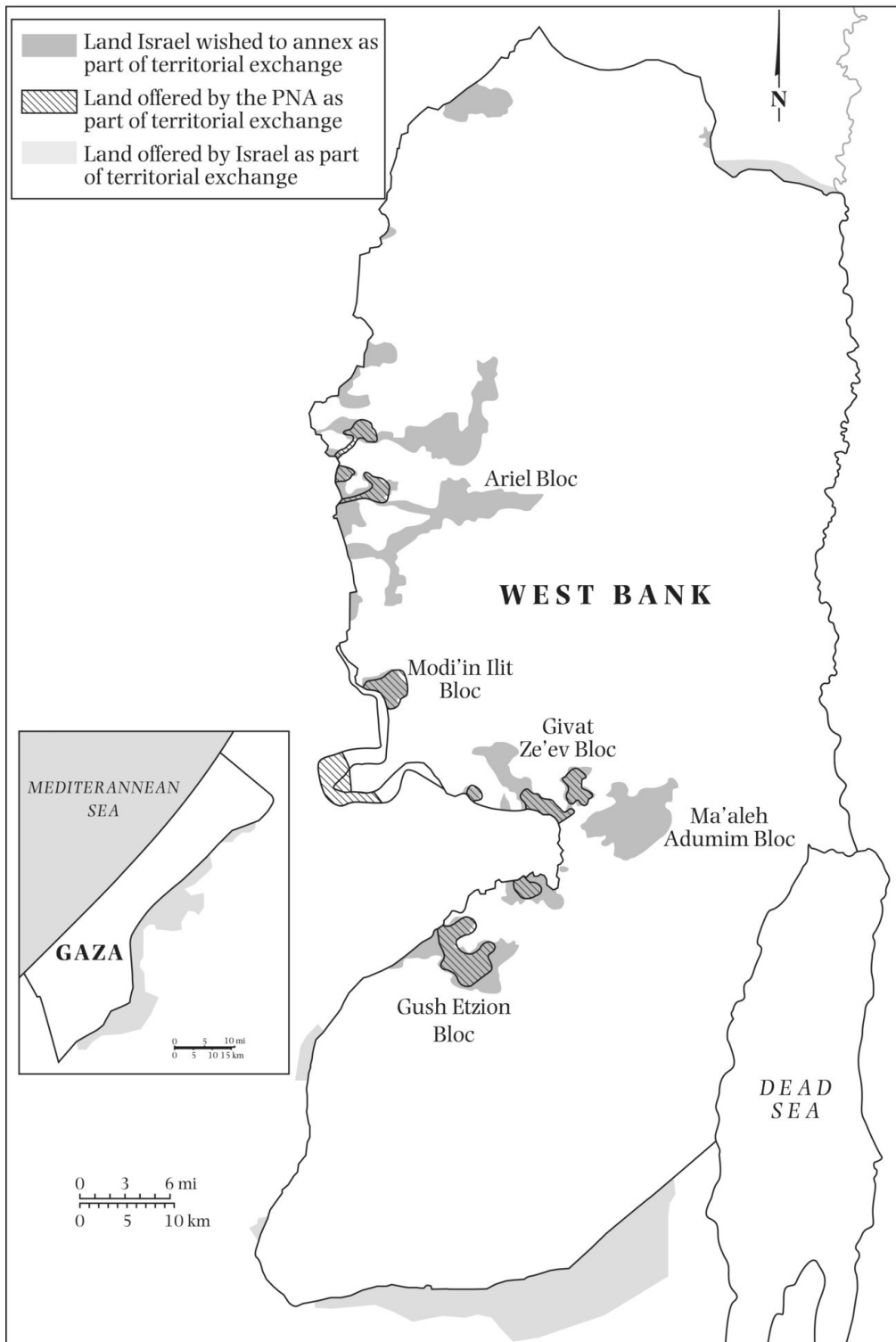
Prior to President Bush's decision to embark upon a major peace effort, changes among the regional and domestic players and forces were not auspicious. American involvement in Iraq was not going well, so refocusing attention on resolving the Israel–Palestine conflict might have been an opportune diversion. As noted, the PNA under Mahmoud Abbas had splintered into two, with Fatah leader Abbas controlling the West Bank and largely cooperating with Israel on security and day-to-day issues, while a militant Hamas ruled the Gaza Strip and threatened Israeli towns and kibbutzim across

the frontier. Israel, meanwhile, worked hard to marginalize Hamas and bring down the régime, using its power to blockade the Gaza Strip which it treated as enemy territory. From across the Lebanese border Hizballah militias had been harassing Israel's armed forces with sniping, kidnapping, and shelling, using an increasingly lethal arsenal of missiles supplied by Iran. In July 2006 Israel responded with a massive and costly cross-border attack. More than a month of fighting ended with over 1000 Lebanese and 161 Israelis deaths, thousands of injuries, and extensive damage to southern Lebanon's infrastructure. To all appearances, the war ended in stalemate, demonstrating more the resilience of Hizballah and its ability to inflict damage on northern Israel than Israel's prowess and power of deterrence.

On the positive side, Israel's PM Ehud Olmert, after replacing the incapacitated Ariel Sharon, had decided upon a new diplomatic outreach, inviting PNA President Mahmoud Abbas to Jerusalem in December 2006 for the first of what became a series of three dozen one-on-one talks over the coming year. On 27 November 2007, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice gave this local initiative some American backing and momentum by convening envoys from almost 50 countries and international organizations in Annapolis, MD, in a "major show of support for the relaunching of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations on permanent status issues, with the two-state solution to the conflict as the desired outcome." The conference's terms of reference also included a disavowal of violence, recognition of Israel's right to exist, and a commitment to all previous agreements.³⁷

Following formalities at Annapolis, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators returned home and broke up into a dozen joint committees to pursue an intensive series of bilateral negotiations in the spirit of the 2003 Roadmap. On the issues of boundaries (including land swaps), security, and Jerusalem, some progress seems to have been made beyond what had been achieved at Camp

David II and Taba. New detailed maps were produced
(see [Map 11.1](#)).³⁸



Map 11.1 Settlement Blocs and Proposed Land Swaps during Annapolis Talks, 2008.

Source: Gershon Shafir, *A Half Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine, and the World's Most Intractable Conflict*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017, p.119; copyright Shaul Arieli, Gershon Shafir, and the University of California Press. Used with permission.

Head negotiators Tzipi Livni, Abu ‘Ala (Ahmad Qurei), and Sa’eb Erekat refined formulae in the search for a compromise that both Olmert and Abbas could agree on and sell to their respective publics. Talks proceeded on parallel tracks (Olmert-Abbas, Livni-Abu ‘Ala) until September 2008, but no deal was reached. By this point, accusations of corruption that had dogged the Israeli PM, combined with criticism of his handling of the 2006 Lebanon war, rendered Olmert a “lame duck.” When, after several attempts at resuscitation, the talks officially broke off in December 2008, the parties were left to retrench as serious violence erupted into a new Israel–Gaza war.

As with the failure of Camp David II, debriefing over the causes of the breakdown produced contradictory narratives apportioning blame for missing another historic opportunity.³⁹ Aside from several specific gaps that were narrowed during these extensive talks, what clearly emerged from the Annapolis experience was how entrenched both parties had now become behind “red lines” on two crucial issues: Israel’s insistence on Palestinian recognition of Israel being the nation-state of the Jewish people, and the Palestinians’ insistence on Israel acknowledging its role and responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugees of 1948 and their right of return.⁴⁰

Kerry’s Shuttle Diplomacy

The Israeli elections of February 2009 brought back to power Benjamin Netanyahu, who immediately announced that, in any future talks with the Palestinians, his government would not be bound by any of the commitments or concessions offered by his predecessors. In early 2011, investigative reporters at *al-Jazeera* published an extensive trove of secret documents leaked by a disgruntled member of the PNA negotiating team during the Annapolis talks. These leaks indicated the extent of concessions that had been contemplated by both sides, and served to undermine the credibility and patriotic credentials of the negotiating teams who had

displayed, although in private only, an apparent willingness to concede several key demands to the other.⁴¹ At the same time, Israeli foreign policy under the new Netanyahu regime became decidedly more hawkish as the new cabinet coalition – described by one critic as “among the most aggressively right-wing, chauvinistic, and racist governments in Israel’s history”⁴² – included partners who were not prepared to accept a two-state solution.

prime minister sought to win over both supporters of the two-state option and its skeptics by defining the conditions under which Israel would co-exist with a future Palestinian state:

If we receive [a] guarantee regarding demilitarization and Israel’s security needs, and if the Palestinians recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people, then we will be ready in a future peace agreement to reach a solution where a demilitarized Palestinian state exists alongside the Jewish state.⁴³

But, in the absence of a resumption of negotiations, conditions on the ground deteriorated. Tensions and a general despondency set in, with a continuation of settlement activity, cross-border violence, and the worsening of living conditions of Palestinians in Gaza under blockade. Popular upheavals of the “Arab Spring” of 2011 rocked the region, indirectly creating new uncertainties for what was left of the stagnant Israeli–Palestinian peace process. In the wake of the failed Olmert-Abbas peace efforts of 2007–2008, PNA officials shifted their focus to international diplomatic initiatives to advance Palestinian claims and to bring pressure on Israel. In November 2012, for example, Palestine joined the Vatican as one of two “Non-member States” enjoying observer status at the United Nations.⁴⁴

On the ground, uncertainty about the feasibility of a two-state solution was growing as the parties jockeyed over when, if, and under what preconditions talks could be restarted. In March 2013, President Obama launched an

intensive American effort to resume talks by personally visiting Israel and Ramallah in the PNA territory. Periodically sounding the alarm about a last chance for a two-state solution, his Secretary of State John Kerry took four months and five visits to Israel and the West Bank just to lay down the conditions under which the reluctant Netanyahu and Abbas would commit themselves to resuming negotiations on final-status issues. Notwithstanding strenuous American efforts and inducements, and despite the “sense of urgency, optimism, and energy” that “the truly indefatigable”⁴⁵ John Kerry brought to the process, leaders on both sides had little room for generosity toward the other, given the mood of their domestic supporters. Mistrust was rife during this period, with multiple claims of bad faith and of commitments not being met, especially with regard to the staggered release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails and announcements of new Jewish housing projects for the West Bank. Working against a perhaps unreasonably short nine-month deadline, negotiators sought desperately to remove outstanding disagreements, to endorse an American “Framework Agreement,” and then to find a formula to extend the talks for an additional period.⁴⁶ As the deadline approached in March 2014, a very frustrated and angry Mahmoud Abbas, battling accusations of selling out his people for little in return, threatened to sign on to 15 international covenants on behalf of the “State of Palestine.” Stymied in US-mediated bilateral talks with a powerful adversary in Benjamin Netanyahu, Abbas played his international-UN card on 1 April 2014. The result was a suspension of Kerry’s efforts and, three weeks later, an official pull-out by Israel in response to the surprise announcement of the signing of a reconciliation agreement between the PNA and Hamas.⁴⁷

One of the lessons which analysts and leaders drew from this failed US effort is that Israeli and Palestinian leaders and their publics need to *want* a resolution more than the Americans do, and to be prepared to pay a price for it. Also, Kerry was heavily criticized by Palestinians for

failing to play the “honest broker.”⁴⁸ Despite his own vigorous efforts and the backing of a talented team, Kerry encountered a “very negative [negotiating] environment” in which two leaders (who were, in any case, “not a compatible pair of peacemakers”) had to contend with serious domestic critics and spoilers.⁴⁹

At the time of writing (December 2018), the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip has again become a serious flashpoint for a possible eruption of full-scale war. Almost 2 million Palestinians live under horrible conditions in an area described as an “open-air prison,” with exit and entry points controlled by Israel on three sides and by Egypt on the fourth.⁵⁰ Despite recurring mediation efforts for a ceasefire, the Strip continues to serve as a pad for the frequent launching of missiles, drones, and incendiary kites targeting nearby Israeli civilian populations and property, prompting predictable and punishing reprisals from the IDF.

A big question-mark also hangs over the diplomatic front. Even while awaiting the details and results of the Trump team’s new plan for an Israel–Palestine settlement, many unanswered questions linger. Underneath all these shifting current-day uncertainties, the basic dispute between Israelis and Palestinians and many of its intertwined core arguments remain unresolved, mired in an uneasy stalemate. True, the parties have come a long way from their pre-Oslo patterns of no-contact and boycott; true, the gaps on many disputed areas have been narrowed since Israelis and Palestinians have broken the taboo of mutual non-recognition.⁵¹ But the key issues separating them and the lack of trust in each other’s intentions still present formidable obstacles to ending their 140-year-old conflict.

Notes

- 1 Also known as the “Oslo II” agreement. See: Indyk, M. (2009). *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East*, 1–3. New York/London: Simon & Schuster; Eisenberg, L.Z. and Caplan, N. (2010). *Negotiating Arab–Israeli Peace: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities*, 2e, 179–183. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Dowty, A. (2017). *Israel/Palestine*, 4e, 154. Malden, MA/Cambridge, UK: Polity Press; online documents available at <http://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-74.html> and <http://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/10/document-78.html>.
- 2 [Beilin-Abu Mazen] Framework for the Conclusion of a Final Status Agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, 31 October 1995, available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/10/document-79.html>. See also Beilin, Y. (2001). Beilin-Abu Mazen with full responsibility. *Haaretz*, 9 November.
- 3 Ben-Ami, S., quoted in Susser, A. (2012). *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative*, 44. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Ben-Ami, S. (2006). *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli-Arab Tragedy*, 212. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press; Ben-Ami, S. (2005). So close and yet so far: Lessons from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. *Israel Studies* 10 (2): 72–90.
- 4 Khalidi, R. (2006). *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, 198; also 195–206. Boston, MA: Beacon. For the text of the US Letter of Assurances to the Palestinians, 18 October 1991, see Institute for Palestine Studies (1994). *The Palestinian–Israeli Peace Agreement: A Documentary Record*, 2e (rev. ed.), 508. Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies [hereafter *PIPA*]; available online at <https://naip->

- documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-61.html. Population statistics from the Foundation for Middle East Peace at <https://fmep.org/resource/comprehensive-settlement-population-1972-2010/> (accessed 23 October 2018).
- 5 Ben-Ami, S., *Scars of War*, 213–215, 250, 258–259; Israeli, R. (2003). *War, Peace and Terror in the Middle East*, 3–28. London: Frank Cass.
 - 6 See Golan, G. and Sher, G. (eds.) (2019). *Spoiling and Coping with Spoilers: Israeli-Arab Negotiations*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
 - 7 Sela, A. (2005). Politics, identity and peacemaking: The Arab discourse on peace with Israel in the 1990s. *Israel Studies* 10 (2): 15–71; Rabinovich, I. (2013). *The Lingering Conflict: Israel, the Arabs, and the Middle East, 1948–2012* (rev. ed). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, ch. 9.
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Part III
Towards a More Useful
Discussion of the Arab–
Israeli Conflict

12

Writing about the Conflict

In the foregoing chapters, I have presented a basic overview of almost 140 years of Israeli–Palestinian and Arab–Israeli conflict in fewer than 250 pages. The intention was to offer readers

- a sense of how the conflict evolved from its early beginnings to one of regional and global dimensions;
- an awareness of changes in the historical context, but also repeating patterns of attitudes and behavior, over this period;
- some understanding of the parties, their motivations, and the emotional content of their conflicting views;
- an appreciation of why the conflict is so resistant to a resolution, especially when one singles out a number of unresolved, perhaps irresolvable, “core arguments”; and
- a basic notion of the main issues in contention among the conflict’s various protagonists and among historians who have written about it.

One of the conclusions to be drawn from this overview is that each of the parties has been operating, and still today operates, with weighty historical baggage. This baggage contains (i) an accumulation of unresolved grievances against, and perceived injustices committed by, the other party, (ii) a constantly renewed and refreshed sense of righteousness in its own cause, (iii) a constantly renewed and refreshed sense of its victimization at the hands of others, and (iv) a degree of pessimism, cynicism, and despair produced by the succession of disappointments over failed efforts and missed opportunities for ending their conflict. As we

have seen, the differing versions of Palestinians and Israelis of their shared history of conflict – their competing narratives – are not easily bridged. Accepting this reality, I have tried to be faithful in the preceding pages to the multiple versions and let each of the contested narratives “speak” to readers with a minimum of editorial interference.

At the end of [Chapter 2](#) we outlined three paradigms illustrating different ways of presenting the past 140 years of this conflict (two of these are captured in our core argument #2). In this chapter we take a closer look at how historical and political writing about this conflict not only reports and describes the conflict, but actually reflects and takes part in it – and often distorts it, too.

On the Shortcomings of “Myths versus Facts”

In the previous chapters we have seen numerous examples of how the same events can be interpreted in widely different ways by Israelis and their supporters, on the one hand, and by Palestinians and theirs, on the other. Each party clings to the accuracy of its own narrative and is quick to dismiss contesting versions by designating their components as myth, propaganda, or lies.

