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CONFLICT
1947-1951

ILAN PAPPÉ

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‘[A]ny one looking for an authoritative account of 1948 [...] should go straight to this book.’

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‘A powerful synthesis of the revisionist literature on the causes and consequences of the first Arab–Israeli war [...], Pappé has added significantly to our understanding of a formative period in the making of the Arab–Israeli conflict.’

Avi Shlaim, *London Review of Books*

‘This is an important book and especially relevant to the current process of Arab–Israeli negotiations.’

Leonard Goren, *International Affairs*

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Preface

The declassification of new archival material in and outside the Middle East has unleashed a spate of scholarly works about the formative years of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The periodization and timing of this historiographical development is determined by the 'Thirty Years' secrecy act common to Britain and Israel which allows historians to update their accounts periodically. This has meant, *inter alia*, that by 1978 historians of the conflict were in a position to scrutinize new material concerning the war of 1948. Once this fresh evidence had been gathered, together with new historical data made available in other parts of the world, a revised history of the war began to emerge.

The new historians benefit first and foremost from the declassification of relevant documents in the British Public Record Office and the Israeli State Archives. Some have also tried to complete the historical puzzle by considering the British and Israeli evidence along with similar material in the American and French archives. Although these two countries have different regulations for declassification, most of their available material on the subject has been released since 1978. Moreover, in the late 1970s and early 1980s Arab scholars, and in particular Palestinian historians, have begun publishing their accounts of, and views on, the war of 1948. Based mainly on Arab material, such as diaries, letters and memoranda of all kinds, their works also contribute to the new historical picture of the war. Finally, various Palestinian documentation centres in the West Bank and Lebanon contain material which adds to our knowledge and understanding.

Considering the richness and originality of the material, it is obvious why the historiographical portrait of the war required drastic change. The transformation of our views has also been

aided by the passage of time; since the Arab-Israeli conflict is an on-going process, our knowledge and understanding of its origins and direction benefit from this new perspective.

The aim of this book is first to present the reader with a new history of the war of 1948. Since in the process of this war a local dispute between Arabs and Jews in Palestine turned into the regional Arab-Israeli conflict, my intention is to provide a historically accurate account of the formative years of that conflict (1948 to 1949), by integrating new archival material with the findings of the most recent scholarly works on the subject as well as valuable accounts of the war written before the opening of the archives.

The newly available material has served to demolish many myths and misconceptions – to the extent that one scholar considered it sufficient for his account of the war simply to enumerate one shattered myth after another.¹ Wherever necessary I shall refer to these myths and misconceptions, although my purpose is a different one. Assisted by hindsight, I shall suggest that the historian of the war should pay less attention to its military development and instead address the political aspects. There are two good reasons for adopting this approach. First, it now seems clear that the fate of the war was decided by the politicians on both sides prior to the actual confrontation on the battlefield. Secondly, the failure of the parties to reach a comprehensive peace in Palestine immediately after the war is the main reason for the present Arab-Israeli conflict. While I do not wish to underrate the importance of certain military campaigns, it is my contention that most of them belong to the microhistory of the war and that the outcome of each of the major confrontations can be explained – some would even argue better explained – by the success or failure of the political negotiations preceding the war.

There is an additional reason, and a most important one, for focusing on the political and diplomatic aspects of those formative years of the conflict. From the work of those who have dealt with the history of the war it is clear that it is more than just a sequence of events: it is often a source of inspiration, particularly for the historian who is living through the processes of the history he or she is writing. It may be helpful here to recall the dictum which E.H. Carr derived from the Italian philosopher of history, Benedetto Croce, that history 'consists essentially in seeing the past in the

eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate'.² I shall therefore record the events of the war as accurately as possible but I shall also, when necessary, comment upon their relevance for the conflict today. The relevance for the present of past events will dictate selection from the vast sea of facts which constitute the history of 1948 and 1949. It follows that the book makes no claim to present a definitive and complete history of the war, but attempts to cover all the major political processes involved, and to trace their implication for the development of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Finally, a note on the choice of an adequate name for the first Arab-Israeli war. Arabs and Jews describe the same event in contradictory ways. For the Arabs – and in particular the Palestinians – the events of 1948 are the *Nakba* or *Karitha*, terms that both signify in one way or another catastrophe, trauma and disaster. For the Jews – and in particular the Israelis – the war was a war of independence and 1948 is for them a year of miraculous and glorious events, the most notable being the creation of the state of Israel. I have chosen to call the war by its calendar name – the war of 1948.

