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A War to Start All Wars Will Israel Ever Seal the Victory of 1948?

By Shlomo Ben-Ami

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1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War. Benny Morris. Yale University Press, 2008, 544 \$32.50

Summary: Israel should pull back settlements and give up its '67 gains in order to secure its '48 victory.

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For 60 years, both the Israelis and the Palestinians have used the past to illuminate the present and confer legitimacy on their nations' respective founding myths. Of course, Zionists and Palestinian nationalists were not the first to embellish the stories of their nations' births or make excuses for their tragedies. Throughout history, nations have been born in blood and frequently in sin. This is why, as the French philosopher Ernest Renan wrote, they tend to lie about their pasts.

The birth of the state of Israel in 1948 has long been the subject of self-congratulatory historiography by the victorious side and grievance-filled accounts by disinherited Palestinians. To the Israelis, the 1948 war was a desperate fight for survival that was settled by an almost miraculous victory. In the Arab world, accounts of the war tend to advance conspiracy theories and attempt to shift the blame for the Arabs' defeat. In both cases, the writing of history has been part of an uncritical nationalist quest for legitimacy.

Refusing to admit that the noble Jewish dream of statehood was stained by the sins of Israel's birth and eager to deny the centrality of the Palestinian problem to the wider conflict in the Middle East, the Israelis have preferred to dwell on their struggle for independence against the supposedly superior invading Arab armies. But the war between the indigenous Palestinian population and the Yishuv, the organized Jewish community of Palestine, was arguably the fiercest phase of the conflict. It was during this period -- between November 30, 1947, and May 15, 1948 -- that the fate of the nascent Jewish state really seemed to hang by a thread. Nevertheless, the popular notion cultivated since then has repressed the memory of this fighting and focused instead on the heroic stand of the tiny Yishuv against the invading Arab armies during the second phase of the war, from May 15, 1948, to the spring of 1949. When the war was over, the Palestinian problem practically disappeared from Israeli public debate, or it was conveniently defined as one of "refugees" or "infiltrators." It was as if there were no Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Palestinian people. As Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir famously put it in 1969, "They did not exist."

LONG REVISION

During the 1980s, a group known as the new historians began to challenge the Zionist mythology surrounding Israel's birth. These Israeli revisionist scholars -- Simha Flapan, Ilan Pappé, and Avi Shlaim, among others -- unearthed documents that challenged the conventional view of the war as a clash between a Jewish David and an Arab Goliath. They also argued that the war was really the story of Arab states betraying the Palestinian cause and showed that there was collusion between some Arabs and the Jews -- as when Trans-jordan and the Yishuv conspired to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state. In other cases, the new historians argued, Arab states rushed to grab land at the expense of the Palestinians or their own rivals in the Arab coalition.

But it was Benny Morris who addressed the most sensitive issue of all: the refugee crisis. His book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, published in 1987, remains the single most important work on the thorniest moral and political issue underlying the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum. It recounts the often violent expulsion of 700,000 Arabs as Jewish soldiers conquered villages and towns throughout Palestine. For bravely and masterfully advancing a new narrative of Israel's birth, he paid a heavy personal price. Denounced as an "anti-Zionist" after the

publication of his 1987 book, Morris was denied tenure by practically every department of history in the country. It was not until 1996, when then President Ezer Weizman summoned Morris to his office and asked him to affirm his belief in Israel's right to exist that Morris was given a job at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

More than any other revisionist, Morris has singled himself out by drawing a line between his views as a historian and his views as a citizen, between his pathbreaking interpretation of the past and his controversial and politically incorrect views about the present. Once a peacenik with impeccable credentials -- he went to jail for refusing to serve as an Israeli army reservist in the occupied territories during the first intifada, in 1987 -- Morris has gradually drifted, together with most Israelis, toward a position vehemently critical of the Palestinians. He has blamed Palestinian leaders for the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the al Aqsa intifada, which began in September 2000.

In January 2004, Morris famously lamented that the architects of Israel's 1948 war strategy had not more thoroughly purged the Jewish state of its Arab population. Morris told the Haaretz journalist Ari Shavit, "If [David] Ben-Gurion [Israel's first prime minister] had carried out a large expulsion and cleansed the whole country -- the whole Land of Israel, as far as the Jordan River . . . he would have stabilized the State of Israel for generations. . . . If the end of the story turns out to be a gloomy one for the Jews, it will be because Ben-Gurion did not complete the transfer in 1948." His statement shocked many of his old admirers and fellow revisionist scholars. But even if his left-wing critics consider him a controversial citizen of the present, Morris remains an honest and superbly professional student of the past.