Unfortunately, this presentation of the history of the dispute by lining up and reinforcing one party’s (true) “facts” against the other’s (false) “myths” has also become a popular, but simplistic, way of explaining the conflict to beginners. It also functions to eliminate inconvenient doubts among the faithful, and works to win over uncommitted observers. Often buttressed by legitimate scholarship, this approach has its appeal but should be carefully scrutinized for its many flaws. Too much in the complex history of this dispute becomes reduced to a battle between *our* side’s truth and *their* side’s lies or propaganda. Likewise, our side’s virtue becomes pitted against their evil intentions, our resistance (self-defense) against their aggression, our

desperation and weakness against their overwhelming strength or unfair advantage.

Over the past 140 years both Zionists/Israelis and Arabs/Palestinians have exhibited repeated examples of this mindset. Coming from the protagonists themselves in the heat of their struggle, there is something natural and authentic about such adversarial closed-mindedness. These attitudes are real obstacles to be overcome among real combatants. But what happens when writers, journalists, scholars, and other interpreters – who stand one or more steps removed from the actual conflict – choose to present the conflict in this same binary way? Are they not playing the role of advocate for one party and replicating its particular version of history?

The conflict's long history has been accompanied by the publication of too many one-sided books, pamphlets, and articles, displaying varying levels of sophistication. Many of these make great pretensions to objectivity, all the more ironic – and deceptive – in the era of “fake news.” A sampling of titles, through the decades, is revealing: *Palestine: The Reality* (1939), *Palestine through the Fog of Propaganda* (1946), *Myths and Facts: A Concise Record of the Arab–Israeli Conflict* (1964, etc.), *Battleground: Fact and Fantasy in Palestine* (1973, etc.), *Know the Facts* (1985).¹

Critical readers soon discover that the real intention of these publications is to score points in the ongoing public-opinion debates between the Israeli/Zionist and Palestinian/Arab viewpoints. These publications are only one illustration of this battle which is as old as the conflict itself. Another is the mobilization of student activists using “talking points” designed to win arguments through rhetorical tricks, sophistry, and the denigration of the adversary. Although technology and formats change, many of today's media and online debates follow the old familiar pattern of “*our* facts versus *their* myths.” The quest of some college students to bypass these sterile and highly polarized presentations of the conflict has resulted in a number of commendable initiatives, but the overwhelming experience on

campuses is of heated, and sometimes toxic, skirmishes between passionate pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli student advocacy groups. The internet abounds with similar adversarial tit-for-tat ways of laying out the issues in dispute; honest attempts at even-handed presentation are rare exceptions.²

For those interested in honing their debating skills or in advancing the cause of their preferred party, this adversarial way of presenting the conflict is perfectly appropriate. Among the leading websites that serve this purpose is the Jewish Virtual Library's "Myths & Facts" page (which comes up directly when clicking on a link called "Arab-Israeli Conflict"), while popular pro-Palestinian websites include "The Electronic Intifada" and "Palestine Remembered."³ But for those really seeking greater understanding of why the parties fight, and whether and under what conditions they will ever be able to reconcile their differences, the merits of uncritically gravitating to one side or the other are dubious.

One troubling feature of myths-versus-facts publications and websites is the high degree of certitude they exhibit – often unmatched by anything in real life. The truth is seldom as simple, and the facts seldom as straightforward, as the purveyors of myths-versus-facts make them seem. Also characteristic of this sort of writing is a pervasive tendency to make unflattering presumptions about the motives of the other; our capacity to know the "true" motives of other people is minimal and unreliable, often no better than guesswork.

Those seeking factual accuracy and an honest appraisal of the forces at work in this conflict will be ill served by relying on the myths-versus-facts approach. By its very essence it marshals facts selectively, and manipulates data using the whole gamut of rhetorical tricks and tools for the sole purpose of advancing a cause – hardly conducive to achieving dispassionate knowledge or critical understanding. Nor is it likely to be helpful to those searching for a way of bridging the Israeli–Palestinian impasse, because by its confrontational

format it denigrates the other side, fueling a cycle of polarization, self-justification, and mutual vilification.

Objectivity and Bias in Academe

What about the halls of academe, where we would expect professional standards to require objectivity and accuracy? Indeed, professors and students of history and historical methodology are constantly faced with the challenges posed by bias. One basic lesson they learn is to appreciate the limits of objectivity; pure objectivity, they discover sooner or later, does not exist. After all, even the most neutral, unbiased scholar must necessarily employ some degree of selection (inclusion/exclusion) and emphasis while constructing her/his chronological or analytical treatment of the past.

Ilan Pappé, one of the Israeli “new historians” (see the section “Israel’s ‘New Historians’”), recognizes these challenges:

history writing is based on choices and decisions. Indeed, a historical narrative is far more than a simple sequencing of events, but rather a way of extracting a plot out of collated facts, requiring historians to make decisions about what to include, exclude, emphasize, and how to structure the narrative. This being the case, it is inevitable that current political realities influence the agendas and orientations of professional historians, especially when the subject matter involves a disputed land.⁴

Indeed, it is safe to say that all scholars and educators consciously or unconsciously inject context and personal perspective into the bare bones of any story they are reconstructing from the past. The real questions are not about “bias” versus “no bias,” but rather about *which* biases are in play. Can a scholar be sufficiently self-aware to monitor and control for his/her own biases? And can a reader detect an author’s (or a website’s) biases, and can such recognition help them understand better how those biases affect the history being presented?

A great responsibility falls to the reader faced with various competing versions of history – each biased to one degree or another. Which one displays greater accuracy or completeness of factual evidence? Which scholar’s (or website’s) way of presenting those facts and the motivations of historical actors seems more credible?

⁵ Careful readers on this heated subject know from experience how book-jacket claims and publishers’ blurbs hailing the objectivity of an author should be treated with healthy skepticism; the highest praises for objectivity often cloak the exact opposite in terms of the actual level of bias or propaganda exhibited by an author.

The quest for reliable, credible scholarship is further hampered in this field of study by an overabundance of “nationalist historians,” defined by Sylvia Haim in the early 1950s as scholars who devote their “abilities and scholarship to the greater glorification of [their] nation or community.” Accepting that “no historian can work without having a definite point of view,” she critiqued George Antonius’s popular *The Arab Awakening* (1938, cited in [Chapter 6](#)) by recognizing that “Antonius adopts a nationalist one” and consequently “he has to be assessed as a nationalist historian.”

The phenomenon is no doubt widely prevalent, but it is nonetheless to be condemned.... Seeing that he deals with the actions of men in power, with right and wrong, and generally with what human beings do to each other, he is not permitted to set himself up as the defender of one imperfect cause against another – and all political causes are imperfect. Should he attempt to do so, this but shows a failure in his professional integrity.⁶

Several decades later the editors of a compendium of articles on the conflict described the problems of academic bias in similar terms:

Even among scholars who are supposed to be objective observers, the conflict has engendered emotional intensity.... Scholars are not immune to the passions that animate the belligerents, who adhere to differing versions of history to support their respective claims. This tug-of-war between scholars ... has manifested itself in contradictory arguments along the same lines which the belligerents themselves use.⁷

More recently, the editor of the *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians* lamented the “fusion of ideology and scholarship” in a field that “is dominated by partisans ... who have used scholarship and journalism to galvanize their people, to gain world support, and as a weapon against one another in their struggle over Palestine.”⁸

All of these observations illustrate very well the underlying premises of the “Contesting the Past” series of which this book is a part. Historians are not neutral chroniclers; they not only report, but often mirror and transmit, the arguments and positions adopted by the conflicting parties they are studying. In the last few years academics have become even more intensely embattled, as if to keep pace with the exacerbation of the unresolved conflict on the ground. Distorted and polemicized presentations of the conflict in scholarly writing, lecturing, and websites are, sadly, more frequent today than ever. Indeed, it has become commonplace for scholars to willingly lend their academic credentials to advance one version of the conflict while discrediting the other. For example, the pro-Palestinian “Faculty for Israeli–Palestinian Peace” competes with the pro-Israeli “Scholars for Peace in the Middle East” by promoting what they both call “educational” tours to the region and issuing “research” publications which, in the end, present, in sophisticated academic garb, variations of the slanted myths-versus-facts approach described earlier in this [chapter](#).⁹ Less overtly politicized and more research-oriented are two US-based organizations: the Palestinian American Research Center (PARC), devoted to “improve scholarship about Palestinian affairs, expand

the pool of experts knowledgeable about the Palestinians, and strengthen linkages among Palestinian, American, and foreign research institutions and scholars,” and The Israel Institute, whose mission is to “enhance knowledge about modern Israel through the expansion of accessible, innovative learning opportunities, on and beyond campus.”¹⁰

A non-threatening climate for calm and open-minded discussion of this conflict has become increasingly rare on campuses around the world. Reflecting a sharpening polarization and a fear of controversy (that might endanger funding or enrolments), a number of instructors and departments have reacted by avoiding altogether the teaching of courses on Israel and Palestine. One response to this disappointing trend in Britain and abroad is to promote the nuanced teaching of “parallel histories” – an activity very much in the dual-narratives spirit of this book.¹¹

Two conspicuous manifestations of today’s heated battles waged in European, North American and other universities are “Campus-Watch” and the “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions” (BDS) movement. Campus-Watch is dedicated to exposing what it considers anti-Israel bias in professors’ course materials and lectures; its website and mass emailings are modeled on other watchdog operations whose purpose is to denounce what their creators consider to be anti-Israel treatments of the conflict.¹² Often responding to hostility and intimidation directed against Jews and pro-Israel students and professors, these advocacy and shaming platforms have added to the bitterness that accompanies normal academic politics (i.e. personality clashes, competition to impress those who have power over one’s advancement, genuine ideological battles). This can be seen, for example, in the work of a Faculty Task Force of the Israel on Campus Coalition, “dedicated to all those who fight against the demonizers and defamers of Israel and Jews on campuses worldwide.”¹³ In the US, nationwide campaigns were organized with the aim of destroying the professional reputations of, or denying tenure to,

outspokenly pro-Palestinian academics like Norman Finkelstein, Joseph Massad, and Nadia Abu El-Haj.¹⁴ Activities aimed at counteracting or shutting down pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel activists became even more intense with the launch in 2015 of a project called Canary Mission, whose motto is: “If you’re racist, the world should know.” Targeting professors and students critical of Israel, this is the latest venture in a decades-old campaign that has provoked accusations of McCarthyist witch-hunting and suppression of academic freedom.¹⁵

Offsetting these militant pro-Israel campus activities, the BDS movement has emerged as one of the most successful pro-Palestinian mass mobilizations in decades. The idea harks back to the economic warfare, boycott and blockade applied by the Arab League against the emerging state of Israel beginning in 1945. The current BDS movement began in mid-2005 as a loose coalition of grassroots organizations working for Palestinian human rights in the spirit of the global campaign that had targeted the South African apartheid regime decades earlier. BDS activities meshed with pro-Palestinian teach-ins and rallies organized on dozens of university campuses under the title “Israel Apartheid Week.” BDS activists lobby the organizations of which they are members – academic institutions, professional associations, labor unions, church groups – to take action that would help “end international support for Israel’s oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law.”¹⁶ The most visible measurements of the movement’s success are high-profile entertainers or athletes who decide not to perform or compete in Israel, international sporting competitions that choose not to invite or welcome Israeli athletes, and academic and cultural institutions that refuse to engage in cooperative exchanges with their Israeli counterparts.

Denouncing Israel’s “settler colonialism, apartheid and occupation,” the movement’s success and popularity caused much concern in the American Jewish

community and in Israel; indeed, the latter has created a Ministry of Strategic Affairs dedicated to fighting BDS around the world. For their part, Israel's supporters in the US responded by proposing or passing state and congressional legislation that would penalize individuals and groups who advocate BDS, sparking serious debates about American constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech.¹⁷ The sharply polarized pro- and anti-BDS divide has unleashed sometimes ugly battles in legislatures and municipalities, and is especially visible among university administrators, faculty associations, and student groups. In addition, BDS militancy and its "anti-normalization" message have alienated many Jewish and other pro-Israel leftists, weakening a potential common front of those who might otherwise be working together for an end to Israel's occupation and the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.¹⁸

Scholars and Activists

What can we say, generally, about the role of educators and scholars in their professional research, publications, public lecturing, and classroom teaching on this conflict? As we have argued, there can be no pure objectivity in discussing human affairs, and some bias must be accepted as inevitable in the presentation of historical events. Many people do, however, recognize that a degree of critical self-awareness by academics is desirable to avoid blatant spillovers from ideology or partisanship into scholarly pursuits. Careful students and readers need to be alert to biases and to work around them in their own processing and understanding of new material offered by experts and specialists.

Given that historians do have opinions, the question becomes: Under what conditions should historians of this conflict divulge their personal views? Few will take the extreme position of arguing that scholars should or can remain neutral, making no judgments whatsoever between what they consider wise and unwise, or between right and wrong. And most will agree that historians

should display empathy rather than antipathy toward the subjects of their chosen research. But where does one draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable injection of a scholar's personal opinions?

Rather than attempting to set up criteria built on the false dichotomy of biased/unbiased, let us consider academic approaches to this conflict along a spectrum between the extent of *reluctance* or *willingness* of a scholar to disclose his/her personal opinions to readers or students. Below I will give examples of scholars in this field of study who display different degrees of reluctance/willingness to insert their personal evaluations and judgments into their writing or lecturing.

At one end of the spectrum are academics who regard their basic task as being limited to establishing or clarifying the factual record. Who did what to whom? When? How many died? Their chief materials are archival and other primary sources and they see their main task as being to uncover and present facts and evidence in an accurate and coherent manner. Discussions of the protagonists' motives are cautious and tentative, in some ways secondary to setting down a reliable record and letting the facts speak for themselves.

These academics are reluctant to express their personal opinions on the rights and wrongs committed by the parties. Recognizing that their own gender and socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds already have some impact biasing their work, they are careful not to "overprocess" their research findings by putting too personal a spin on them. Although sometimes criticized as ivory-tower intellectuals, they are content to provide useful and credible raw material, leaving it to others to further explore and theorize about. They prefer to keep a low profile and not venture into public debates or take stands on controversial issues.

I see myself as a follower of this approach in much of my scholarly output, having worked mostly with diplomatic documents. I prefer to let my readers draw their own conclusions and register their own criticisms based on

the texts and historical record that I and others are laying out. If I interject my own personal judgments, they are usually to criticize what I consider to be one party's or another's misjudgments, erroneous appraisals or wishful thinking. My own personal biases are already implicit in the choices I make: the topics I write about, where I seek and find my raw material and secondary readings. When I sift through masses of research material, I choose to use some documents and authors (which I judge to be more credible and pertinent) and set aside others (which I deem to be less credible or pertinent). Then I make choices in the presentation of the historical data, in setting the material within what I consider an appropriate context. My reluctance to go beyond these choices to offer too many personal opinions on the actors and their motives issues is motivated, in part, by respect for, and deference toward, both the subjects and readers of my research, as well as a desire to guard against the pitfalls of my own human fallibility.

But, surveying the field, it is obvious that this sort of restraint is an approach not widely favored or followed. Far more plentiful are academics who conceive their role in more activist terms. Avi Shlaim, one of the original "new historians" (see the section "Israel's 'New Historians'"), believes that "the historian's most fundamental task is not to chronicle but to evaluate. The historian's task is to subject the claims of all the protagonists to rigorous scrutiny and to reject all those claims, however deeply cherished, that do not stand up to such scrutiny."¹⁹ Unlike the minimalist approach, such views define professional responsibility as requiring that readers know the author's opinions and judgments, and not just the facts.