The names given by Jews and Arabs point to two different historical approaches, both somewhat narrow but none the less legitimate. They clearly indicate that a proper historical treatment of the war of 1948 is a difficult task. When writing this account I have often thought of Lord Acton's instructions to the contributors to the 1906 edition of the *Cambridge Modern History*: 'Our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English.'³ It seems inevitable that a scholarly, that is historically accurate, account of the war of 1948 will please neither of the adversaries and displease both.

Preface to the Paperback Edition

As the paperback edition of this book goes to press, Israel and the PLO are engaged in negotiations on the future of the West Bank and Gaza. On 13 September 1993, the protagonists exchanged mutual recognition and signed an agreement of principles in Oslo, Norway. Since then many students of the Arab-Israeli conflict have been repeatedly asked by the media, and have probably asked themselves, whether this new accord signifies the beginning of the end? Has a cycle been completed, resolving the conflict which began in 1948? Only time can tell whether the Oslo accords represent the historic breakthrough needed to reach a reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians. Meanwhile, the peace process has been severely criticized by Palestinians and Israelis alike as inadequate and dangerous, although the critics have not so far suggested an alternative way out of the stalemate created by previous abortive peace efforts.

Those Israelis who are against the agreement blame their government for giving up territory which is either sacrosanct in their eyes or of great strategic importance. Palestinian critics, on the other hand, claim that the present peace process ignores the fundamental issues of the conflict: the fate of the Palestinian refugees, the future of Jerusalem and the question of Palestinian statehood. Readers of this book will find that, following the 1948 war, precisely the same Israeli fears produced an inflexible and intransigent attitude to peace, as they will recognize that the issues that concern Palestinians today were, for their predecessors, the main stumbling block in the way of the 1948 peace venture.

The main issue on the peace agenda agreed at Oslo is the result of the June 1967 Six Day War: namely the fate of the West Bank

and the Gaza Strip. These two geopolitical entities were created in the aftermath of the 1948 war and governed by Jordan and Egypt respectively. In the 1967 war they were occupied by Israel. Since then Israel has been willing to negotiate with Arab countries over the future of these two areas but not with the Palestinians. The novelty of the process set in motion by the Oslo accords is that, for the first time, Israel is willing to regard the PLO as the sole representative of the people of the West Bank and Gaza, a constant demand both of the Palestinians and of many others in the Arab world.

So far, however, the discussions have avoided the question of sovereignty, and have revolved around the nature of the transitional authority in those limited areas to be transferred from Israeli to Palestinian authority. By 1996, both sides are expected to finalize the terms of an interim agreement that should hold until 1998. The Oslo document includes a promise to start negotiations over the final status of the West Bank and Gaza in 1996. It is stated vaguely that this phase of the peace process will include discussion of Palestinian statehood, the fate of Jerusalem and the Right of Return – for the Palestinians the three great bones of contention emanating from the 1948 war.

Despite these somewhat hazy promises there is ample ground for guarded optimism. One can argue, along with many Israeli commentators, that whether the Israeli people like it or not, future Israeli governments will negotiate these intricate problems. Moreover, the mutual recognition itself of the right of Palestinian self-determination by Israel and the legitimization of the Jewish state by the Palestinians are acts that will help to resolve the problems stemming from the 1948 war. Mutual recognition, therefore, is so far more significant than the Jericho-Gaza proposal, which only slightly changes the present status quo.

Thus we may conclude that the 1993 peace accord has opened a window of opportunity to solve the problems flowing from 1948 and assume that any attempt in the future to overlook the fundamental questions created by the events of that year will diminish the chances for a successful conclusion of the process. In any case, it is my hope that this book will help to shed some light on the genesis of the problems which led to the continued struggle in post-mandatory Palestine and which are still to be resolved before a lasting peace returns to the torn land.

Haifa, April 1994

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Introduction

The Jewish National Movement and the Arab National Movement made their appearance on the historical stage simultaneously in the middle of the nineteenth century. With the arrival of the first Zionists in Palestine in the second half of the 1880s, the two movements were for the first time brought into direct confrontation. At this time Palestine was still part of the vast Ottoman Empire and the success or failure of the early Jewish settlers depended to a large extent on Istanbul's policy. Arab reaction in Palestine or elsewhere in the Middle East had only a marginal, if any, effect on Ottoman policy. From the onset of the Jewish attempt to settle in Palestine, the Ottoman government and Sultan Abd al-Hamid II (1875–1908), who was to be the last effective ruler of the Ottoman dynasty, had adopted a negative attitude towards Zionism. When the Young Turks came to power (in the Ottoman Empire) in 1908 they continued the same policy, fearing – like the Sultan before them – that Zionism was yet another vehicle for European ambitions in the Middle East and another way of undermining Istanbul's position there. In addition, the Zionist settlers were mainly from Russia and were perceived by the Turks as potential allies of the Russian Empire – whose ambitions in the Balkans and in the northern regions of Anatolia constituted one of the major external threats to the Ottoman Empire.

