Introduction

The Palestine War lasted less than twenty months, from the United Nations resolution recommending the partition of Palestine in November 1947 to the final armistice agreement signed between Israel and Syria in July 1949. Those twenty months transformed the political landscape of the Middle East forever. Indeed, 1948 may be taken as a defining moment for the region as a whole. Arab Palestine was destroyed and the new state of Israel established. Egypt, Syria and Lebanon suffered outright defeat, Iraq held its lines, and Transjordan won at best a pyrrhic victory. Arab public opinion, unprepared for defeat, let alone a defeat of this magnitude, lost faith in its politicians. Within three years of the end of the Palestine War, the prime ministers of Egypt and Lebanon and the king of Jordan had been assassinated, and the president of Syria and the king of Egypt overthrown by military coups. No event has marked Arab politics in the second half of the twentieth century more profoundly. The Arab–Israeli wars, the Cold War in the Middle East, the rise of the Palestinian armed struggle, and the politics of peace-making in all of their complexity are a direct consequence of the Palestine War.

The significance of the Palestine War also lies in the fact that it was the first challenge to face the newly independent states of the Middle East. In 1948, the Middle East was only just emerging from colonial rule. Though Israel was the newest state in the region when it declared independence on 15 May 1948, its neighbors were hardly much older. Egypt was still bound to Britain in a semi-colonial relationship by the treaty of 1936. Transjordan's 1946 treaty gave Britain such extensive control over the state's military and finances that the international community would not recognize its "independence" and the terms of the treaty had to be renegotiated in January 1948. Lebanon and Syria had been given their independence from France in 1943 and 1946. Even Iraq, which had enjoyed international recognition as an independent state in the interwar years, entered secret negotiations with Britain in 1947 to renegotiate the 1930 treaty to reduce the British military presence in "independent" Iraq. In the Arab world, the nationalist leaders who oversaw the transition to

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independence fell at their first hurdle when they failed to live up to their rhetoric and save Palestine from the Zionist threat. This failure provoked a crisis of legitimacy in nearly all the Arab states.

History plays a fundamental role in state formation, in legitimizing the origins of the state and its political system, in the Middle East as elsewhere. Governments in the region enjoy many direct and indirect powers over the writing of history. Elementary and secondary school texts in history are the preserve of the state. Most universities in the Middle East are state-run and their faculty members are state employees. National historical associations and government printing presses serve as filters to weed out unauthorized histories and to disseminate state-sanctioned truths. As promotion within the historical establishment is closely linked to adherence to the official line, historians have had little incentive to engage in critical history writing. Instead, most Arab and Israeli historians have written in an uncritically nationalist vein. In Israel, nationalist historians reflected the collective memory of the Israeli public in depicting the Palestine War as a desperate fight for survival and an almost miraculous victory. In the Arab world, histories of the Palestine War have been marked by apologetics, self-justification, onus-shifting and conspiracy theories. Both the Arab and the Israeli nationalist histories are guided more by a "quest for legitimacy" than by an honest reckoning with the past.[1]

A fabric of myths

The burden of legitimating national actions in the Palestine War, in the halls of politics as well as in the classroom, has conflated history writing and patriotism in the Middle East in what might best be termed "official history."[2] This political invention of history is common to both Israel and the Arab states, though for markedly different reasons. Arab official histories seek to advance state interests by mobilizing citizens disillusioned by the defeat of national armies and the loss of Arab Palestine, while Israeli official histories seek to reaffirm a sort of Zionist manifest destiny while diminishing responsibility for the negative consequences of the war. This practice has led a recent generation of critical scholars to view the official histories of 1948 as a fabric of myths.

Since the late 1980s, a group of Israeli scholars has led a charge on Israel's foundational myths. The new critical Israeli history was catalyzed by Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when the Likud government sought to establish historic continuity between their controversial actions in Lebanon and the actions of Israel's founding fathers in Palestine in 1948.

Significantly, in defending the actions of his government, then-Prime Minister Menahem Begin referred to the policies of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, in 1948. Begin claimed that the only difference between them was that Ben-Gurion had resorted to subterfuge, whereas he was carrying out his policy openly. He cited Ben-Gurion's plan to divide Lebanon by setting up a Christian state north of the Litani River, his relentless efforts to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state, and, during the 1948 War, his wholesale destruction of Arab villages and townships within the borders of Israel and the expulsion of their inhabitants from the country – all in the interest of establishing a homogeneous Jewish state.[3]

Begin's remarks inadvertently set in motion a reassessment of Israel's origins. The War of Independence, as the 1948 War is called in Israel, had always transcended controversy. Researchers, motivated in many cases to clear Ben-Gurion's name and discredit Begin, began to look into these charges of wholesale destruction of villages and expulsions. They were aided by a liberal archival policy by which government documents are released to public scrutiny after the passage of thirty years, which made available a vast quantity of documentation on the 1948 War and its aftermath. The Israeli archives proved most revealing.