Another example of an academic who publicly shares his opinions is Benny Morris. His published scholarly works on difficult subjects exhibit a no-nonsense approach, and he does not hold back from issuing harsh criticism based on his reading of the evidence. The 1987 publication of his findings on the expulsion and flight of Palestinian refugees, based mainly on Zionist and Israeli primary

sources, was truly ground-breaking and eye-opening. Morris received both praise and criticism for his accounts of 1947–1949, which included severe judgments that challenged a number of self-serving myths held by Jews and Israelis about the alleged voluntary exodus of Palestinians and the behavior of Zionist militias and Israeli soldiers, as we saw in [Chapter 6](#). He was among the first of a generation of “new historians” to challenge the received narrative for 1948 in Israel. In a critical review of a book published by Ilan Pappé (another “new historian”), Morris describes his own quest for objectivity and his attempts to keep his personal views out of his scholarship:

[W]hile historians, as citizens, ha[ve] political views and aims, their scholarly task [is] to try to arrive at the truth about a historical event or process, to illuminate the past as objectively and accurately as possible. [Unlike Pappé,] I ... believe that there is such a thing as historical truth; that it exists independently of, and can be detached from, the subjectivities of scholars; that it is the historian’s duty to try to reach it by using as many and as varied sources as he can. When writing history, the historian should ignore contemporary politics and struggle against his political inclinations as he tries to penetrate the murk of the past.²⁰

But keeping a separation between one’s professional work as historian and one’s beliefs and activities as concerned citizen is easier said than done. This was vividly illustrated in Morris’s own case in 2002. Like many Israelis then living through the daily violence of the Second *Intifada* and embittered over the 2000–2001 near-miss talks at Camp David and Taba, Morris publicly despaired of the chances of reconciliation and vented his frustration against the Palestinians for what he considered their unrealistic aims and hostile intentions.²¹ Avi Shlaim, who considered the Israelis as the real obstacles to peace, took to the pages of *The Guardian* to challenge and distance himself from his erstwhile comrade-in-arms.²² Two years later, in the

course of an extended interview, Morris uttered some highly unflattering remarks about Muslim and Arab society and culture, comments that some considered stereotypical and racist.²³ This outburst raised an important question: Can a historian continue to write sound, credible history on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict after having publicly disclosed such a lack of empathy for one of the subjects of his research, and having expressed his belief that “the Arabs are after our state, and they are after our blood.”²⁴ While some reviewers of his massive 2008 study of the 1948 war credited Morris for keeping his scholarship separate from his personal opinions, others denounced him for retrofitting his own post-*Intifada* fears into his historical treatment of 1948.²⁵ Later, in announcing his switch to a new area of study, Morris confessed: “The decades of studying the conflict ... left me with a feeling of deep despair. I’ve done all I can. I’ve written enough about a conflict that has no solution, mainly due to the Palestinians’ consistent rejection of a solution of two states for two peoples.”²⁶

Benny Morris is one example among many of historians of the Arab–Israeli conflict who generously share personal opinions and not only research findings. They see it as a natural part of their professional task to take positions on contemporary controversies, offering their readers, students, and the media their opinions on and critiques of the attitudes and behavior of the parties in conflict. We can find outspoken people who take this approach one step further, seeing themselves as public intellectuals for whom the Israel–Palestine conflict is one subject of study and interest that falls under a larger dedication to promoting universal human rights, social justice, or to fighting against oppression and colonialism. They would reject any separation between a narrow professional focus and their broader responsibilities and obligations as citizens of the world or human beings. These wider frameworks make it easier for them to take clear-cut positions on the rights and wrongs committed by the parties to the Israel–Palestine conflict. These scholar-activists feel free – some may even feel obliged –

to pass judgment on the actions, inaction, and/or motives of the protagonists, and to apportion blame and responsibility for hostilities, the perpetuation of injustice, and/or the absence of a solution.

Such scholar-activists may also work outside of academia as advisers to policy-makers, NGOs, or advocacy groups. This engagement often translates into playing the advocate on behalf of one of this conflict's protagonists whom they see as being the aggrieved party and whose cause they openly embrace. In so doing, however, they risk being accused of allowing their scholarship to be driven by their ideology, or of putting polemics or partisanship ahead of scholarship. In their political engagement, however admirable or popular, it is sometimes difficult to know when devotion to ideology or worldview may cause them to select and present their facts in distorted ways so as to align better with the dictates of their activist commitments.²⁷

Ilan Pappé is an example of this approach. A disciple of well-known public intellectuals Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, he is an Israeli historian formerly at the University of Haifa who moved to the University of Exeter in England. Pappé's early work followed the standard published-PhD style; his 1988 *Britain and the Arab–Israeli Conflict*²⁸ exhibited all the markings of the restrained, minimalist scholarship described above. Since then, however, he has been far more explicit in displaying his personal views and political commitments in his lectures and writings. Atypical among Israeli intellectuals, he has gone beyond merely criticizing the Zionist narrative to openly embracing the rival Palestinian narrative which he promotes in his work. In *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (2004, revised 2006) Pappé reveals his credo as follows:

My bias is apparent despite the desire of my peers that I stick to facts and the “truth” when reconstructing past realities. I view any such construction as vain and presumptuous. This book is written by one who admits compassion for the colonized not the colonizer; who sympathizes with the occupied not the occupiers; and sides with the workers not the bosses. He feels for women in distress, and has little admiration for men in command. He cannot remain indifferent towards mistreated children, or refrain from condemning their elders. In short, mine is a subjective approach, often but not always standing for the defeated over the victorious.²⁹

A similar honest disclosure of subjectivity comes from anthropologist Ted Swedenburg, who professed his solidarity with the Palestinians and their resistance, and admitted that his study of the 1936–1939 revolt “required an effort to unlearn an academic training in anthropology and history that enjoins one to uncover the objective truth.”³⁰

Two other examples of activist/engaged scholars may be cited here. In a sophisticated discussion and powerful disclosure of her personal approach and beliefs, Sara Roy, a leading Harvard-based expert on Gaza, argues in favor of what she calls “humanistic scholarship” on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Drawing on her own self-awareness as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, Roy feels morally compelled to expose the causes and agents of repression while giving an empathetic voice to the Palestinian victims of oppression and dispossession.³¹ Similarly, within Israeli academia Galia Golan has spoken of her professional responsibility and privileged position as requiring her “not just to observe, but to observe critically, to criticize, to protest, to engage authority.” She is a political scientist, Soviet specialist, and a former leader of the Peace Now (*Shalom Achshav*) movement who feels committed “to battle, even to subvert those perpetrating oppression, hatred, and fear.”³² For scholars like these two women, a broader engagement in social justice drives their lines of

academic inquiry and research into this very troubled field of study.

In the end, readers and students are the “consumers” of the writings and lectures offered by educators and experts who, as shown in this chapter, have differing definitions of their own scholarly responsibilities.

Students-as-consumers encounter facts and explanations as transmitted by their professors – whose personal opinions on the conflict and ideological biases, both implicit and explicit, are unavoidably at work in shaping their resultant books, articles, or lectures. In the context of grading and academic advancement, students are vulnerable and may, consciously or subconsciously, wish to please and impress, or at least not run afoul of, their professors – playing to the latter’s presumed prejudices or well-known views rather than engaging in open-ended critical thinking and intellectual exchange. This reality should alert both consumers (students) and providers (professors) to the need to act respectfully and responsibly.

I feel we need to be wary of the scholarship created by those who explicitly identify with either of the embattled parties in the contested histories of Palestine/Israel. I have already disclosed my own preference for writing and lecturing wherein educators are restrained and cautious about expressing their personal views. I stand by a traditional, “positivist” approach to historical facts, objectivity, and bias; I am dubious about the merits of scholarship built on relativism and a wholesale rejection of academic detachment. But I recognize that our field is dominated, for better or for worse, by scholars who tend to be more explicit and more activist in their approach. In defense of my own – admittedly minority – preference, let me quote the words of Northrop Frye:

The scholar ... has all the moral dilemmas and confusions of other men, perhaps intensified by the particular kind of awareness that his calling gives him. But *qua* scholar what he is is what he offers to his society, which is his scholarship. If he understands both the worth of the gift and the worth of what it is given for, he needs, so far as he is a scholar, no other moral guide.³³

From the above it is obvious that there is no right or wrong way to teach history or to write about this conflict. There is a great variety of personalities and approaches, and it is up to readers/consumers to evaluate publications, lectures, and speeches according to a chosen set of criteria. Below is a modest checklist of professional goals which readers might legitimately expect of historians of this conflict:

- to provide basic factual accuracy and help establish the historical record based on credible (and multiple, where available) sources;
- to establish causality, where it is warranted, between one action and another, and to offer alternative hypotheses explaining links between events;
- to provide contextualized information helping readers to better understand the motivations, attitudes, decisions, and behavior of the actors;
- to identify patterns that deepen our understanding of the forces that contribute to causing and maintaining conflict;
- to scrutinize beliefs and myths of all the protagonists even-handedly, without becoming the advocate on behalf of any particular narrative;
- to challenge distortions and misrepresentations, whatever their provenance, by presenting credible counterevidence.

Israel's "New Historians"

With the opening of 1948 materials in many archives, a new generation of scholars eagerly probed the past through these primary sources, producing a wave of revisionist PhD theses and monographs. A particular brand of activist and committed scholarship emerged in Israel in the late 1980s, led by Benny Morris, Avi Shlaim, and Ilan Pappé – scholars with a “mission”³⁴ who, despite their differences in methodology and ideological leanings, were lumped together by some critics as being on a “crusade”³⁵ under the banner of the “new historians.”

One mission undertaken by this new cohort of scholars was to challenge a number of myths associated with the accepted Zionist narrative of *milhemet ha-atzma'ut* (the War of Independence, 1948), looking back after 40 years. Among other things, these writers wrote with great empathy for the Palestinian victims of the Zionist success story, while criticizing their own leaders for being somewhat intoxicated by their victories and hardened in their new-found power. Some inside Israel, along with many Palestinians and Israel's critics abroad, welcomed the appearance of these new historians – each for different reasons. Some Israelis looked forward to the corrective effect this new scholarship could have in revising mainstream histories that had displayed an overdose of self-glorification, a lack of self-criticism, or unduly myopic perspectives. Many agreed that the very launching of these debates could only be good for the continued study and writing about the history of the conflict.

But many in Israel and the Jewish world were taken aback to see their erstwhile heroes and heroines portrayed in such unflattering ways.³⁶ Not many were happy to be told that their Zionist saga and the creation of Israel were tainted by “original sin” because of the way the new Israelis treated the Palestinians. Fresh research on 1948 seemed to show the state's very foundation as something other than a miraculous victory of beleaguered underdogs, challenging Israelis' self-view as “the few against the many,” as David against Goliath.

During the late 1980s and through the 1990s, the Israeli public's displeasure with the new historians (often mistakenly lumped together with avowedly "post-Zionist" and anti-Zionist Israeli and Jewish scholars) was palpable and provoked many counterattacks.³⁷ Some criticized them for exploiting the imbalance in the availability of source materials, which naturally led to a disproportionate criticism of the Israeli-Zionist decision-makers while saying little or nothing about what Arab and Palestinian leaders were thinking and doing at the time. Others, less charitably, accused the new historians of engaging in an indiscriminate slaughter of sacred cows in selfish pursuit of notoriety and their own career advancement. Others dismissed the scholars for exhibiting an arrogant contrariness or, worse still, a "suicidal" self-loathing.³⁸

Beyond stirring up these lively, sometimes nasty, public debates about history among Israelis and Jews, the phenomenon of the new historians had other repercussions. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to two of them, namely:

1. a surge in the use of the "missed opportunities" approach to studying the elusiveness of Arab–Israeli peace, and
2. the impact of this specifically Israeli phenomenon on trends in historiography on the Palestinian side.

Missed Opportunities

It is the business of statesmen and leaders to discover and exploit windows of opportunity for advancing the interests of their people. Similarly, it is one of the tasks of researchers and analysts, albeit from the comfort of their armchairs and with the wisdom of hindsight, to review the history of conflicts and point out "missed opportunities" for peace.

There are two possible purposes for such post facto exercises: to allocate blame for failed leadership, and to

learn more about the nature of the conflict and the chances for its eventual resolution. Polemical and partisan writers produce the former, while academics and policy advisers tend to aim more for the latter. In the following pages we examine both ways of using the “missed opportunities” approach.

Many among Israel’s new historians have portrayed the Israeli–Arab conflict as if it were primarily a series of missed opportunities for peace. For those who frame the discussion in this way, the main purpose of research is to understand the failure to reach peace by exposing and censuring the party or parties considered responsible for missing those presumed opportunities. But narrowing the discussion to this single aspect and attributing a degree of retrospective certainty to what “might have been” are a simplification of larger and more complex phenomena that need to be considered together as making up the conflict and the reasons why it is not yet resolved.

The missed opportunities approach is a form of counterfactual analysis, a field of inquiry pursued by philosophers and by international relations specialists. It relies heavily on speculative second-guessing³⁹: *If only A had done (or not done) B, then C would/might have done (or not done) D.* An example of this sort of “if only ... then” history would be to explore a proposition like: *“If only Hitler and the Nazi Party had not come to power in Germany in 1933, then the Zionist movement might not have overwhelmed Mandatory Palestine with Jewish immigrants; and then the Palestinians might have been able to create an Arab state with a Jewish minority.”* In many ways this is indeed a fascinating and popular approach,⁴⁰ but it is methodologically problematic as a line of inquiry. We can never really know how any of the parties might have reacted to hypothetical possibilities. *“If only ... then”* and *“what if ...”* propositions involve hypothetical actions and further hypothetical consequences which we have no way of establishing or confirming, even using the best 20/20 hindsight.

In order to truly understand negotiation attempts we must go beyond “what-if” to examine the complex and interwoven reasons why some fail and others succeed.⁴¹ “Goodwill” and a “genuine desire” for “peace” – four elastic, subjective, and imprecise words covering a wide range of terms and conditions – are not the only determining factors. Those who single these out for scrutiny often rush to judgment to condemn one party’s bad faith for missing an opportunity to bring the conflict to an end. Frequently this forms part of a presumed pattern which, according to the writer, proves that either Arab, Palestinian, Zionist, or Israeli decision-makers were not truly interested in peace, sealing an indictment against one side or the other for perpetuating the dispute.⁴² This is not always a useful or sound intellectual exercise, although it may satisfy the needs of those advocating for or against one of the parties in conflict.

The best-known examples of the missed opportunities approach are, as we noted, the new historians who by and large found Israel’s leaders guilty of missing multiple chances to end the conflict in the wake of the 1948 war. This appears, for example, in Avi Shlaim’s early study of Syria’s Husni Za’im, as well as in his later studies, *Collusion across the Jordan* and *The Iron Wall*.⁴³ In particular, Shlaim and other new historians criticize the Israeli leadership for not doing more to transform their limited armistice agreements signed in 1949 into more extensive and stable peace treaties, and for not responding more generously to overtures from the Arab side. They cite archival evidence indicating that David Ben-Gurion, and even dovish leaders like Moshe Shertok/Sharet and Abba Eban, took conscious decisions that demonstrated their preference for holding on to territory captured in war over a potential deal that would have involved negotiating over the price demanded by the (defeated) Arab states for signing a peace treaty: viz., withdrawal from the armistice lines to the boundaries proposed back in November 1947 by the

United Nations (UN) partition plan, and the repatriation of Palestinian refugees.⁴⁴

On this score, mainstream Zionist/Israeli historiography is quick to cite Chaim Weizmann's aborted 1919 agreement with Amir Faysal as the most prominent illustration of the seriousness of their efforts to win Arab acquiescence for the Zionist program for Palestine.⁴⁵ During the Mandate period Zionist officials were open to initiatives from the other side, and often followed them up so as to avoid any possible criticism for losing a chance for a breakthrough.⁴⁶ The problem, they claimed, lay not with themselves but rather with Arab unwillingness to accept the Jewish national home and continued Jewish immigration.

A number of scholars have sought to make more judicious use of the missed opportunities approach and the newly opened archive material. In 1991 Itamar Rabinovich of Tel Aviv University's Dayan Center published *The Road Not Taken: Early Arab–Israeli Negotiations*.⁴⁷ The book had been sparked by new historian Avi Shlaim's article on a negotiation episode involving Husni Za'im, in the course of which Shlaim blamed Israel for "fritter[ing] away" a "historic opportunity" for peace with the Syrian leader (who was soon deposed and murdered).⁴⁸ While disclaiming any intention to defend any of the actors, allocate blame, or to focus on what he called "the ever-intriguing issue of 'missed opportunities'," Rabinovich's book was clearly intended as a corrective to the missed opportunities approach as sometimes misused by the new historians.

Without directly contradicting the newly revealed evidence of shortsightedness on the part of Israeli decision-makers of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Rabinovich spread the responsibility for the failure to achieve peace more evenly among the conflicting parties. Drawing on his expertise in Arab regional politics and on a wider selection of primary and secondary sources, he took a close look at whether anyone on the Arab side of a potential deal was really prepared to accept and make peace with Israel, *if only* the Israelis had shown more

willingness to make concessions. In his careful review of three post-1948 case studies, Rabinovich provided evidence showing that none of Israel's potential peace partners in Syria, Egypt, or Jordan was in any realistic position to follow through on a potential agreement and "deliver the goods" against domestic opposition – even had the Israelis been more forthcoming or generous in their bargaining stances. Going beyond simplistic and accusatory treatments of missed opportunities, Rabinovich offers a model of careful analysis that can be tested, refined, or contradicted by further research and the integration of additional source materials as they become available. A similar flurry of academic controversy took place over whether Israeli leaders missed opportunities for peace with the Palestinians in 1967–1968 or with Egypt in the early 1970s.⁴⁹

As with the second-guessing of Zionist and Israeli decision-makers, there are also many writers who manipulate the missed opportunities approach for the purpose of criticizing the Arabs and Palestinians for the absence of peace. The late Israeli diplomat Abba Eban once quipped that the Arabs "never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity," which became a stock-phrase used by Israelis to blame the other side on many occasions when a window of opportunity was opened and slammed shut again. Most of those who quote this witty phrase do so in the context of the "blame game." In so doing, they promote the self-serving view that, while Israel is always ready to make sacrifices for peace, the Arabs and Palestinians are somehow congenitally unable to seize those opportunities – whether out of implacable enmity, a lack of political savvy, inability to understand their own best interests, the curse of incompetent leadership, or some evil anti-Israel impulse that turns out to be equally, if not more, harmful to themselves than to their enemies.⁵⁰

Other writers choose to single out Palestinian "extremism" and "rejectionism" for the missing of opportunities. They often point to Palestinian rejection of the 1937 Peel and 1947 United Nations Special

Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) Reports and their proposed maps. To quote one particularly polemical use of the missed opportunities approach:

The useless suffering that the Palestinian leadership and elites inflicted on their own people and on all they encountered (Jews, Jordanians, Lebanese, and victims of terrorism worldwide) is a direct product of their obsession with justice. Had they been willing to accept the inevitable historic compromise, they could have had a Palestinian state in 1947 in much more than today's West Bank and Gaza Strip.⁵¹

This outlook is accusatory in tone (“blaming the victim”) and omits essential elements that may help to explain why Palestinians could not have – or, in their own best interests, perhaps even *should* not have – accepted those proposals.