The ability to engage in a sober inquiry into the past is an essential test of free societies and truly democratic academic institutions, and the challenges that the new historians have posed to traditional myths surrounding the birth of Israel represent a major contribution to both historiography and the country's identity. The revisionists' work has had political consequences as well: the Israeli-Palestinian peace process of the 1990s was nurtured by their reshaping of the national *Zeitgeist* in Israel. The introduction of powerful new arguments about 1948 has influenced the views of politicians and peace negotiators, too, whether they admit it or not. (The speech I gave as head of the Israeli delegation during the 1992 multilateral talks on Palestinian refugees in Ottawa, Canada, was profoundly influenced by Morris' work.)

No such new history has yet emerged in the Arab world, nor have any Arab archives been opened to allow for such a fresh perspective. Most Arab historians continue to absolve their countries' militaries of all responsibility for the defeat. By exonerating the Arab armies and attributing their failure to the treachery and incompetence of conservative civilian elites, such scholars provided legitimacy for the revolutionary military regimes that took power across the Arab world after 1948.

REWRITING THE CREATION

Morris' latest book, *1948*, is likely to become the most definitive study of the first Arab-Israeli war. On each and every facet of the conflict -- military strategy, human rights abuses, the refugee crisis, diplomacy, and propaganda -- it is an extraordinary tour de force. Exhaustive, although at times exhausting, it is a meticulous and authoritative narrative.

Morris' scholarship spares no Israeli founding myth, especially not the notion of Israel's "purity of arms" (one element of the Israel Defense Force's code of ethics, which dictates that force be used only in the pursuit of soldiers' missions), an idea that remains central to the nation's self-image as morally superior to its enemies. Morris supports his arguments with vast numbers of primary sources and always places his findings in their proper context. The atrocities and evictions suffered by Arab communities took place sometimes in the storm of battle, sometimes as the Yishuv's forces sought to secure roads linking Jewish settlements, and frequently in response to explicit orders from generals on the battlefield. Morris shows that the Zionists committed more massacres than the Arabs, deliberately killed far more civilians and prisoners of war, and committed more acts of rape. The Arabs, he claims, were responsible for only two large massacres: the December 1947 killing of 39 Jewish workers at the Haifa oil refinery and the Kfar Etzion slaughter of 150 Jews in May 1948. With painstaking detail, Morris exonerates the Arab side for what others have called a massacre: the destruction of a convoy of doctors and nurses on Mount Scopus in April 1948. According to Morris, this incident was simply a battle.

In *1948*, Morris transcends the arithmetic approach -- with its emphasis on the number of troops on the ground -- that characterizes so many other revisionist accounts of the 1948 war. Certainly, the organizational capacity of the Yishuv was formidable; it managed to mobilize 13 percent of the Jewish population in the name of protecting the nation's precarious existence, a level of mobilization practically unknown in the annals of military history. Yet as Morris rightly points out, battlefield strength was never the Zionists' only concern; even more troubling was the fact that the Yishuv was encircled by large, hostile Arab states whose armies could easily retreat, recover, and be ready for the next round. Accounts that focus on the number of troops on the ground ignore the traumatic memory of the destruction of European Jewry, the Yishuv's deep sense of insecurity, and its tendency to see every battle in apocalyptic terms. Even today, Israel has not overcome the legacy of the Holocaust; its status as a regional power has not diminished its existential fears.

The Palestinian Arabs' war against the Yishuv in 1947-48 may have been disorganized and spontaneous, but the Palestinians almost succeeded in causing the United States to reverse its support for a Jewish state. The White House backed partition, but the State Department opposed it for fear of alienating Arab states. Zionist leaders were convinced that if the Yishuv appeared to be losing, the State Department's position would gain sway in Washington. Morris makes the compelling argument that the Yishuv's shift from a defensive stance to an offensive strategy in early April 1948 stemmed not only from signs of an impending Arab invasion but also from its fear that the superpowers would abandon their commitment to partition. The Yishuv's military doctrine -- as it had been conceived by the Jewish militias in the 1930s and was masterfully put into practice in the spring of 1948 -- was essentially one of offensive defense. The leaders of the Yishuv understood that crushing the Palestinian militias and securing control of the main roads were vital to repelling the imminent Arab invasion and convincing the international community to maintain its commitment to an independent Jewish state. And the victories they won as a result helped demarcate the boundaries of the new state.