However, the last phase of Ottoman rule was marked by political instability and by the central government's inability to impose its will on the various districts of Ottoman Palestine. By means of bribery and other forms of persuasion the energetic heads of the embryonic Zionist movement succeeded in circumventing the categorical opposition of the Ottoman government to the settlement of Jews in Palestine. Thus, it was in the late Ottoman

period and despite the official policy of Sultan Abd al-Hamid II that the foundations for the Jewish homeland were laid.

If the Ottomans appeared indifferent to the Palestinian position, the Zionist leaders totally ignored it. Theodor Herzl the leader and founder of Zionism, is often quoted as having stated that Palestine 'is a land without a people for a people without a land'.¹ It was in fact not Herzl but Israel Zangwill, one of the forefathers of the Zionist movement, who had said this in 1901.² Nevertheless, it is quite clear that, like other Zionists, Herzl was unaware of or gave little thought to the indigenous Palestinian population. When the first Jewish settlers tried to purchase land and settle they were immediately made very much aware of the presence of Palestinians in the 'Promised Land'. The first group of settlers to arrive in Palestine were young Russian intellectuals, called the 'Billuim'. They had faced Arab indignation and hostility, since their arrival in 1883, and attributed this to the xenophobic attitude of Arabs everywhere. Nevertheless, we also possess ample historical evidence of a hospitable and generous Arab reception given to many of the new immigrant settlers.³ It was only towards the end of the 1880s that reports emerged of increasing communal friction over questions of water exploitation, pastoral territory, harvesting, and so on. The first notable violent clash between indigenous Arab and Jewish settlers occurred on 29 March 1886, in the coastal strip. Arab villagers from Yahudiya attacked Petach Tikva, the oldest Jewish settlement (founded in 1878). This set the stage for attacks in other parts of Palestine and led to the first organized Palestinian protests against Jewish settlement efforts.

In 1893, Tahir al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem and one of the leaders of the Muslim community of Palestine – more than 75 per cent of Palestinians were Muslims – began to campaign against Jewish settlement and immigration. He regarded the attempts of the Jews to buy land and enlarge their numbers in Palestine as a direct threat to the Arab community there, a perception which has since been shared by many other members of the Husayni family. Tahir's son Hajj Amin al-Husayni, who became the Mufti of Jerusalem in 1920, succeeded not only to the post but also to the ideology of his father and continued the campaign against Zionism on a national basis.

Thus almost from the beginning the focus was on the land. Each purchase by the Jews was seen by many Palestinians as another

step towards the realization of the Zionist dream – a dream whose fulfilment in their eyes could only bring harm to the Palestinians. Around 1910–11, intellectuals and journalists in Palestine and the Arab world at large began writing about the national conflict, and focused predominantly on the question of land.⁴ Jewish activists in Palestine expressed themselves in similar terms on the conflict. In 1911 the dispute was aggravated by the struggle over employment. 'Hebrew Work' (*'Avoda Ivrit*) became the Zionist slogan of the day and Jews consciously competed with local Arabs for the few jobs available in the towns. While in 1910 this was no more than an attempt – and not a very successful one – at replacing Arab agricultural workers in Jewish farms and settlements with new Jewish immigrants, the problem would become more acute in the 1920s.

We have stressed these particular problems because as the Jewish presence in Palestine expanded, so the Zionist demands for land increased and exacerbated the struggle for work. In the 1930s, increased Jewish immigration into Palestine as a result of the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe engendered a growing sense of fear and indignation among the Palestinians, which culminated in the Arab Revolt of 1936–39.