Surely a more nuanced examination of those classic missed opportunities is required. One can raise the following doubts and considerations about what might have been had the Palestinian leadership accepted to work with the Peel proposals. For example,

1. Would the proposed Peel boundaries, restricting the proposed Jewish state to an enclave or mini-state in only 20% of western Palestine (Galilee and the Mediterranean coast north of Tel Aviv), have remained on the table, given the Zionist leadership's energetic rejection of those boundaries, even while announcing its acceptance in principle of the Peel *Report*?
2. Would the Arab state proposed by Peel – Arab areas of partitioned Palestine placed under Britain's loyal ally, the Amir Abdullah – have been a viable one?
3. Could the necessary population transfers have been implemented? Imbalances in the demographic distribution of Jews and Arabs in the two proposed states by Peel would have necessitated border adjustments and – more problematic and perhaps unworkable – transfers of population. Some 225

000 Arabs would have found themselves within the boundaries of the proposed Jewish state (incorporating a Jewish population of 396 000), with 1250 Jews in the proposed Arab state.⁵²

In contrast to the frequent use of the missed opportunities approach as part of the blame game, more serious and impartial historical analysis is now being produced that tackles questions about whether the Palestinians might not have lost their homeland to the Zionists, or might have worked out a tolerable arrangement with them, if only they had behaved differently at crucial moments in their history. In [Chapter 4](#), for example, we saw how the Palestinians rejected British proposals in 1922–1923 for limited self-government. In his unpublished research into Palestinian missed opportunities,⁵³ Philip Mattar undertakes a detailed look at this episode and the context in which leaders decided to reject the three successive British proposals (an elected legislative council, an appointed advisory council, and an “Arab Agency” modeled on the Jewish Agency). In choosing to boycott these British initiatives for limited self-governing institutions, Mattar asks, did the Palestinian leaders deprive their people of a tool that might have slowed down the advance of Zionism and enhanced their own chances for statehood?

After a careful examination of a broad range of primary sources, Mattar concludes that the rejection of the 1922 legislative council proposals was a major tactical error. This decision, he argues, meant that Palestinians denied themselves a forum for regular access to British officials, while the Jewish Agency continued to advise the Palestine government in Jerusalem and the Zionist Organization had the ear of the British government in London and the League of Nations in Geneva.⁵⁴ By rejecting the 1922–1923 proposals, they further missed out on a regular mechanism to press for British commitment to the second part of their “dual obligation” (see [Chapter 4](#)) under the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate. Regular meetings of a council, although likely

to be the scene of much political bickering and grandstanding, would have been chaired by the liberal High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel. As a venue, the council might have allowed both Palestinians and Zionists to work together on ad hoc economic, social, and cultural issues of mutual benefit, creating personal relationships that could have led some individuals, at least, to moderate their political positions and search for common ground. Even allowing for predictable deadlocks over “hot” issues like immigration quotas, a legislative council that had powers to enact laws and regulations and ratify budgets would, Mattar argues, have provided the Palestinians with some tools for protecting and modernizing their community, enabling it to better compete with the Europeanized Jewish *yishuv*.

Not, Mattar concedes, that their participation would have been, by itself, enough to halt the flow of Jewish immigration and land purchase, given the overall imbalance between Zionist strengths and Palestinians weaknesses. But, Mattar clearly believes, “the Palestinians would have been in a more advantageous position than what transpired” if they had accepted to participate in the proposed legislative council:

With no discernable strategy of either confrontation or cooperation [vis-à-vis the British rulers of the country], they allowed the Yishuv to grow, to establish military and governmental institutions. Their leaders often met British officials but only to protest, demand, threaten, or plead, which led to little if any policy change.

Despite moral qualms about their participation requiring tacit acquiescence in the Jewish national home and the Mandate, “they stood to gain more from working within the Government, than outside of it.” They could have helped in drafting legislation. They could have had official input into expenditures and quotas for Jewish immigration. They could have used their official positions to criticize British policy and appeal for British and world support. Most of all, they would have put themselves in a position to ask for more.

Unlike the polemical use of evidence shown earlier, and unlike apologetics arguing that Palestine's fate would have been different if only Palestinians had followed Ragheb Nashashibi and accepted these and other British proposals,⁵⁵ Mattar's method is to draw upon a range of credible evidence and research into episodes such as this one. His conclusions are no less forthright than those quoted above, but the tone is altogether different: "By seeking total justice, instead of attainable justice, [the Palestinians] attained nothing, and eventually lost their homes, lands, and homeland. That is, by ignoring practical politics and by allowing only ideology and emotions to drive their policies and actions, they insured failure."

Another noteworthy example of the judicious application of a missed opportunities approach to Palestinian decision-making comes in Rashid Khalidi's *The Iron Cage*, which raises a number of critical questions about what the Palestinians might have done differently, such as:

- Could they have compromised and accepted some form of Jewish national home within the context of an Arab state in Palestine before 1939?
- Had they done so, would this have had any effect on the powerful drive of the Zionist movement for an independent Jewish state in Palestine?
- Would the Palestinians have been better off had they been more militant in dealing with the British much earlier?
- Would they have benefited had they been able to rein in the revolt of 1936–1939 and win some political gains from it?

Reviewing options and possible outcomes of these "what-if?" propositions in the circumstances of the 1930s and 1940s, Khalidi concludes that it would be "difficult or impossible" to imagine a successful trajectory either to Palestinian statehood or to a reconciliation between Zionist and Palestinian national

aspirations.⁵⁶ Similar careful counterfactual analysis could be used to examine whether the Palestinians should be blamed, or blame themselves, for missing another opportunity to contain or block the expansion of the Jewish national home when they decided after May 1939 to reject the MacDonal White Paper, rather than exploit its favorable clauses (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Whether one chooses to agree or disagree with a particular set of conclusions, the missed opportunities approach can be a useful tool for analyzing the positions adopted by both sides. But, as noted, such analysis means avoiding simplistic certainties and playing the blame game.

Trends in Palestinian and Israeli Historiography

Why did critical, revisionist history of the conflict begin and prosper among Israeli rather than Palestinian scholars? And why is there, until today, no Palestinian equivalent to the Israeli “new historians” phenomenon?

Part of the explanation is technical, but quickly becomes connected to the ongoing dynamics of the conflict itself. For a variety of reasons, primary sources in the form of diplomatic correspondence and memoranda are more plentiful and more easily accessible on the Israeli side. The Western tradition of open public archives is not generally replicated in the Arab world. The Palestinian community, stateless and dispersed, has lacked the structures and resources needed to facilitate and promote the accumulation of authoritative documentation on Palestinian history on the same scale as the rival Central Zionist Archives and Israel State Archives. For years, exiled Palestinians relied on the Beirut-based Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Research Center and the Institute for Palestine Studies to collect and preserve these parts of their national heritage; but much of the task of preservation of documents was left to individuals and families. The limitations of written testimony are being partially

counteracted by a new generation of collectors of oral history.⁵⁷

The asymmetrical power relationship between the two parties has implications for the writing of the history of the dispute. Ilan Pappé has claimed that Israel not only colonized the Palestinians' land, but has for many years also "colonized" the writing of their history.

By and large, Israeli historians conveyed the message that Israelis were the victims of the conflict, and constituted the rational party in the struggle over Palestine, while the Palestinians were irrational if not fanatic, intransigent and immoral.... The stronger party ... has the power to write the history in a more effective way. In our particular case, [Israel] had formed a state and employed the state's apparatus for successfully propagating its narrative in front of domestic as well as external publics. The weaker party [Palestinians] ... was engaged in a national liberation struggle, unable to lend its historians a hand in opposing the propaganda of the other side.⁵⁸

One result of this asymmetry is that early historical writing was characterized as "a form of resistance by means of formulating a national Palestinian narrative" which resembled, in the words of one Palestinian historian, "emotional speeches and direct national[ist] propaganda rather than a search for the truth."⁵⁹

Rejecting or ignoring claims of an imbalance of power, some Israelis involved in dialogue with Palestinians have argued that, now that they themselves have been subjected by their new historians to the painful process of myth-busting, it is time for the Palestinian side to do the same. Why, they ask, don't we see an equally energetic campaign to rewrite Palestinian history and subject its myths and narratives to rigorous scrutiny?

There are several responses that Palestinians offer to this challenge by their Israeli counterparts. While the conflict persists in its present form, they point out, Israeli historians enjoy the luxury of criticizing their own side's "victor's history" with relative ease and impunity, risking

only minor damage to the national self-image and (possibly, but not necessarily) their career advancement. Palestinian academics cannot, they argue, be considered a symmetrical or parallel case. Being members of the weaker, defeated party and living largely under occupation or as guests in undemocratic states, their historians cannot openly attack leaders or régimes, or engage in the slaughter of national sacred cows, past or present. And they are loath, not unlike many Israelis, to engage in acts of self-criticism which may provide easy ammunition or comfort to the enemy or cause harm to their own national struggle.

There is another reason why Palestinians do not find themselves replicating the crusading zeal of Israel's new historians. As Rashid Khalidi points out, research findings of Israel's new historians have largely borne out the factual accuracy of "many elements of the standard Palestinian narrative"⁶⁰ – thus leaving less to debunk on their side. Some Palestinians take this point even further, viewing the emergence of Israel's new historians simply as a belated recognition of the non-tenability of the "old and distorted official history" of Zionism and Israel, and proof of the correctness and validity of their own Palestinian narrative of victimization at the hands of Zionist colonialism. "The need for new Israeli historians," wrote Palestinian poet Zakaria Mohammed,

derived from the existence of a history that cannot [with]stand serious criticism. After all, ... what serious historian can describe the Zionist movement as a movement of national liberation? ... The Palestinian views the new Israeli historian as a penitent rather than a "new historian." His history is no more than "a confession" before the "priest of history." This is an admission of sin and no more. The Palestinian historian [on the other hand] cannot be repentant because he has nothing to confess to the "priest of history."⁶¹

Yet Khalidi not only recognizes that the Palestinian nationalist narrative "includes its share of myth" but also itemizes several key myths specifically about the

“Zionist-other” that deserve debunking. Significantly, the Columbia University scholar criticizes the Palestinians’

reductionist view of Zionism as no more than a colonial enterprise. This enterprise was and is colonial in terms of its relationship to the indigenous Arab population of Palestine; Palestinians fail to understand, or refuse to recognize, however, that Zionism *also* [emphasis orig.] served as the national movement of the nascent Israeli polity being constructed at their expense. There is no reason why both positions cannot be true.⁶²

Such sharply defined differences between the approaches of Israeli and Palestinian historians are a telling indication of how far apart the writers of the contested histories of Israel and Palestine remain. Similar dilemmas and disputes have occurred regarding the writing and revising of Israeli and Palestinian school textbooks since 1993.⁶³ Despite some interesting and original classroom experiments – notably the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME) project’s curriculum of parallel Israeli and Palestinian narratives aimed at children on both sides – the immediate results have been disappointing, largely owing to the effects of the conflict still being experienced on the street.⁶⁴

Even when scholars meet to talk openly on neutral territory, the interaction is not always encouraging. During a 2003 closed-door international conference of experts on the two parties’ narratives hosted by the World Peace Foundation and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, tension and frustration accompanied the discussions.⁶⁵ While Israeli participants, ranging from center-right to leftist to extreme left, exhibited varying degrees of criticism of the Israeli national narrative in the presence of their Palestinian colleagues, Palestinian participants refused to be drawn into the same exercise in self-criticism. Nadim Rouhana, an Israeli-based Palestinian social psychologist, used his presentation to launch into a

scathing attack on the inherent violence, exclusion, and oppression (“Zionism’s culture of force”) that Israel still inflicts on the Palestinians, who should not be blamed for resisting.⁶⁶ In response, Israeli historian and peace activist Mordechai Bar-On acknowledged the reality of Palestinian grievances but took offense at his colleague’s accusatory lecture, which he felt delegitimized his own existence as a native-born, peace-loving Israeli. He criticized his Palestinian colleague for displaying all the objectionable characteristics of an “exclusionist” narrative, suggesting instead that “self-critical revision” had to be applied by both Palestinians and Israelis, with three goals in mind:

1. To uncover and peel off the prevailing narrative’s exclusionist nationalist and self-congratulatory ideologies.
2. To transcend simplistic generalizations and labeling, and discover the full complexity of disputed events, motives and causations.
3. To try to understand the motives and the rationale of the “enemy’s” behavior, and to present the narrative with maximum sensitivity to the opposite side, with human compassion and a deeper understanding of the tragic nature of the conflict.

It is highly doubtful whether Bar-On’s proposed guidelines made any impression on his Palestinian co-participants at this closed-door seminar.⁶⁷

The late Edward Said welcomed the appearance of Israel’s new historians, however limited their willingness to abandon parts of the Zionist narrative in favor of Palestinian claims, as an opportunity for both parties to engage in dialogue while scrutinizing their own history with a new critical outlook.⁶⁸ But what is amply clear from the Harvard symposium and other attempts to bring academics together is the extreme difficulty in arriving at a common Palestinian–Israeli project for revising history, challenging myths, and criticizing national narratives.

Notes

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- 7 Lukacs, Y. and Battah, A.M. (eds.) (1988). *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: Two Decades of Change*, 3. Boulder, CO/London: Westview Press.
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- 9 Compare these organizations’ websites at www.ffipp.org and www.spme.net. Another pro-Israeli advocacy website offering an academic façade is the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research at www.isranet.org (accessed 28 April 2018).
- 10 Compare these organizations’ websites at <http://parcus-pal.org> and <https://israelinstitute.org>.
- 11 “Parallel Histories: A New Way to Study Conflict” project website at www.parallelhistorie.org.uk (accessed 19 May 2018). Cf. Waldron, J. (2018, 28 June). Brave spaces. *New York Review of Books* at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/06/28/brave-spaces-campus-free-speech> (accessed 15 June 2018).
- 12 <https://www.meforum.org/campus-watch/home>. See also: CAMERA (Committee for Accurate Middle East Reporting in America) at www.camera.org; Palestinian Media Watch at <https://www.palwatch.org>; NGO Monitor at <https://www.ngo-monitor.org>; UN Watch at <https://www.unwatch.org/en>; “Honest reporting:

Defending Israel from media bias” at <http://honestreporting.com> (all sites accessed 19 May 2018).

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- 14 On Finkelstein, see Peter Kirstein at <https://academeblog.org/2012/06/08/the-tenure-denial-of-norman-finkelstein> (accessed 5 April 2018). On Massad, see: “Special Document” dossier in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34 (2; Winter 2005): 70–84, and 34 (4; Summer 2005): 75–107; Petition on Jerusalem and Palestine/Joseph Massad, Academic Freedom, <http://jerusalemmites.org/old/jerusalem/petition/16.htm> and “The Columbia Battleground,” (November 2005) online at http://www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=2&x_outlet=118&x_article=874 (both accessed 5 April 2018). On Abu El-Haj, see Kramer, J. (2008). The Petition: Israel, Palestine, and a tenure battle at Barnard. *The New Yorker*, 14 April, 50–59, at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/04/14/the-petition> (accessed 5 April 2018).

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- 57 On the problems of Palestinian primary written and oral sources, see e.g. Abdel-Jawad, S. (2006). The Arab and Palestinian narratives of the 1948 War. In: *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict* (ed. R.I. Rotberg), 72–114, esp. 95–103; Khalidi, R. *The Iron Cage*, xxxv–xxxviii; Scham, P. et al. *Shared Histories*, 232–241, 265; Mattar, P. *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, xiv–xv; Kraft, D. (2009). On fiery birth of Israel, Memories of 2 sides speak. *New York Times*, 17 May; Nakba Archive at <http://nakba-archive.org> (accessed 2 May 2018); Palestine Remembered

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- 63 Critiques of Palestinian textbooks have been undertaken by Palestinian Media Watch, at <https://www.palwatch.org> (accessed 6 June 2018) and by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) at <http://www.impact-se.org> (accessed 24 September 2018). For some of the literature on the textbooks controversies, see Podeh, E. (2000). History and memory in the Israeli educational system: The portrayal of the Arab–Israeli conflict in history textbooks (1948–2000). *History and Memory* 12: 65–100, esp. 89–91; Brown, N.J. (2003). *Palestinian Politics after the Oslo Accords: Resuming Arab Palestine*. Berkeley: University of California Press, ch. 6; Brown, N.J. (2006). Contesting national identity in Palestinian education. In: *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict* (ed. R.I. Rotberg), 225–243; Naveh, E. (2006). The dynamics of identity construction in Israel through education in history. In: *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict* (ed.