The notorious Plan D, a controversial measure adopted by Ben-Gurion in March 1948, was part of this offensive strategy. Morris' impressive treatment of this phase of the war demonstrates that Plan D was not, as is commonly believed, a master design for the complete occupation of Palestine and the massacre or forceful eviction of its Arab population. Rather, it was a push to extend the frontiers of the future Jewish state beyond the partition lines by linking Jewish population hubs to outlying settlements. The armistice lines were determined later, after the Arab front collapsed, Jewish forces won unexpected victories, and the Yishuv's leaders seized the opportunity to occupy more and more land. As Arab villages, towns, and then entire regions fell to Jewish forces, the Yishuv sought to bolster its claim to statehood by creating facts on the ground.

THE PALESTINIAN EXODUS

In many ways, the Arabs of Palestine had already lost the 1948 war -- or the nakba (catastrophe), as it is also known -- ten years earlier, during the Arab revolt of 1936-39. That revolt, which sought to limit Jewish immigration to Palestine and halt the Zionists' acquisition of Arab land, reflected rage and blind despair more than organization or careful strategy. As Morris, the Palestinian American historian Rashid Khalidi, and others have shown, the Palestinian Arabs suffered a crippling defeat that left them in a state of fatalistic disarray. During the years that followed, the Palestinian community was so dismembered that when it faced the challenge of partition and war in 1947 and 1948, it was no longer master of its own destiny. Outsiders from neighboring Arab states had begun to play an increasingly central role in determining its fate.

By intervening in May 1948, the Arab states sought to kill the partition plan, acquire new territory, and placate public opinion at home. The Arab leaders constantly blundered due to their penchant for belligerent rhetoric and their deeply held view that the Jewish presence in Palestine was merely transitory -- a repetition of the crusaders' failed experiment to put down roots in the Holy Land. Their defeat in 1948 underscored what would be the central paradoxes of Arab politics for years to come: How would Arab leaders reconcile their proclaimed intention to do away with the Jewish state with their fear of its military power? How would they placate and control the "Arab street," which they had themselves incited with bellicose language? And how would they demonstrate their support for the liberation of Palestine while advancing their own particular agendas at the Palestinians' expense?

Israel's leaders were not blind to the evolving Palestinian tragedy. It was Ben-Gurion's profound awareness that a monumental disaster had befallen the Palestinians that eventually turned the prime minister into an incorrigible pessimist about the prospects for Arab-Israeli peace. The hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who flooded surrounding Arab countries during the 1948 war were not evicted under instructions from the Israeli cabinet. Still, the lack of explicit government directives does not absolve the Israelis of responsibility. In an update to his earlier study on the subject, Morris found that far more Palestinians were expelled on explicit orders from commanders in the field than fled for fear of military attacks. And in some cases, Ben-Gurion personally authorized such orders without informing his government.

This is not surprising given that the idea of population transfers had a long and solid pedigree in Zionist thought. The evictions of 1948 stemmed from an ideological predisposition in the Jewish community and a cultural and political environment that made military commanders feel comfortable initiating or encouraging the mass eviction of Arabs. Zionist leaders differed on many issues, but they generally agreed, as Morris points out, on the benefits of "transfer" -- a euphemism for "expulsion." The idea of forced transfer was explicitly endorsed by the British government's 1937 Peel Commission on Palestine, and Jewish forces began to implement it in the storm of battle in 1948. In October of that year, on the eve of Operation Hiram, which led to the expulsion of many of the Arabs of the northern Galilee region, Ben-Gurion declared, "The Arabs of the Land of Israel have only one function left to them -- to run away." And they did; panic-stricken, they fled in the face of massacres in Ein Zeitun and Eilabun, just as they had done in the wake of an earlier massacre in Deir Yassin. Operational orders, such as the instruction from Moshe Carmel, the Israeli commander of the northern front, "to attack in order to conquer, to kill among the men, to destroy and burn the villages," were

carved into the collective memory of the Palestinians, spawning hatred and resentment for generations.