Palestine came under British rule at the end of 1918. General Allenby, commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, occupied the former Ottoman provinces of Palestine following a severe and bloody battle against Gamal Pasha, commanding the Fourth Turkish Army. Four hundred years of Ottoman rule and nearly a millennium of Muslim domination thus came to an end. The British established a military administration in Palestine as they had done elsewhere in the areas of the Arab Middle East occupied by the allies after the First World War. According to an understanding the British had reached with the French during the war, the Sykes–Picot agreement of May 1916, Palestine was to become an international enclave and the rest of the Arab Middle East was divided into either British or French spheres of influence. Yet, when in September 1919 the prime ministers of Britain and France, David Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau, concurred on the revision of the Sykes–Picot accord, Palestine fell into Britain's orbit. In the course of their meeting in Deauville, France, Clemenceau, unwillingly and according to some accounts angrily, ceded Palestine and the Vilayet of Mosul to Britain.⁵ The idea of Palestine becoming an international region was given up and

Mosul passed from French into British hands. In return, the British reiterated their support for French control over Syria and Lebanon as specified in the Sykes-Picot agreement. While the French seemed to have gained very little from the revision of the agreement, there were two strong arguments for giving in to British pressure. First, there were as yet hardly any French troops stationed in the Arab territories and, secondly, Clemenceau could not afford to lose Britain's goodwill in the discussion at the peace conference over the fate of Germany and Europe. Thus, when the last session of the peace conference convened in San Remo in April 1920, Britain was granted a mandate over Palestine and the military administration was duly replaced by a mandatory government later that year.

The Palestine mandate's charter included both the Balfour Declaration, which had been signed on 2 November 1917 and contained a vague British undertaking concerning the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine; and the twenty-second clause of the League of Nations' Covenant, which bestowed upon Britain the 'sacred trust of civilization' to help Palestine achieve full independence. According to this clause the purpose of the mandate system was to assist the former Ottoman provinces of the Middle East to become independent states. It was to this end that the League appointed France and Britain, the victorious allies on the Middle East front, as the mandatory powers under whose guidance and supervision the newly-formed states were to progress towards full independence.⁶ The United States had also been entitled to a mandatory role, but its withdrawal from world politics in 1920 – owing to increasing isolationist trends in Congress – left the arena to the two colonial European powers.

The borders of mandatory Palestine, first drawn up in the Sykes-Picot agreement, were given their definitive shape during lengthy and tedious negotiations by British and French officials between 1919 and 1922. The two main problems were the northern and eastern borders – the southern border was an 'internal' British matter, as Egypt was under British influence, and the boundary which had been agreed upon in 1907, during the Ottoman period, remained intact. In the north, questions of water resources, strategic routes, and economic considerations determined the final delineation of the border. Since these borders have been of such fundamental importance throughout the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is worth remembering that in October 1919 the British envisaged the

area that is today southern Lebanon and most of southern Syria as being part of British mandatory Palestine. Considerations of a wider colonial nature led the British to give this up and it was the officials of the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office Middle East Committee who in the end determined the territorial framework of Palestine.⁷

In the east, matters were more complicated. The difficulties arose from the debate about the future of Transjordan. This land, much of it barren and uninhabited, was part of the Ottoman province of Damascus which in the Sykes-Picot agreement had been allocated to the French. However, Sharif Husayn, the head of the Hashemite family of the Hijaz and Britain's ally in the war against the Turks, had been led to believe by London that Syria, or at least part of it, could become an independent Arab state after the war. This British pledge was included in a secret correspondence between Husayn and MacMahon, the British High Commissioner of Egypt, which had preceded the Sykes-Picot accord. As a dynasty, the Hashemites were to play an important role in the war of 1948 and the subsequent peace negotiations.

Originally from the Hijaz, the Hashemites were a noble clan, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, who had been granted by the Ottomans the privilege of guarding the two holiest places for Islam, Mecca and Medina. In return for their assistance in the war against the Turks, they had been promised by the British a share in the control over some of the Arab areas previously controlled by the Ottomans. This was the gist of the Husayn-MacMahon correspondence – a vague, unclear agreement (in the eyes of most historians unintentionally so) which in fact contradicted the British understanding with the French about the future of the Arab Middle East.⁸

The British government was divided in its attitude towards the Hashemites. Eli Kedourie has claimed that the pro-Hashemite school in the British government caused Britain to commit one mistake after another in its Middle East policy, mistakes which would prove to be tantamount to voluntary suicide. That is, Britain, in spite of its ability at the time to impose any settlement it wished, had allowed local Arab leaders to gain control in areas which were vital to the British Empire.⁹ After their occupation of Damascus in December 1918, the British allowed one of Husayn's sons, Faysal, to establish himself as the *de facto* ruler of Syria, later known as 'Greater Syria', which included Syria, Lebanon and