R.I. Rotberg), 244–270; Miller, J. (2005). *Inheriting the Holy Land: An American's Search for Hope in the Middle East*, 45–68. New York: Ballantine Books.

- [64](#) See Bar-On, D. and Adwan, S. (2006). The psychology of better dialogue between two separate but interdependent narratives. In: *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict* (ed. R.I. Rotberg), 205–224; Jeffay, N. (2010). Banned textbook offers a lesson in Mideast politics. *Forward*, 3 December; Adwan, S., Bar-On, D., Naveh, E., and PRIME (2012). *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine*. New York: The New Press; Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME) website at <http://vispo.com/PRIME>.
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- [66](#) Rouhana, N.N. (2006). Zionism's encounter with the Palestinians: The dynamics of force, fear, and extremism. In: *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict* (ed. R.I. Rotberg), 115–141. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- [67](#) Bar-On, M. Conflicting narratives, 153. His response to Rouhana is given on pages 143–150. See also Ramsbotham, O. (2017). *When Conflict Resolution Fails: An Alternative to Negotiation and Dialogue: Engaging Radical Disagreement in Intractable Conflicts*, 70–75. Cambridge, UK/Malden, MA: Polity.

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13

Grappling with the Obstacles

The latest incarnations of the Israel–Palestine conflict continue to resist efforts to resolve it. The protracted and intractable nature of this struggle suggests that it may never be definitively *resolved* through compromise arrangements, the splitting of differences, and the removal of perceived injustices.¹ There may be, as we suggested in [Chapter 1](#), only ways to *manage* the conflict by containing the festering grievances at a low and “tolerable” level. But even those working for such a modest aim know how easily the unresolved local tensions can suddenly spiral into a major regional or international crisis. How can we best grapple with the longstanding obstacles to reconciliation and peace between the parties? And how can we effectively deal with the related obstacles to our own ability – as students, observers, or activists – to understand the contested histories of Israelis and Palestinians as accurately as possible?

Issues versus Rights

At any given moment, a summary of the issues separating Israelis and Palestinians can take on different forms. One such useful list can be generated by reminding ourselves of the unresolved “permanent-status” issues stemming from the unconsummated 1993 Oslo Accords. Seen from the vantage point of late 2018, and in spite of recurring debates about the viability of the two-state solution (which we discuss in this chapter), these issues are:

- How to maintain and advance a commitment from all parties to both *Palestinian statehood* and *Israeli statehood*;

- How to reach an agreed determination of the *borders* between the state of Israel and the future independent state of Palestine, the latter to be recognized in (what percent of?) the West Bank and Gaza, and a schedule for withdrawal of Israeli forces from areas to be assigned to Palestine;
- What will be the fate of *Jewish settlements* built since 1967 in the West Bank: which will stay, in exchange for what land swaps, and which will be evacuated?
- What *security arrangements* will be agreed upon between the two future neighboring states;
- How to deal with the return and/or compensation of *Palestinian refugees* who were expelled or fled in the wars of 1948 and 1967? How many will return to Palestine, how many to Israel? – And what of Israel’s claim to compensation for the Jews who were forced to leave Arab countries as a result of the wars of 1948, 1956, and 1967?
- What régime can be established for *Jerusalem*, claimed as national capital by both Israel and the Palestinians and regarded as a holy city to hundreds of millions of Muslims, Christians, and Jews? Can it be a shared, or a divided, city? Under whose sovereignty?

When one reviews the parties’ minimum demands, or “red lines,” on the above checklist of issues, along with their often surprising ability to withstand pressure to alter these minimum demands, it is no wonder that the conflict appears intractable.

The chances of agreement between Palestinians and Israelis appear even slimmer when we go beyond such lists and factor in other drivers of the conflict – those emanating from the parties’ contested histories and competing narratives. As we saw in [Chapter 11](#), the linking of concrete issues (Jerusalem, refugees, borders, security) to intangible and unmeasurable concepts like “justice” and “recognition” was an important contributor to the failure of several recent rounds of negotiation. On

the Palestinian side, negotiators have been insisting on a peace based on “justice,” which they define as Israel’s recognition of, and apology for, its role in the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem – a declaratory act with serious demographic implications for the Jewish state flowing from an implementation of the “right of return” for Palestinian refugees.² For their part, Israeli negotiators have increasingly focused on the need for any agreement to enshrine some formulation of Palestinian recognition of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state.³ Each side is now, more than ever, insisting that it would consider declaring the conflict ended only after the other provides a validation of a key component of its core narrative – an almost certain recipe for continuing and deeper deadlock. As Asher Susser points out, “narrative-invalidating demands made by both sides” are “pointless exercises that peace negotiations could well do without.”⁴

When negotiations are shifted like this from discussing *interests* to debating *rights*, we move from the realm of the negotiable into the realm of the non-negotiable. Sari Nusseibeh, a respected Palestinian philosophy professor and university administrator, has wisely noted how

our respective absolute rights – the historical right of the Jews to their ancestral homeland, and the Palestinian rights to the country robbed from them – [are] fundamentally in conflict, and [are] in fact mutually exclusive.... [T]he more historical justice each side [demands], the less their real national interests [get] served. Justice and interests [fall] into conflict.⁵

Further reinforcement of this point comes from Natasha Gill, who warns that “in the marketplace of negotiation” an insistence on “rights” and “recognition” becomes a “tool of intransigence,” symbolic of “the very issues that bring the peace process to its knees.”⁶

Our survey of the past confirms the preceding observations and suggests that the only possible “peace” would be a limited one (perhaps more accurately termed

a “truce”), built on narrower interests over which the parties may find some room for compromise. For both sides it will have to be something less than the definitive end-of-conflict that many have been seeking.

The Shape of the Future: What “Solutions”?

As we saw in [Chapter 11](#), testimony of the negotiators at Taba in early 2001, the work of participants in the 2003 Geneva Initiative, and the land-swap maps drawn up during the Annapolis talks of 2007–2008 all suggest that, through clever formulations and a spirit of compromise, a bridging of many gaps on the main issues is not out of reach. However, in the absence of leaders on the ground with the political will and domestic support to take risks to advocate compromises, the conflict will remain unresolved and periodically manifest itself in violent or oppressive forms.

Drawing on past experience does not, unfortunately, provide us with easy lessons on how Palestinians and Israelis might move forward from the latest unstable impasse toward peace or reconciliation. An understanding of the contested histories of the parties can, however, enable us to better appreciate the complexity of these disputed issues, along with the depth of bitterness and insecurity felt by all the protagonists. For those who seek realistic solutions, such an appreciation of past difficulties more easily translates into a rough guide to “what *won't* work” rather than “what *will* work.” All in all, drawing on the past may be most helpful in terms of preventing us from underestimating the powerful obstacles that need to be confronted and overcome if real progress toward a solution is to be made.

Thinking ahead to “the shape of the future,”⁷ there is not much room for inventing anything radically different from proposals made in the past. People engaging in today’s discussions will be, knowingly or unknowingly, drawing on a wealth of previous plans and ideas, and

they cannot avoid being limited in their options by the record of earlier failures. Also to be taken into account is the accumulated historical baggage that each party would be bringing to the table, once one is set up.

Recent decades have seen an intensification of intricate philosophical, political, and demographic debates about whether the futures for Israelis and Palestinians would be best served by a two- or one-state solution. In theory, the choices seem to boil down to only two in number:

1. two separate, sovereign states for two peoples, dividing between them the territory known to Arabs as “*Filastin*” and to Jews as “*Eretz-Israel*” – often called partition, or a two-state solution; and
2. one sovereign state shared by Israelis and Palestinians – a one-state solution – but with a wide variety of formats for the constitution of that single state with its two component communities, ranging from unitary to binational to cantonal to confederal.⁸

Apart from the doomsday scenario wherein one party completely wipes out, subordinates, or absorbs the other, these two are logically the only choices available.

The two-state solution is still considered by many the default option. Indeed, its origins go back to the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate, with their “dual obligation” formulas. In 1937 the Peel Commission and in 1947 United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) both recommended partitioning the country into Arab and Jewish states. The idea has been the starting-point of almost every international effort at peacemaking, from UN Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) through to 1850 (2008), with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reasserting “its vision of a region where two democratic States, Israel and Palestine, live side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders.”⁹ In the same spirit, in 2017 the General Assembly endorsed the two-state solution while marking the annual “International Day of Solidarity with the

Palestinian People,” reaffirming its 1947 resolution which had recommended the partition of Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state.¹⁰ Likewise, US initiatives from Clinton to Bush to Obama have been based on formulae such as “the vision of two states, Israel and sovereign, independent, democratic and viable Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security.”¹¹

Significantly, with the signing by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat of the Oslo Accords and letters of mutual recognition in 1993, the main parties became formally committed to working for this type of solution. And their publics are not far behind; popular backing for two states among the Israeli and Palestinian population has fluctuated over the years, often decreasing in response to political declarations, deadlocks, or outbursts of violence. For Israelis, support has varied over time between 60% and 70% of the total population, while among West Bank and Gaza Palestinians it has been somewhat lower, ranging between 35% and 65%.¹² In recent years backing for two states has dropped somewhat, reflecting stalemated negotiations and frequent expressions of despair over the chances of an acceptable two-state solution; in late 2017, support dipped for the first time to below 50% among both Palestinians and Jewish Israelis.¹³ Following earlier patterns, however, the appearance of credible leaders standing behind a detailed, specific proposal may well reverse such downward trends. “If the leaderships in Israel and Palestine mustered the courage to do what [is] required to achieve a two-state solution,” predicts Asher Susser, “they would have the majority of their respective publics behind them.”¹⁴

One of the core constituencies behind a two-state solution are those liberal Zionists who support an Israel that seeks to be both “Jewish” and “democratic.” Concerned about the generally accepted population projections¹⁵ that point to an eventual majority of Arabs living in the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, they find it imperative to partition the land so as to retain a Jewish majority within a reduced

territory, while allowing Palestinians to create and govern their own separate country. This motivation and position have been increasingly adopted by mainstream Israeli politicians, including many to the right of center.¹⁶

But the extended stalemate in negotiations after multiple failed efforts of the parties to reach a final resolution has created a vocal chorus of naysayers from across the political spectrum, seemingly in competition over the cleverest wording for pronouncing the two-state solution to be dead. One writer, for example, generously ridiculed those who operate under a “two-state delusion,” while a respected academic set off a firestorm of criticism by mocking the “mirage” of the “two-state illusion” held by true believers in the “peace-process industry.”¹⁷ Practical objections have also been raised about whether it is geographically and politically possible to create two viable contiguous states, one largely Jewish Israeli and the other largely Arab Palestinian, given the required land swaps and population exchanges. Defenders of the two-state option have responded with their own demographic projections and topographic studies – one site recently creating a monthly composite “Two-State Index.”¹⁸

Proposing a viable alternative, though, remains as elusive and as difficult as implementing the two-state solution. On several occasions, Mu’ammār Qaddafi announced proposals and designed a flag for a single state to be called “Isratin” – a solution which the late Libyan dictator touted as one destined to bring peace to Israelis, Palestinians, and the entire Middle East.¹⁹ More serious proposals for a one-state solution have become abundant, and currently the range is quite wide. The choice of proposals often boils down to whether the future entity will be a predominantly Jewish, or predominantly Arab, single state containing a significant minority of the other. On the one hand, Caroline Glick’s “Israeli Solution” is based on the annexation of post-1967 territory (without Gaza) so as to create a “Greater Israel”

containing a Palestinian minority.²⁰ (Supporters of this solution necessarily dispute the accuracy of commonly accepted population projections of an Arab *majority* within that proposed territory.²¹)

On the other hand, activists like Omar Barghouti advocate a “secular-democratic state in historic Palestine” requiring the “ethical decolonization” or de-Zionization of Israel.²² In many ways, followers of the current one-state vision are the successors of leftist intellectuals who persuaded the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from 1969 to 1974 to advocate a single secular democratic state in which an Arab majority and a Jewish minority would enjoy equal rights, after the latter had renounced Zionism.²³ The renewed popularity of this option has provoked some energetic responses from Israel’s supporters who view the one-state “agenda,” alongside the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign, as “a choice vehicle of political warfare against Israel and the Zionist project,” contributing to “the escalating delegitimization of Israel in the academia, intelligentsia, and political elites of the West – exacerbated in part by Israel’s own actions, settlements in particular.”²⁴ From another angle, sociologist and anti-occupation critic Gershon Shafir has rigorously examined the feasibility of several one-state options and found them wanting, despite their appeal in some ideological circles.²⁵

Despair over the lack of progress toward peace has provoked some thinking “outside the box” in the form of federal or confederal arrangements. Some of this contemporary creative thinking is, knowingly or unknowingly, drawing upon historical antecedents that we have seen in earlier decades. One type of proposal is for a single federal state comprising Palestinian and Israeli national units, or parallel states, under titles such as “two states/one homeland” or “confederalism.”²⁶ This hybrid variant resembles the binational state of the Mandate period favored by a small group of liberal Jewish intellectuals and briefly endorsed by the Anglo-

American Committee of Inquiry (see [Chapter 6](#), section “The Anglo–American Committee of Inquiry”). Its promoters today are few but articulate, working to make inroads on public opinion by winning endorsements from mainstream personalities.

Another, quite different, variant calling itself “The Federation Movement” recently emerged. It would, like Glick’s “Israeli solution,” be built on a single Jewish state in all of “Greater Israel,” allowing Palestinians full civil rights but also cantonal autonomy on all matters excluding defense and international affairs.²⁷

Structurally, this plan resembles proposals for the cantonization of Mandatory Palestine floated by a number of British, Zionist, and Palestinian Arab figures in the 1930s.²⁸ Its inspiration is almost identical to that behind Menachem Begin’s “autonomy plan” (1978–1982) which sought to keep West Bank and Gaza Palestinians under Israeli rule by offering them personal autonomy and local self-rule, rather than the full national-political self-determination sought by the PLO (see [Chapter 8](#)). Like its predecessors, this Israeli “Federation Movement” proposal falls far short of a basic acknowledgement of the *national* interests and claims of most Palestinians.

Despite increased indications of support for one-state solutions in distant quarters, Asher Susser’s painstaking analysis of the positions and interests of all the protagonists on the ground in historic Palestine – i.e. Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, and their various constituent populations – leads him to the firm conclusion that

the overriding consensus and the most realistic of options [is] still two states for the two peoples west of the river [Jordan].... A partition into two states still [holds] out the greatest hope for a peaceful accommodation of the political differences between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians and for the exercise of their respective rights to ethno-cultural self-determination.²⁹

Consistent with such findings and with the competing-narratives approach presented in this book, I would also conclude that a two-state solution, whatever its drawbacks, offers the only hope of moving Israelis and Palestinians toward some form, however imperfect, of peaceful coexistence. This belief is underpinned by an historical appreciation of the attitudes and positions of those who have intimately lived, or have closely studied, the conflict – from David Ben-Gurion and Awni Abd al-Hadi, whom we have quoted earlier, to engaged observers in our own day (see the section “Telling It Like It Is” in this chapter). This point can be reinforced by going back to and expanding upon the observations made in the *Peel Report* of 1937 (see [Chapter 5](#)). After visiting Palestine and hearing testimony from dozens of prominent representatives on both sides, the Commissioners found an “irrepressible conflict ... between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country.”³⁹ There was, they believed,

no common ground between them.... The Arab community is predominantly Asiatic in character, the Jewish community predominantly European. They differ in religion and in language. Their cultural and social life, their ways of thought and conduct, are as incompatible as their national aspirations. These last are the greatest bar to peace.... [T]o maintain that [common] Palestinian citizenship has any moral meaning is a mischievous pretense. Neither Arab nor Jew has any sense of service to a single State.

In proposing partition of Palestine as the only option that offered some hope of a solution back in 1937, the Commissioners argued, in the context and language of the period:

Manifestly, the problem cannot be solved by giving either the Arabs or the Jews all they want. The answer to the question “Which of them in the end will govern Palestine?” must surely be “Neither.” We do not think that any fair-minded statesman would suppose ... that Britain ought either to hand over to Arab rule 400 000 Jews, whose entry into Palestine has been for the most part facilitated by the British Government and approved by the League of Nations; or that, if the Jews should become a majority, a million or so of Arabs should be handed over to their rule. But, while neither race can justly rule *all* Palestine, we see no reason why, if it were practicable, each race should not rule *part* of it.

Recognizing that the idea of partitioning the small country had been previously considered and rejected because of perceived difficulties, the Commissioners nonetheless concluded that “those difficulties do not seem so insuperable as the difficulties inherent in ... any other alternative arrangement.... Partition seems to offer at least a chance of ultimate peace. We can see none in any other plan.”