There are only two points on which Morris' splendid analysis falters. He is unconvincing in his attempt to pardon some of Israel's original sins by creating an awkward symmetry between the Palestinian refugee crisis and the forced emigration of 600,000 Jews from Arab countries and Iran, which Morris quotes Israeli leaders as calling "an unplanned 'exchange of population.'" Regimes hostile to Israel were not alone in getting Jews to leave; envoys from the Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency, and from the Jewish Agency were working underground in several Middle Eastern countries to encourage Jews to go to Israel. More important, for many Jews in the region, the very possibility of immigrating to Israel was the culmination of millenarian dreams. It represented the consummation of a quest to take part in Israel's resurgence as a nation. No matter how painful the memory of their eviction or how humiliating their second-class status in Israel, these new Israelis never sought to return to their lands of origin. By contrast, the Palestinian refugees were forced into the wilderness of exile with no guarantee of a new national home and no prospect of returning to their native land. The yearning for return thus became the Palestinians' defining national ethos.

Morris' characterization of the conflict of 1948 as an Islamic jihad against Jewish-Western infidels in Palestine is also unpersuasive. It is true that the figurehead of Palestinian nationalism at the time was the fanatically religious and viscerally anti-Semitic mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini. And Arab discourse during 1948 was occasionally peppered with the rhetoric of holy war: the Syrian author Vadi'a Talhuq's book *A New Crusade in Palestine*, published on the eve of the Arab invasion, compared the war to the liberation of Palestine from the crusaders. Yet Israel in 1948 was no tool of the West. On the contrary, it could not have won the war without arms shipments from the Soviet bloc. The socialist nature of Israeli society at the time prompted Egypt's prime minister, Mahmud al-Nuqrashi, to define Israel as an agent of "atheism and nihilist Communism." And the Zionists' Arab enemies were hardly under the control of Islamic movements. They were all ruled by decadent conservative elites who paid nothing more than lip service to Islamic values and the religious hysteria on the Arab street. Broadcasters and agitators rallied the masses under the banner of a holy war against the nascent Jewish state. But the Muslim Brotherhood sent only one battalion to fight in Palestine. It was ill-trained conventional armies, not Hezbollah-style guerrilla units, that led the Arab assault in 1948. After the defeat, rather than pursuing jihad against Israel, the conservative Arab regimes signed an armistice agreement granting legitimacy to Israel's 1948 borders. And between 1949 and 1952, they all attempted to reach permanent peace agreements with the Jewish state.

THE ZIONIST TIME WARP

The past still casts its shadow on the present in disturbing ways. Morris' scrupulous research shows how the 1948 expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs was in no small measure driven by a desire for land among Israeli settlers, who grabbed it and then actively pressured the Israeli government to prevent the Arab refugees from returning to their villages. In 1967, a powerful group of settlers in the Galilee region pressured the government to take over the Golan Heights. The hunger for land persists to this day, as settlers lobby politicians to allow the expansion of outposts in the West Bank. The redemption of the land of Israel by settling it -- which was encouraged just as enthusiastically by Labor Zionists as by those on the right -- was always central to the Zionist enterprise. So, too, was the creation of strategic settlements along the state's borders that could serve as its defensive shield in the case of an invasion. These border kibbutzim served their purpose during the 1948 war, curtailing Palestinian assaults and obstructing the path of the invading Arab armies.

Unfortunately, Zionist thinking got fossilized at that point. What had worked in 1948 was no longer useful during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, when the Golan Heights settlements had to be evacuated to give the Israeli army proper freedom of movement. And in today's era of long-range ballistic warfare, the belts of Jewish settlements in the West Bank along the Jordan River and the old Green Line offer Israel no military advantage whatsoever. The Zionist tradition of support for settlements should be challenged on political grounds as well; after all, a normal state is not supposed to occupy land beyond its legitimate borders. The Zionist movement created a state that was admitted to the United Nations and aspires to have orderly relations with the international community. Yet this state continues to behave as if it were the old Yishuv bent on outsmarting a colonial occupier and the local Arab population. And the complex web of settlements it has spread across the West Bank now make negotiating a two-state solution a logistical nightmare.