This snapshot from 1937 seems equally valid when updated to our own day. Our survey of the contested histories of Israel/Palestine, including the most recent negotiating experiences – Taba; the Roadmap; the Arab Peace Initiative; the Geneva Accords; the Annapolis talks; the Kerry Initiative – only confirms that a formula based on two states for two nations is the only one that may one day provide a glimmer of hope, despite the ebb and flow of predictions of the demise of this option. “For both Israelis and Palestinians,” writes one Israeli scholar, “a two-state solution [is] not an ideal, but the lesser evil.”³¹

Unwinnable Core Arguments

The list of still unresolved issues discussed earlier in this chapter offers only a partial sense of what obstacles need to be confronted before we can expect movement from

the lingering stalemate toward some kind of eventual settlement. Above and beyond those tangible issues lie a number of *existential* and *intangible* obstacles that appear more difficult to overcome. The interlacing of these tangible and intangible obstacles can best be seen by reviewing the 11 core arguments that we have highlighted over the course of the conflict's evolution:

1. Who was there first, and whose land was it to begin with?
2. Was the Zionist solution to the Jewish question a Jewish variant of national revivals and struggles for liberation around the globe? Or was Zionism part of an aggressive European colonialist expansion into the Middle East, whose *raison d'être* was to exploit, dispossess, or overpower the indigenous population?
3. Did the British create or aggravate the conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Zionist Jews by unduly favoring one party over the other?
4. Were the protests and demands of Palestinian leaders legitimate expressions of an authentic Palestinian national feeling?
5. Did Zionism bring harm or benefit to the indigenous population of Palestine and the region?
6. Is the [Palestinians'] [Arabs'] [Zionists'] [Israelis'] resort to violence justified, or is it to be condemned?
7. What linkage, if any, should be made between the destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust and the question of who should rule Palestine/Israel?
8. Was United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 181 (Partition) a legitimate exercise of the authority of the United Nations in international law, and were the Arab states and the Palestinians wise to reject it?
9. How did Palestinians become refugees in 1948–1949? And why have they remained refugees for so

long?

10. Is the land conquered by Israel in June 1967 on the West Bank of the Jordan to be considered “occupied territory,” and does Israel have the right to build Jewish settlements there?
11. What are the true intentions of the Palestinians and the PLO: To eliminate the Jewish state of Israel and replace it with an Arab state of Palestine? Or to create a Palestinian Arab state in part of historic Palestine, to coexist alongside an Israeli Jewish state?

These remain unresolved and are probably unresolvable, both among the parties themselves and among those who write and comment on the conflict. By viewing the contested histories of Israelis and Palestinians in terms of this series of interlocking questions, we get a sharper sense of the obstacles that must be confronted if ever there is to be a resolution to this dispute. The cumulative result of these 11 “dead-ends” is what makes the Arab–Israeli conflict such a protracted – and perhaps insoluble – dispute.

Righteous Victimhood

Perhaps the single most important attitudinal obstacle underpinning all the arguments on the above list is the tendency of both parties to deflect responsibility onto the other as the root cause of their misfortunes. Israelis and Palestinians are locked into viewing themselves as the victims of the other – not just victims, but (in Benny Morris’s apt phrase) *righteous* victims. Recent research continues to probe this mindset and to focus on it as perhaps the main obstacle to Israeli–Palestinian peace and reconciliation.³² Israeli peace activist and novelist Amos Oz has noted that, “even when this conflict is history, there will still be bitter disagreement ... [a]nd neither of the parties will ever give up its claim to victimhood.” This, he believes, is something that the parties will simply have to live with and work around.³³

An important component of each party's sense of victimization is its profound sense of insecurity. One of the first things that struck Marwan Muasher, Jordan's first Ambassador to Israel, when he took up his post in the mid-1990s was

the deep sense of insecurity that the average Israeli felt. I had grown up in an Arab society that believed its security to be under constant threat from a regional power, a huge military machine that had resulted in the loss of Palestine, a lingering refugee problem, and the occupation of land belonging to three Arab states. Not until I went to Israel did I discover that the feeling was mutual. Israelis, too, felt a deep sense of insecurity from being in the middle of a "hostile" neighborhood. Each side shares a genuine fear about the other and harbors a profound sense that its personal and existential security is threatened by the other. Both sides also share another thing: an almost total lack of understanding of the depth of the insecurity they feel about each other.³⁴

Equally striking revelations greet Israelis who have the opportunity to live among and share everyday concerns with Palestinians and Arabs. Those involved in promoting dialogue emphasize the importance of transcending one's own fears and insecurities in order to be able to empathize with the *other's* equally authentic feelings of vulnerability.

Nowhere are the near-exclusive feelings of vulnerability and victimization more evident than in the parallel Israeli and Palestinian traumas of the *Shoah* and the *Nakba*. A growing number of observers have identified these as the sources of key obstacles to Israeli-Palestinian mutual understanding. "Generally," write Dan Bar-On and Saliba Sarsar,

both sides mourn their own man-made cataclysm separately. There is an underlying fear that the acknowledgement of the tragedy of the “other” will justify their moral superiority and imply acceptance of their collective [raison d’être]. For the Palestinians, accepting the Jewish pain around the Holocaust means accepting the moral ground for the creation of the State of Israel. For the Israeli Jews, accepting the pain of the 1948 Palestinian refugees means sharing responsibility for their plight and their right of return.³⁵

One way that Israelis, Palestinians, and dialogue groups address this two-pronged, deep-rooted psychological barrier is through activities aimed at sensitizing Palestinians and Jewish Israelis to each other’s pains and fears. Demonstrating empathy across boundaries on such sensitive issues happens occasionally among writers and intellectuals,³⁶ but is rare in the general population. Professional and lay people involved in peace education, interpersonal sensitivity training, and compassionate listening aim at overcoming negative attitudes and developing empathy for “the Other” as a first step toward reconciliation.³⁷ For some, this begins in community-based experiments, such as joint Jewish-Palestinian schooling (e.g. Hand-in-Hand schools, the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME) dual-narrative curriculum) and the Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam (Oasis of Peace) communal village.³⁸

Programs dedicated to the *Shoah* and the *Nakba* tackle the most sensitive areas of all. Specialized trips to former concentration camps have been geared to educating Israel’s Palestinian Arab community not only about the reality and the facts of the Holocaust, but also about the impact this event still has, generations later, on their Jewish fellow-citizens.³⁹ In a number of Knesset speeches marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day, MK Ahmad Tibi has become a leading voice in the Palestinian Arab community demonstrating sensitivity toward Israeli and Jewish

Holocaust-related fears through his vigorous condemnation of Holocaust denial.⁴⁰ Among Israelis, grassroots organizations like *Zokhrot* (“they remember”) engage in activities trying to open the minds and hearts of Israeli Jews to acknowledging the Palestinian losses and suffering that are still felt as a result of the *Nakba*.⁴¹

Responding partly to the post-2000 increase in the politicization of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel (see [Chapter 11](#)), nationalistic Jewish Knesset members have promoted laws that penalize Palestinian expressions of commemoration of the *Nakba*, activities viewed as a danger to the state. This follows years of informal but deliberate efforts to downplay and forget about it.⁴² But such legislation only drives more Palestinians to conclude that Israelis wish to continue the “job” of the *Nakba* by trying to erase from current generations the memory of the events of 1948.⁴³ It gives credence to Palestinian accusations that Zionist and Israel leaders have, all along, been deliberately intent on ethnically cleansing the land of its original inhabitants and expanding Israel’s borders so as to make room for more Jews.

The Israeli sense of victimhood is a modern incarnation of historical, culturally ingrained fears, transmitted through generations of Jews around the globe: the feeling at times that “the whole world is against us.” Such fears are easily rekindled by verbal threats to, or physical attacks on, Jews. From their earliest encounters with Arabs in Ottoman Palestine, most Zionist Jews have misperceived Palestinian hostility and violence simply as new examples of familiar antisemitism and pogroms, rather than as expressions of a resident population resisting the arrival of foreign “intruders” who wished to take over their lands. Likewise, many of today’s Jewish Israelis cannot perceive of Palestinian violence as resistance to living under occupation, or as tools in their struggle for their own state. Aided by slogans exploited by demagogic political leaders, Jews, and Israelis convince themselves that the conflict exists because there is “no one to talk to” on the other side, because “the

whole world is against us” and that, as a result, “*ein breira*” – there is “no choice” for Israelis but to always be fighting Arabs who, many firmly believe, won’t rest until they have destroyed Israel.

Understandably, few Palestinians can empathize with their enemy’s claims to feelings of vulnerability, overwhelmed as they are by their own defeats, dispersion, dispossession, and ongoing daily humiliations at the hands of seemingly all-powerful Israelis. The Palestinian people also labor under a sentiment of abandonment, reinforced by seeing their claims of injustice endorsed by only lip-service in the international community and among their Arab “brothers” in the region, while being ignored, in practice, by a strong Israel, backed by Western powers and world Jewry. These aggrieved feelings may have been somewhat allayed by the continuing growth of international sympathy for the Palestinian narrative and cause, along with successes of the international BDS campaign challenging and bringing pressure to bear on Israel.

The promulgation of Israel’s Law of Return in 1950,⁴⁴ endowing automatic Israeli citizenship to any Jew applying for it, was Israel’s main answer to a hostile or indifferent world which had not offered sanctuary to Jews fleeing for their lives during the *Shoah*. In Palestinian eyes, however, this law merely reaffirms a basic Israeli desire to wipe out the Palestinian presence by preventing exiled Palestinians from returning to their pre-1948 homes, as claimed under paragraph 11 of UNGA Resolution 194. Taken together with Israel’s longstanding rejection of this resolution and recent legislation underscoring the Jewish character of the state,⁴⁵ it appears that Israeli governments and their Jewish population are at the time of writing a long way from empathizing with the feelings of victimization of their Palestinian Arab citizens.

Imagining Dialogue

It is not easy to break out of these reciprocal negative images of, and hostile attitudes toward, “the other.” Deadlocked as righteous victims, Israelis and Palestinians often present their claims and dismiss the other party’s counterclaims in a kind of closed logic that seems impossible to penetrate. In extreme form, each side seems to be saying: “The other party does not have a case; our party’s position is irrefutable. The other party’s narrative is totally propaganda. There is nothing to discuss. So let the conflict continue until our side ultimately wins – however long that takes.”

Optimists will point to evidence that partial breakthroughs may become possible when this closed-ended mentality can be penetrated and a measure of empathy introduced. Generations of social psychologists have experimented with small-group approaches to conflict resolution in hopes of transferring lessons learned in controlled workshops into the real world of inter-ethnic and inter-state conflict.⁴⁶ Many – but not all⁴⁷ – researchers regard efforts at mutual empathy as the first step toward conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Let us imagine a typical dialogue structured to result in the parties opening themselves to acknowledging the pain of the other. A first step might be for one party to admit, however begrudgingly or tentatively: “OK, we accept that the other party may have a case on some selected grievances. The other party’s narrative may contain some valid points, and ours might need slight revision. But their narrative is still largely a product of self-serving propaganda and does not nullify the inherent truth of our more authentic narrative. There may be room to discuss some aspects of the conflict if the other side shows reciprocal openness to changing its views.”

Dialogues may go beyond this simple opening, if some participants find evidence, through personal contact or exposure via reading or film, which allows them to move further along a path to greater empathy. They may permit themselves to say: “The other party’s narrative is

different from ours, but it is as legitimate for them as ours is for us. We each need to learn more about the other's narrative with an open mind, however uncomfortable that makes us feel. Both narratives may contain errors and misunderstandings, but these can be reduced by further discussion. By engaging in respectful dialogue about our two conflicting narratives, we can enhance mutual understanding.”

Those working for peace and reconciliation strive to help negotiators, opinion makers, and political leaders on both sides to evolve in their thinking to a stage where they can adopt this sort of open discussion about their reciprocal fears and conflicting narratives. But such attitudinal transformations are not easily arrived at, as they require very difficult (to some, unthinkable) revisions to people's basic beliefs. Accepting the legitimacy of major parts of the other party's narrative involves the extremely unsettling possibility that the existence, rights, and entitlements of one's *own* side may not be as valid as once believed. It would involve accepting blame and responsibility for causing harm or injustice to the other party, reversing generations of entrenched belief that one's own side had been a blameless victim of the other.

Unfortunately, on the basis of both the historical record and current sentiment, it seems difficult to conclude that the two sides will overcome their obsession with their respective and exclusive claims to victimhood, or that they are anywhere near coming to acknowledge their share of responsibility for past errors committed or traumas inflicted upon the other. Still, would-be peacemakers are likely to continue directing efforts toward clarifying and redefining the causes of each party's sense of victimhood, welcoming, for example, calls for empathy and introspection such as Galia Golan's bold plea to her countrymen: “We Israelis must face our part in the physical expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 and its symbolic weight for Palestinians today. It may bite, but it won't destroy us.”⁴⁸ Some critics may disagree with this statement, pointing out that such recognition of Palestinian suffering, whatever its symbolic value, would

create entitlement to a redress of grievances, starting with return and/or compensation for those displaced – bringing us back to the tangle of unwinnable core arguments. Other critics may be generally skeptical about the impact of attitudinal change on behavior on the ground in this tense, asymmetrical and always potentially explosive conflict.

It is almost impossible to imagine people involved in this conflict being able to make the difficult mental leaps described in the sort of dialogue imagined above. Perhaps the most realistic goal for peacemakers would be to find ways of reducing tensions and violence on the ground for an extended period – a situation resembling, as noted earlier, little more than a “truce” – while continuing to try to accurately assess the minimum requirements on all parties for a more stable *modus vivendi*. To some readers this may not seem like much. But we ought to consider it a great achievement in terms of the real-life experiences of many people on the ground in Israel/Palestine. It would be a most welcome alternative to the repeating historical pattern of periodic explosions, destructive clashes, and escalating violence – violence that does little to advance either the justice or the security that so many Palestinians and Israelis are desperately seeking.

Reducing Some Obstacles to Understanding the Conflict

Let us turn now from the protagonists themselves to “non-combatants” on the sidelines who seek to better understand the essence of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Gaining an appreciation of the contested issues and the parties’ competing narratives is only one dimension of the challenge we face in trying to understand this dispute. Our efforts can be enhanced – or hindered – by the ways we choose to frame or study the issues. As we have seen in [Chapters 2](#) and [12](#), there are a number of layers that academics and other observers superimpose, often unhelpfully, onto the already much-contested

histories. Rather than clarifying the issues, these additional layers can introduce additional distortions and confusion, contributing further obstacles to our ability to understand the conflict.

The following is a short checklist of recommendations of what to avoid if we wish to focus our attention most usefully on the contested histories of Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians with a view to better understanding their unresolved conflict.

1 Avoid investing in trying to win “no-win” arguments

Respecting and reflecting the parties’ own parallel expressions of realism and pessimism, the treatment of the origins and evolution of today’s Arab–Israel conflict in [Chapters 3–11](#) has highlighted a series of unresolved, and sometimes interlocking, deadlocks. While readers are free to speculate on how those deadlocks might have been broken by seizing upon, rather than missing, opportunities (see the following subsection “Avoid Using the Missed Opportunities Approach as a Tool in the ‘Blame Game’”), I believe that most of these 11 designated core arguments are essentially irresolvable – whether on the ground or at the level of debate and argument.

Given the closed mindsets of the parties as righteous victims, one side’s claims are almost impossible for the other to accept. Even with the benefit of the most skillful, eloquent, and passionate argument, there is virtually no chance that one party will convince the other to change its position. These are essentially “no-win” arguments because marshaling correct facts or supplying different interpretations for those presumed erroneous, missing, or misguided will usually have no impact on the other side; the argument will remain deadlocked between the contesting parties.

I am not suggesting that the parties themselves should, or could, abandon these arguments simply because they are unwinnable. Rather, I am recommending that

anyone wishing to truly understand the conflict should not – beyond learning the depth of each side’s passionately held positions on these core arguments – invest inordinate amounts of time and energy in trying to prove definitively which side’s claim is correct or incorrect. While research into all aspects of these core arguments is always useful and in some cases essential, research aimed specifically at trying *to win* or *resolve* those arguments may be superficially stimulating but ultimately not very helpful.

2 Avoid using the missed opportunities approach as a tool in the “blame game”

As we saw in [Chapter 12](#), there is much that can be learned about the protagonists and the evolution of the conflict from careful counterfactual analysis. What should be avoided, however, is the temptation to resort to simplistic explanations of why peace or victory was not achieved. There is not much to be gained, outside of polemical or partisan advantage, from investing precious research time and energy in attempting to prove that Palestinians, Arabs, Israelis, or a particular leader should be blamed for missing opportunities for peace.

A realistic review and a nuanced understanding of possible missed opportunities can, however, be a useful tool in developing arguments over what went wrong in the past. For best results, research should not be agenda-driven. Each case should be studied using a full range of available sources and following rigorous scholarly methodology. Such historical analyses can, in turn, lead to useful discussions of whether to accept or reject contemporary proposals for peace; in some cases, knowing about past missed opportunities can serve as useful background for decision-makers facing their own strategic choices.

3 Deal separately with issues of justice and truth

Many of those who write and comment about the contested histories of Palestinians and Israelis are

inspired by the lofty ideals of truth and justice. Bible-reading Jews and Christians, for example, might invoke Psalm 85, which speaks of peace and justice kissing, truth springing forth from the earth, and justice looking down from the heavens. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's historic speech before the Israeli Knesset in 1977 presented himself as a good Muslim on a "sacred mission" and called almost a dozen times for a "permanent peace based on justice."⁴⁹

It is almost impossible to exclude considerations of justice – redress of wrongs inflicted; the struggle against oppression, occupation, or denial of rights; the longing for homeland; the search for security from violence and terror – from discussions of the history of this conflict. There is no doubt that the quest for justice and truth motivates the protagonists and their supporters. But, as we have seen, there is also strong evidence that the inclusion of agenda items defined as questions of justice, recognition, and rights has contributed heavily to the breakdown of negotiations among would-be peacemakers.

Normally we turn to politicians and advocates, along with spiritual and community leaders, for guidance and inspiration in pursuing what we and they define to be truth and justice. But it is not clear to me to what extent we should be looking to scholars and historians to do the same in the course of their teaching and writing about this, or any, particular conflict. When they do, academics invariably become involved in the machinery of advocacy on behalf of one of the parties they are studying. Once scholars and academics espouse the narrative of one side or its quest for justice as being uniquely correct and worthy, their teaching and publications in the service of this cause will be doing a disservice to their students and readers who seek – and deserve – a disinterested presentation of both parties' conflicting demands, attitudes, self-views, and experiences.

Academics would do well to avoid promoting in their scholarly writing or classroom performance the narrative and claims of one party against the other. This seems to

me a laudable notion, requiring a minimal degree of self-restraint which has unfortunately been in short supply in academia in recent years. Even while being empathetic toward their subjects, scholars can do more for their students and readers by distancing themselves from, rather than mimicking, the “us (good) versus them (evil)” mindset exhibited by the parties themselves. There is ample scope in the broader public-political arena, in the media, and in grassroots activism for advocacy for justice and redress of grievances without also importing them into the classroom and into scholarship.

4 Avoid the perils of wishful thinking

Most solution-oriented and caring people believe that this conflict must, one day, be resolved. Because it exacts such a human toll on its participants, they argue, it *simply cannot go on*. For many people, the purpose of writing, teaching, and learning about the conflict is a mightily practical and humane one: to learn how best to bring it to an end. People want and need to believe that – somehow, some day – there will be a “light at the end of the tunnel.”

These natural and noble instincts carry with them several pitfalls. One is the focus on what the observer believes *ought* to have been or *ought* to be, often misleadingly proposed at the cost of accurately presenting what actually *was* and *is*. Humanitarian and peacemaking impulses are – happily, in my view – irrepressible, but they should not be pursued by softening, sanitizing, or glossing over the harsh realities of the contested histories of the parties – what *really* happened and how the parties *really* felt, acted, and reacted, however unpleasant that history and those realities may at times be.

Grassroots activity for Israeli–Arab peace has always existed at modest levels, but mushroomed during the brief window of heightened optimism that followed the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. For a decade, many new peacebuilding initiatives were launched by Non-

Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Israel, Palestine, and abroad, aimed at overcoming fears and fostering people-to-people understanding and reconciliation.⁵⁰ The climate for such activity deteriorated markedly, however, after the eruption of the al-Aqsa *Intifada* in 2000. Despite the ensuing disillusionment of many dedicated fighters for peace and reconciliation, a number of stalwart peace activists continue to work for mutual understanding. This was expressed, as we saw in [Chapter 11](#), in the Geneva Initiative of late 2003 – a good example of realistic idealism that successfully avoids the naïveté of excessive wishful thinking, being the product of Israelis and Palestinians with recent hands-on negotiating experience.⁵¹ To the extent that peacebuilding efforts are well-grounded in an accurate appreciation of the contested histories of Israelis and Palestinians, they can advance the process of making people more sensitive to the actual positions, experiences, and feelings of both sides, leaving observers and well-wishers with a better grasp of the gaps that need to be bridged.

Telling It Like It Is

Recalling the hard-nosed appraisals of their conflict by David Ben-Gurion and Awni Abd al-Hadi almost a century ago ([Chapter 1](#)), let me conclude by quoting two Israelis and two Palestinians defining what they believe lies at the crux of their still-unresolved conflict. While all of them frame their appraisals in terms of a clash of nationalisms or a clash of narratives, there are real differences among them in the degree of acceptance of the other's narrative and in their implied paths to a resolution.

Mordechai Bar-On was a soldier who fought in the 1948 war, served as Moshe Dayan's *chef de bureau* in the 1950s, and later became an academic and peace activist. He has offered the following definition:

The century-old conflict between the Zionist movement and the Arab national movement is neither the result of an error committed by either side nor the result of a misunderstanding by either side of the true motivations of the other. The bitter confrontation was unavoidable from the moment that Jews decided, at the end of the nineteenth century, to regain their national sovereignty in Palestine, a piece of territory they always referred to as the Land of Israel (Eretz-Israel) but which was occupied by another people. The root of the conflict lies in a tragic clash between two sets of motivations and processes, which, to begin with, were essentially independent of one another but in time became inextricably entangled and collided head-on.⁵²

A similar Israeli perspective comes from Shlomo Ben-Ami, a Moroccan-born historian who served as a member of Ehud Barak's cabinet and as chief negotiator during the talks at Camp David II. His memoir bears the title: *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli-Arab Tragedy*.

It is the total and absolute nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has made it into such a protracted dispute. For it is not just a collision over territory, or a banal border dispute; it is a clash of rights and memory. The longing for the same landscapes, the mutually exclusive claims of ownership of land and religious sites and symbols, and the ethos of dispossession and refugeeism for which the two parties claim a monopoly make their national narratives practically irreconcilable.⁵³

Articulate Palestinians have also given clear-headed expression to what they believe lies at the heart of the conflict. Ahmad Samih Khalidi, a London-based analyst and veteran of track-II talks, offers the following views in the course of his argument challenging Israel's demand for Palestinian acceptance of Israel's right to exist as the state of the Jewish people:

Palestinians do not believe that the historical Jewish presence in and connection to the land entail a superior claim to it. Palestine as *our* homeland was established in the course of over fifteen hundred years of continuous Arab-Muslim presence; it was only by superior force and colonial machination that we were eventually dispossessed of it. [We utterly reject] the Zionist narrative [according to which] the homes that our forefathers built, the land that they tilled for centuries, and the sanctuaries they built and prayed at were not really ours at all, and that our defense of them was morally flawed and wrongful: [the Zionist claim that] we had no right to any of these to begin with.... [We reject the argument that] it is Arab rejection that caused the conflict and not the Zionist transgression against Arab land and rights.... We understand that there is a Jewish majority in Israel today and that the character of the state reflects this. But we cannot sever the thread that connects the past to the present and, necessarily, to the future.⁵⁴

And, finally, in describing Zionist-Israeli and Palestinian narratives as being “irreconcilable,” the late Edward Said defined the clash as follows:

Israelis say they waged a war of liberation and so achieved independence; Palestinians say their society was destroyed, most of the population evicted....

The conflict appears intractable because it is a contest over the same land by two peoples who believed they had valid title to it and who hoped that the other side would in time give up or go away. One side won the war [in 1948], the other lost, but the contest is [in early 1999] as alive as ever. We Palestinians ask why a Jew born in Warsaw or New York has the right to settle here (according to Israel's Law of Return) whereas we, the people who lived here for centuries, cannot....

I see no way of evading the fact that in 1948 one people displaced another, thereby committing a grave injustice. Reading Palestinian and Jewish history together not only gives the tragedy of the Holocaust and of what subsequently happened to the Palestinians their full force but also reveals how, in the course of interrelated Israeli and Palestinian life since 1948, one people, the Palestinians, have borne a disproportional share of the pain and loss.⁵⁵

These four selected explanations of the conflict may not be accepted by all, but they are honest starting points – authentic voices of the protagonists themselves whose forthrightness can help us better decipher what this conflict is really about, why it is not yet resolved, and why it may never be fully resolved.

Notes

- ¹ For extended discussions on the resolution of protracted conflicts, see Brecher, M. and Wilkenfeld, J. (2000). *A Study of Crisis*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press; Iklé, F.C. (2005). *Every War Must End*, 2e (rev. ed.). New York: Columbia University Press; Ramsbotham, O. (2017). *When Conflict Resolution Fails: An Alternative to Negotiation and Dialogue: Engaging Radical*

Disagreement in Intractable Conflicts. Cambridge UK/Malden MA: Polity.

- 2 See: [PLO] Negotiations Support Unity [NSU] memo to Erekat, Talking points for meeting with Tal Becker recognition of refugees' rights, 26 March 2008 at <http://transparency.aljazeera.net/files/2370.PDF> (accessed 2 June 2018); Talking points: Refugees, 7 May 2008 at <http://transparency.aljazeera.net/files/2530.PDF> (accessed 2 June 2018); NSU memo to Erekat, State declarations of responsibility & Apology to the Palestinians, 25 July 2008 at <http://transparency.aljazeera.net/files/3002.PDF> (accessed online 2 June 2018); Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. (2014). *Justice and Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (ed. A.M. Kacowitz), 121–122, 129–130. London/New York: Routledge; Sela, A. and Caplan, N. (2016). Epilogue: Reflections on post-Oslo Israeli and Palestinian history and memory of 1948. In: *The War of 1948: Representations of Israeli and Palestinian Memories and Narratives* (ed. A. Sela and A. Kadish), 208–209, 215–216. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- 3 See: NSU, Strategy and talking points for responding to the precondition of recognizing Israel as a “Jewish State,” 16 November 2007 at <http://transparency.aljazeera.net/files/2021.PDF> (accessed 27 June 2018); Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. *Justice and Peace*, 127–128; Becker, T. (2011, February). The claim for recognition of Israel as a Jewish State: A reassessment. Washington Institute, Policy Focus No. 108 at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-claim-for-recognition-of-israel-as-a-jewish-state-a-reassessment> (accessed 3 May 2018); Khalidi, A.S. (2011). Why can't the Palestinians recognize the Jewish state? *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40 (4): 78–81; Susser, A. (2010). *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine: The Two-State Imperative*, 110–113. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Olesker, R. (2018). Securitized diplomacy: Israel's

Jewish identity and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. *Middle East Journal* 72 (1): 9–27.

4. Susser, A. *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine*, 219; cf. Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. *Justice and Peace*, chs. 5–6.
5. Nusseibeh, S. and David, A. (2007). *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life*, 508. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
6. Gill, N. (2007). The Arab peace plan: Say no to rights, recognition. *Forward*, 6 June. See also Gill, N. (2013). Mediation perspectives: How to prevent the clash of narratives from undermining Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. *CSS Blog Network*, 2 September, 2013 at <https://isnblog.ethz.ch/conflict/mediation-perspectives-how-to-prevent-the-clash-of-narratives-from-undermining-israeli-palestinian-peace-talks> (accessed 21 May 2018). Gill is founder and director of *TRACK4*, an organization that runs conflict negotiation simulations.
7. “The Shape of the Future,” Middle East project of the Search for Common Ground, at http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/cgp/cgp_tsotf2.html (accessed 19 May 2018).
8. For a sampling of positions, see: Anderson, P. (2015). The house of Zion. *New Left Review* 96: 21–37; Dowty, A. (ed.) (2018). *The Israel/Palestine Reader*. Malden, MA/Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, readings 47–49; “Is a two-state solution (Israel and Palestine) an acceptable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?” at <https://israelipalestinian.procon.org> (accessed online 30 August 2018).
9. For the texts of UNSC resolutions 242, 338, 1397, 1515, 1850, see <http://unscr.com>; also individually at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document-19.html>, <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/09/document->

[23.html](#), <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/10/document-105.html>, <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/10/document-112.html>, and <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/10/document-121.html>.

- 10** “On Day of Solidarity, UN reaffirms two-state solution as only answer to ‘question of Palestine’,” *UN News*, 29 November 2017 at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/11/637741-day-solidarity-un-reaffirms-two-state-solution-only-answer-question-palestine> (accessed 14 July 2018).
- 11** A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 30 April 2003, available online at <https://naip-documents.blogspot.com/2009/10/document-109.html>.
- 12** On Israeli public opinion, see: Susser, A. *Israel, Jordan, and Palestine*, 90, 148–149; Israeli, Z. (2017, 6 April). The National Security Index: Public support for an arrangement based on the two-state solution. *INSS Insight* No. 916 at www.inss.org.il/publication/national-security-index-public-support-arrangement-based-two-state-solution (accessed 15 July 2018). On Palestinian public opinion survey results, see Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, *Palestinian-Israeli Pulse*, 25 January 2018 at <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/717> (accessed 15 July 2018); Public Opinion Poll No. 68, 4 July 2018 at <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/729> (accessed 15 July 2018). See also: Dowty, A. (2017). *Israel/Palestine*, 4e, 140–142, 147, 165, 178, 221. Malden, MA/Cambridge, UK: Polity Press; Israel Democracy Institute and Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, *Palestinian-Israeli Pulse: A Joint Poll*, 22 August 2016, at <https://en.idi.org.il/media/4218/palestinianisraelipul>

[se_fullsurvey_english.pdf](#) (accessed online 10 August 2018).

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Chronology

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| 1882 | | First group of Zionists emigrates from Tsarist Russia to Ottoman Palestine, beginning of the first <i>aliya</i> (wave of Zionist immigration) |
| 1891 | | First petition to Ottoman authorities by Palestinian Arabs protesting Jewish immigration and land sales |
| 1896 | | Theodor Herzl publishes <i>Der Judenstaat (The Jewish State)</i> |
| 1897 | | First World Zionist Congress convenes in Basle, Switzerland |
| 1903 | | Pogroms in Kishinev; start of the second <i>aliya</i> |
| 1908 | | Young Turk Revolution; Ottoman parliament reinstated |
| 1913 | | First Arab Nationalist Congress meets in Paris |
| 1914 | | World War; Turkey aligns with Germany against Britain and France |
| 1915 | | Sir Henry McMahon correspondence with King Husayn of the Hejaz |
| 1916 | | Sykes–Picot agreement on Anglo–French division of Fertile Crescent into spheres of influence after the War |

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| 1917 | November/December | British issue Balfour Declaration; British troops enter Jerusalem |
| 1918 | October | British forces move through Northern Palestine; Turks surrender and sign armistice; Amir Faysal, son of King Husayn, installed in Damascus (until July 1920) |
| 1919 | January | Chaim Weizmann and Faysal sign a treaty in London, in preparation for Paris Peace Conference |
| | July/August | King–Crane Commission visits Middle East and issues report |
| 1920 | April | Riots and attacks on Jews in Jerusalem; League of Nations Council meeting in San Remo awards mandates to Britain (over Palestine, Iraq) and France (over Syria) |
| | July | Sir Herbert Samuel arrives as first British High Commissioner for Palestine |
| | December | Palestine Arab Congress meets in Haifa, elects Arab Executive to represent Palestinian interests; founding convention of the <i>Histadrut</i> (General Federation of Jewish Labor), with responsibilities for the |

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| | | <i>Hagana</i> (underground militia) |
| 1921 | March | Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill visits Palestine; endorses Amir Abdullah's rule over Transjordan as part of the Palestine Mandate |
| | May | Arab riots and attacks on Jews in Jaffa and nearby settlements; Hajj Amin al-Husayni named "Grand Mufti" of Palestine |
| | October | Haycraft Commission reports on Jaffa "disturbances" |
| 1922 | March | Amin al-Husayni elected president of newly created Supreme Muslim Council |
| | June | British issue Statement of Policy, "Churchill White Paper" |
| | July | League of Nations sanctions Mandate for Palestine |
| 1928 | September | Incident at the Western ("Wailing") Wall in Jerusalem triggers Jewish outrage and protests; Muslims, in turn, express fears of Jewish encroachments on Islamic holy places |
| 1929 | August | Tensions and incidents regarding Western Wall spark Arab attack on Jews in the old city of |

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| | | Jerusalem; attacks spread to Hebron and Safed |
| 1930 | April | Shaw Commission Report on August 1929 “disturbances” is published |
| | October | Hope Simpson Report on land settlement, immigration, and development is published, along with new British Statement of Policy, “Passfield White Paper” |
| 1931 | February | British PM Ramsay MacDonald publishes letter to Dr. Weizmann, reassuring him of continued support of Zionism; Arabs denounce MacDonald’s “Black Letter” |
| | December | General Islamic Congress convened by Hajj Amin al-Husayni in Jerusalem; parallel meetings of pan-Arab nationalists |
| 1932 | August | Awni Abd al-Hadi and others found the Istiqlal (Independence) Party |
| | October | Iraq becomes independent and joins the League of Nations |
| | November | High Commissioner Sir Arthur Wauchop announces intention to set up representative institutions for Palestine, |