This geographic puzzle has prompted certain observers to call for a binational state. Some, such as the British historian Tony Judt, are disillusioned former Zionists. Others, such as Pappé, believe that exposing the lies of the past requires reversing the course of history: undoing the Jewish state and going back to the supposedly happy days of Arab-Jewish coexistence in a binational community. The notion of returning to a peaceful paradise lost is not new, but it has never been practical. It was severely damaged during the Arab revolt of 1936-39 and then shattered by the 1948 war, when Arab-Jewish fighting over the same piece of land and for demographic superiority deflated lofty dreams of coexistence. As Morris describes both in his previous book *Righteous Victims* and in 1948, separation became a logical goal for the Zionists after the Arab revolt. But the idea was never natural for the Palestinian national movement. Many Palestinian

nationalists wanted an Arab state with a Jewish minority; it was Yasir Arafat who eventually imposed the two-state solution on them. Now that he is dead, there is no one left to lend it legitimacy.

Morris' somber concluding chapter is fatalistic about the chances for peace, because the catastrophe of 1948 still haunts the Arab world. Yet the 1990s did offer some glimmers of hope. The irrational all-or-nothing politics that dominated both sides after the 1948 war faded as the Arab-Israeli conflict went through an unmistakable process of secularization. The same Arafat who had joined the Muslim Brotherhood's battalion in 1948 in its holy war against the Jews in Palestine accepted the idea of two separate states in 1988 and led his people into the Oslo process in 1993. The pragmatic peace agreements that Israel concluded with Egypt and Jordan, Israel's peace negotiations with Syria's secular Baathist regime, and its signing of the Oslo accords with Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) all reflected a sober drive to transform the conflict from an apocalyptic clash into a soluble political dispute.

However, the collapse of the Oslo process damaged the popularity of the two-state solution. The failure of the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000 left the al Aqsa intifada in its wake, and Israel's persistent policy of expanding the settlements has severely undermined the Palestinians' trust in the two-state idea. Arafat's exiled PLO leadership (the "outsiders") had imposed its rule on young local leaders committed to resistance (the "insiders"). So long as Arafat was alive, he managed to control these detractors. But after his death, in 2004, insiders in both Fatah and Hamas returned in full force to challenge the decrepit Oslo-era clique led by Arafat's nominal replacement, Mahmoud Abbas. Secular nationalism in the Palestinian territories, and throughout the Arab world, is now in decline. It is being swept away by Islamic fundamentalism. Everywhere, loyalty to the state and the nation is being superseded by loyalty to Islam. Palestinians are moving away from Arafat's pragmatic nationalism toward revolutionary and maximalist positions on issues such as the return of refugees and the liberation of partitioned Palestine.

It is worth remembering that Arab armies did not invade Palestine in 1948 for the sake of the Palestinians; it was their war against the Jews that drew Arab governments into the Palestinian question. Still, any future resolution of the broader Arab-Israeli conflict will depend on a final settlement of the Palestinian question. Israel has already managed to force the entire Arab world to accept the legitimacy of its 1967 borders prior to the Six-Day War -- as evidenced by the peace plan offered by the Arab League in 2002. It must now belatedly seize this unique opportunity and negotiate peace agreements with Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians for a return to the June 4, 1967, lines -- essentially the same borders established in the aftermath of Israel's crushing 1948 victory.

A failure to do so, coupled with rapidly shifting demographic trends -- namely, a higher birthrate among Arabs than among Jews -- will permanently destroy the credibility of the two-state solution, allowing the binational model to gain sway among the Palestinians as they become a majority. A binational state would lead to a situation resembling the old South Africa, with two classes of citizens possessing vastly different political and civil rights. Worse, such a development would not lend itself to a peaceful South African-style solution, because Israel, with its superior might, would never concede power to a Palestinian majority as white South Africans eventually did to the black majority in 1994. The only alternative scenario would be Israel's unilateral disengagement to lines determined by the separation barrier, which annexes about eight percent of the West Bank. And this would, in all probability, leave a Hamas state on Israel's borders.

To avoid these disastrous scenarios, Israel must admit once and for all that the territorial phase of Zionism has ended, dismantle most of the West Bank settlements, and help create a viable Palestinian state as soon as possible. This is Israel's only chance to seal its 1948 victory -- which has been constantly challenged ever since -- before the swelling tide of Islamic fundamentalism drowns the existing Arab regimes and dooms the prospects of an enduring Arab-Israeli peace.

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