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| | | beginning with municipal elections |
| 1933 | January | Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany |
| | March | Arab Executive adopts non-cooperation and boycott resolutions against British and Zionist goods, land sales |
| | August | Palestine police eviction of Arab tenant farmers from Wadi al-Hawarith |
| | October | Palestinian Arabs' demonstrations in Jaffa, Haifa, Nablus, and Jerusalem turn violent |
| 1934 | December | National Defense Party is formed, with Ragheb al-Nashashibi as president |
| 1935 | March | Palestine Arab Party is formed, with Jamal al-Husayni as president |
| | June | Reform Party is founded, led by Jerusalem mayor Dr. Husayn Fakhri al-Khalidi |
| | September | XIXth Zionist Congress ends; David Ben-Gurion becomes chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive |
| | October | British inspectors at Jaffa port uncover weapons ostensibly bound for the <i>Hagana</i> smuggled into Palestine |
| | November | Rebel Shaykh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam and several followers die in a |

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| | | gunfight with British troops; his funeral in Haifa draws large crowds who revere Qassam as a national hero and martyr |
| | November | Coalition of five Palestinian political parties is formed and submits three demands to British: (a) immediate stoppage of Jewish immigration, (b) prohibition of transfer of lands from Arabs to Jews, and (c) establishment of democratic government |
| 1936 | February to April | British Cabinet publishes proposals for a legislative council for Palestine; Parliamentary debates; Palestine Arabs invited to send delegation to London for discussions |
| | April | Arab rebels' attack on convoy, killing two Jewish travelers, provokes counterattacks, tensions, and rioting near Jaffa and Tel Aviv; British declare state of emergency; Arab Higher Committee formed to coordinate general strike until the Palestinian Arabs' three main demands are met |
| | April to October | Country paralyzed by an Arab general strike and terrorized by rebels |
| | November | Royal Commission, |

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| | | headed by Lord Peel, arrives in Palestine to hear testimony about the underlying causes of the “disturbances” |
| 1937 | July | (Peel) Royal Commission publishes Report proposing partition of Palestine; AHC rejects proposals; Arab rebellion resumes |
| | July/August | Twentieth Zionist Congress votes conditional acceptance of Peel partition |
| | September | Pan-Arab conference meets in Bludan, Syria, rejects partition; Palestinian terrorists assassinate senior British official in Nazareth; rebellion resumes |
| | October | Arab Higher Committee outlawed, Mufti flees to Beirut, later to Iraq and to Germany |
| 1938 | July | Conference at Evian discusses but does nothing to resolve problem of European Jewish refugees |
| | October | Cairo Inter-parliamentary Conference for the Defense of Palestine |
| 1939 | February/March | Arab–British and British–Zionist “round table” conferences at St. |

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| | | James's Palace reach no agreement |
| | May | British Statement of Policy, "MacDonald White Paper," restricting Jewish immigration, land purchases; Arabs and Zionists reject new policy |
| | September | Outbreak of World War II |
| 1942 | January | Nazi officials meet at Wannsee Conference (Berlin) to coordinate plans for "final solution," i.e. total annihilation of Europe's Jewish population |
| | May | Emergency Zionist Conference at Biltmore Hotel, New York, adopts resolutions demanding "Jewish commonwealth" in and free immigration to Palestine |
| 1943 | April | Bermuda Conference discusses but does nothing to resolve problem of European Jewish refugees |
| 1944 | November | Zionist (Stern, LEHI) terrorists assassinate Lord Moyne in Cairo |
| 1945 | March | Founding of the League of Arab States at Alexandria, demand for independent Arab Palestine |
| | May | End of World War II |
| | November | Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry |

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| | | appointed |
| 1946 | May | Anglo–American Committee of Inquiry issues report, recommending immediate admission of 100 000 Jewish refugees from Europe |
| | July | Zionist (<i>Irgun</i>) terrorists blow up wing of King David Hotel housing British military HQ in Jerusalem |
| | September | London Conference of Arab leaders and British meetings with Zionist officials; no agreement reached |
| 1947 | February | Britain announces intention to return the Palestine Mandate to the United Nations |
| | May | UN General Assembly appoints Special Committee on Palestine [UNSCOP] to investigate and make recommendations |
| | August/September | UNSCOP recommends partition of Palestine; British announce decision to terminate the Mandate and withdraw from Palestine |
| | November | UN General Assembly passes Resolution 181 adopting UNSCOP report; AHC rejects; armed struggle intensifies for control of Arab and |

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| | | Jewish areas of Palestine; Arab League begins plans to prevent implementation of UN resolution |
| 1948 | May | British leave Palestine; Ben-Gurion proclaims state of Israel; Arab armies attack Jewish state; UN appoints Count Folke Bernadotte as mediator |
| | (May 1948 to January 1949) | First Arab–Israeli war involving forces of Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestinians, alternating with several truces |
| | September | LEHI (Stern) terrorists assassinate UN Mediator Bernadotte |
| | December | UN General Assembly adopts Resolution 194 establishing Conciliation Commission [UNCCP], urging the return of or compensation to Palestinian refugees, and calling for internationalization of Jerusalem |
| 1949 | February | Egypt and Israel sign General Armistice Agreement [GAA] at Rhodes under auspices of UN Acting Mediator, Ralph Bunche |
| | March | Israeli–Lebanon GAA and Israel–Jordan GAA signed |

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| | April (to September) | UNCCP hosts peace conference in Lausanne (no result) |
| | May | Israel admitted to membership in the UN |
| | July | Syria–Israel GAA signed |
| 1950 | January to July | UNCCP hosts peace conference in Geneva (no result) |
| | December | Jordan annexes West Bank |
| 1951 | July | Jordan’s King Abdullah assassinated while visiting Jerusalem |
| | September to November | UNCCP hosts peace conference in Paris (no result) |
| 1952 | July | Egyptian army officers, including future president Gamal Abd al-Nasir, overthrow King Farouk |
| 1953 | May | Hussein becomes King of Jordan (until 1999) |
| | October | Israeli reprisal raid on Qibya, led by Ariel Sharon |
| 1955 | February | Israeli attack on Gaza |
| | September | Public announcement of extensive Soviet military aid to Egypt |
| 1956 | July | Nasir nationalizes Suez Canal Company |
| | October | Israel invades Gaza and Egypt’s Sinai, followed by British and French occupation of Suez Canal |

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| | | zone; US, USSR, and UN press parties to retreat |
| | November | UN creates United Nations Emergency Force to be positioned along Egypt–Israel frontier |
| 1957 | January/March | Israeli forces complete withdrawal from Gaza, Sinai, and Sharm al-Shaykh |
| 1959 | January | Yasir Arafat and others form Fatah |
| 1964 | January | Arab League meeting in Cairo creates Palestine Liberation Organization [PLO] |
| | May | PLO's Palestine National Council [PNC] holds first meeting in East Jerusalem, adopts a Palestinian National Charter |
| 1965 | January | Fatah's first raid into Israel, from Jordanian territory |
| 1966 | November | Large-scale Israeli reprisal raid on as-Samu in West Bank, Jordan |
| 1967 | April/May | Escalating tensions and attacks along and across Israeli–Syria frontier |
| | May | Nasir mobilizes troops, orders UNEF troops out of Sinai, blockades Straits of Tiran to shipping to/from Israel |
| | June | Decisive Israeli victory in war against Egypt, |

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| | | Jordan, Syria; captures Sinai, West Bank, and Golan Heights |
| | September | Arab League summit at Khartoum adopts resolutions declaring no negotiations with, recognition of, or peace with Israel |
| | November | UN Security Council passes Resolution 242 calling for Israeli withdrawal to secure and recognized borders; Gunnar Jarring appointed UN Special Representative |
| | December | Formation of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine [PFLP] under George Habash |
| 1968 | March | Invading Israeli forces battle Palestinians and Jordanians at Karameh, Jordan |
| | July | Fourth PNC Meeting, Cairo, revises Palestinian National Charter; hijacking of Israeli airliner by PFLP to Algiers |
| 1969 | February | Arafat elected chairman of the PLO |
| | March 1969 (to August 1970) | Egyptian–Israeli War of Attrition |
| 1970 | September | Death of Egyptian president Nasir, succeeded by Anwar Sadat; multiple PFLP |

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| | | hijackings bring aircraft to Jordan; Jordanian Army battles and expels Palestinian guerilla groups (“Black September”); PLO headquarters move to Beirut |
| 1972 | May | Terrorist attack at Tel Aviv Airport |
| | September | Palestinian “Black September” terrorists attack Israeli athletes at Munich Olympics |
| 1973 | October | Egypt and Syria attack Israel; UN Security Council Resolution 338 reiterates 242 and calls for negotiations |
| | December | Opening session of inconclusive Geneva Conference |
| 1974 | June | 12th PNC meeting in Cairo adopts new political program, accepting to create a national authority on any part of liberated Palestine |
| | October | UN General Assembly and Arab League summit meeting at Rabat recognize PLO as sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people |
| | November | Yasir Arafat addresses the UN General Assembly |
| 1975 | September | Signing of final Israeli–Egyptian disengagement agreement in Sinai; US |

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| | | and Israel agree on conditions for negotiating with the PLO |
| | November | UN General Assembly passes Resolution 3379 declaring “zionism” to be a form of racism |
| 1977 | May | Israel elects Likud leader Menachem Begin prime minister |
| | November | Egyptian president Sadat becomes first Arab leader to visit Israel, launching peace negotiations |
| 1978 | September | Israel and Egypt sign Camp David Accords mediated by US president Jimmy Carter |
| 1979 | March | Israel and Egypt sign peace treaty |
| 1981 | June | Israeli jets destroy Iraqi nuclear reactor near Baghdad |
| | October | Sadat assassinated; succeeded by Hosni Mubarak |
| 1982 | April | Israel completes withdrawal from Sinai |
| | June | Israeli invasion of Lebanon |
| | September | Reagan Plan published; Fez Arab Summit adopts Saudi (Fahd) Plan; Phalangists massacre Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps outside Beirut; PLO evacuates and moves headquarters to Tunis |

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| 1985 | October | Israeli Air Force bombs PLO headquarters in Tunis |
| 1986 | October | Members of Palestine Liberation Front hijack Italian cruise liner <i>Achille Lauro</i> |
| 1987 | December | Outbreak of first Palestinian uprising, <i>Intifada</i> |
| 1988 | February | First appearance of Hamas movement |
| | July | King Hussein ends Jordan's administrative responsibilities for and legal ties with West Bank |
| | November | PNC Meeting in Algiers declares Palestinian statehood, implied recognition of Israel |
| | December | Arafat addresses UN General Assembly, announcing PLO acceptance of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 |
| 1990 | August | Iraq invades Kuwait |
| 1991 | January | US begins war against Iraq ("Gulf War") |
| | October | Madrid Peace Conference convened by US president George H.W. Bush, followed in December by talks in Washington, DC |
| 1992 | June | Labor Party's Yitzhak Rabin elected prime minister of Israel |
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| 1993 | September | Rabin and Arafat sign letters of mutual recognition and Oslo Accord (Declaration of Principles) for Palestinian self-government and Israeli withdrawal |
| 1994 | July | Arafat returns to Gaza, then Ramallah, to head Palestine National Authority [PNA] following the start of Israeli withdrawal |
| | October | Israel and Jordan sign peace treaty |
| 1995 | September | “Oslo II” agreement between Israel and PNA for further Israeli withdrawals |
| | November | Rabin assassinated |
| 1996 | January | Arafat elected president of the PNA |
| | May | Likud’s Benjamin Netanyahu defeats Labor’s Shimon Peres to become prime minister |
| 1997 | January | Netanyahu and Arafat sign protocol regarding Hebron evacuation under US mediation |
| 1998 | October | Netanyahu and Arafat negotiate Wye River Accord for further Israeli withdrawals, mediated by US president Bill Clinton |
| 1999 | February | King Hussein of Jordan dies; succeeded by Abdullah II |

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| | May | Labor's Ehud Barak defeats Likud's Netanyahu to become prime minister |
| | September | Israel–Palestinian accord signed at Sharm al-Shaykh |
| 2000 | May | Israel unilaterally withdraws remaining forces from Southern Lebanon |
| | July | Clinton invites Arafat and Barak to Camp David; no agreement reached |
| | September | Ariel Sharon visits Temple Mount; subsequent demonstrations and police repression spark second Palestinian <i>Intifada</i> |
| | December | US president Clinton outlines “Parameters” for an Israeli–Palestinian agreement |
| 2001 | January | Israeli–Palestinian talks at Taba, Egypt; no agreement reached |
| | February | Likud's Ariel Sharon defeats Labor's Barak to become prime minister |
| | September | al-Qa'ida terrorist attacks on New York, Washington |
| 2002 | March | Saudi peace proposals endorsed by Arab League meeting in Beirut; UN Security Council adopts Resolution 1397 |

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| | | endorsing two-state solution |
| 2003 | April | Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) becomes first Palestinian prime minister; Quartet (US–Russia–UN–EU) publish text of “Roadmap” peace plan for Israel–Palestine |
| | June | Sharon and Abbas attend summit meeting at Aqaba, Jordan, convened by US president George W. Bush; Israel begins construction on “security fence” |
| | October | UN Security Council Resolution 1515 endorses Quartet Roadmap and two-state solution; non-governmental Israeli and Palestinian negotiators unveil Geneva Accord |
| 2004 | April | Sharon announces plans for Israel’s unilateral disengagement from Palestinian territories |
| | November | Arafat dies in Paris |
| 2005 | January | Mahmoud Abbas elected president of the PNA |
| | August | Israel removes troops and 8000 settlers from Gaza Strip |
| 2006 | January | Israeli PM Sharon incapacitated by cerebral stroke, replaced by Ehud Olmert; Hamas wins large majority in |

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| | | Palestinian Legislative Council elections |
| | July | Israeli–Hizballah war along Israeli–Lebanon frontier |
| 2007 | March | Arab League peace plan endorsed during Riyadh summit |
| | June | Hamas militias overpower Fatah forces in civil war in Gaza |
| | July | Arab League representatives visit Jerusalem to promote peace plan |
| | November | Olmert and Abbas attend Annapolis Peace Conference, convened by US president Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice |
| 2008 | January | Winograd Commission report on 2006 Lebanon war published; Annapolis negotiation committees continue under Abbas and Olmert but deliberations end in September without agreement |
| | July | Olmert announces intention to resign to face under criminal indictments |
| | December | UN Security Council resolution 1850 endorses Roadmap, two-state solution; Israel launches attack on Gaza |

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| | | ("Operation Cast Lead") following border provocations |
| 2009 | January | Israel-Gaza war ends; Barack Obama begins US presidency |
| | February | Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu wins election |
| | March | PM Netanyahu forms cabinet with right-wing parties, will not be bound by predecessor's commitments to Palestinians |
| | June | President Obama addresses Muslim world in Cairo speech, supports two-state solution, opposes Jewish settlements; Netanyahu gives speech at Bar-Ilan University defining conditions for two-state solution |
| | September | UN publishes Goldstone Report on 2008 Gaza war |
| 2010 | March | Israel and PNA agree to proximity talks with US special envoy George Mitchell |
| | May | Israeli commandos board flotilla of ships carrying aid for blockaded Gaza, killing nine activists aboard Turkish vessel <i>Mavi Marmara</i> |
| 2011 | January | <i>Al Jazeera</i> publishes leaked documents of 2007–2008 talks |

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| | | showing Palestinian and Israeli negotiators were willing to make major concessions for a peace deal |
| | May | Palestinian rivals Fatah and Hamas sign reconciliation pact; agreement fails |
| | September | Palestinian PM Mahmoud Abbas seeks full UN membership for a Palestinian State |
| 2012 | November | Palestine National Authority accepted by UN General Assembly as Non-Member Observer State; new war erupts in Gaza (Israeli Operation “Pillar of Defense”) |
| 2013 | January | Israeli PM Netanyahu forms new center-right coalition government, pledging a resumption of peace process |
| | March | President Obama visits Israel, Palestine; US Secretary of State John Kerry begins mediation between Israelis and Palestinians for two-state solution |
| | July | Israeli–Palestinian peace talks continue in Washington, DC |
| 2014 | April | Breakdown of Kerry-mediated peace talks; Hamas and Fatah |

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| | | announce agreement to form unity government |
| | July/August | Israel-Gaza war (Israeli Operation “Protective Edge”) |
| 2015 | March | Netanyahu wins election, forms narrow coalition with right-wing parties |
| | May | The Vatican recognizes State of Palestine |
| 2016 | December | US abstains on UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements allowing motion to pass |
| 2017 | May | Hamas declares willingness to accept interim Palestinian State alongside Israel (pre-1967 boundaries) |
| | December | President Trump recognizes Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, orders move there of US Embassy |
| 2018 | May | US Embassy opens in Jerusalem amid joy and protests |
| | July | Israeli Knesset passes law declaring Israel a Jewish State, Hebrew as official language, undivided Jerusalem as capital |

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