Simha Flapan set the agenda when he reduced the historiography on the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 to seven myths: that the Zionists accepted the UN partition resolution and planned for peace; that the Arabs rejected the partition and launched the war; that the Palestinians fled voluntarily intending reconquest; that the Arab states had united to expel the Jews from Palestine; that the Arab invasion made war inevitable; that a defenseless Israel faced destruction by the Arab Goliath; and that Israel subsequently sought peace but no Arab leader responded. Other Israeli scholars developed these themes more extensively. Benny Morris provided the first documentary evidence to demonstrate Israeli responsibility for the flight of the Palestinians from their homes.[4] Avi Shlaim overturned the myth of the Arab Goliath and documented peace overtures to Israel by King ʿAbdullah of Jordan and even the Syrian leader Husni al-Zaʿim.[5] Ilan Pappé demonstrated that Britain, far from seeking to prevent the creation of a Jewish state as argued by Zionist historiography, sought instead to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.[6] The sociological consequences of the state's myth-making have in turn been scrutinized by Zeev Sternhell.[7] These works have provoked enormous controversy within Israel and their authors have become a self-conscious group referred to as the "new historians" or "critical sociologists."[8]

A critical tradition has always existed in the Arab histories of 1948, though the criticism in any given country was more often directed against the actions of *other* Arab states. Arab intellectuals have, since the immediate

aftermath of the war they dubbed "the catastrophe" (*al-Nakba*), sought to explain their defeat in the shortcomings of Arab society generally. Constantine Zurayq, Sati' al-Husri, Musa al-'Alami and George Hanna were among the most influential of these intellectuals, and their works gained wide circulation in the Arab world. "Yet these books," Walid al-Khalidi argues, "were not able to eradicate and bury forever our myths of what took place in the 1948 War, in spite of their wide circulation." While Khalidi characterizes both the Israeli and the Arab historiography of the 1948 War in similar terms, his summary of the Arab myths is worth citing at length.

The most prominent of the Arab myths of the 1948 War, most of which continue to be circulated down to the present day, portray the Zionist forces as mere terrorist gangs which had been surrounded in all directions by the Arab armies in the first phase of the war (15 May–11 June). The Egyptian vanguard had reached the southern suburbs of Tel Aviv, the Iraqi advanced forces had come very close to the Mediterranean coast to the west of Qalqiliya and Tulkarm, and the Jordanian Arab Legion had reached the eastern suburbs of Tel Aviv. All that was needed was a few more days to deal the enemy the mortal blow which would decide the matter once and for all, when international pressure escalated into threats and menaces and imposed the first truce on the Arabs. Thus the Zionist entity snatched victory from the jaws of inevitable defeat.[9]

Israeli scholars have turned their interests to Arab historiography, perhaps in consequence of their own historical self-examination. Emmanuel Sivan, in his analysis of Arab political myths, considered such recurrent themes as the Crusades as a symbol of an on-going battle between Muslim Arabs and their enemies in the holy land of Palestine, and the symbolic significance of Jerusalem, as two examples of particular relevance to Arab thought in the aftermath of the Palestine War.[10] Avraham Sela, who has studied the Arab historiography of 1948 most extensively, has drawn parallels between Arab and Israeli narratives. Like the earlier Israeli histories of 1948, he argues, "Arab historiography of the 1948 war consists predominantly of non-scholarly literature based more upon collective memory than critical historiography." Unable to reach military parity with Israel or to fulfill its Arab nationalist agenda of liberating Palestine, Sela argues, "the history of the 1948 war is an essential part of the 'unfinished business' of Arab nationalism."[11]

Arab states and Arab nationalism

One explanation for the persistence of national myths in the Arab histories of 1948 lies in the distinction between a narrower nation-state nationalism

and a broader supra-national Arab nationalism. The colonial experience of the interwar years had put paid to the greater Arab kingdom envisaged by the Hashemite Sharif Husayn ibn ʿAli and his sons in the First World War. The division of the Fertile Crescent into discrete states under British and French Mandates meant that nationalist struggles went on within the boundaries of the new Arab states rather than at the pan-Arab level. History was thus employed to instill patriotism in Egyptians, Iraqis, Jordanians, Lebanese, and Syrians, though not to the exclusion of their collective identity as Arabs. By the time these states were gaining their independence in the aftermath of the Second World War, political elites had emerged with interests to protect within the boundaries drawn by the colonial authorities. Furthermore, there was no popular champion of pan-Arab nationalism. Amir ʿAbdullah's calls for a Greater Syrian union carried little ideological appeal at the grass-roots level and were seen instead as a bid for Transjordan's territorial expansion. Pan-Arabism figured only symbolically in the official rhetoric of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, or Iraq.[12] Nor did the Arab League, founded in March 1945, serve to transcend individual national interests.

It should come as no surprise that the Arab states fought the Palestine War in strictly national terms, guided by domestic agendas and national interests. While all Arab leaders spoke of the necessity of protecting Arab Palestine from partition, King Faruq put Egyptian interests first, King ʿAbdullah the interests of Transjordan, President Quwwatli the interests of Syria, as did the other leaders the interests of their countries. Fearful for internal stability within their countries, several Arab leaders committed only a fraction of their armed forces to the "common struggle" against Israel. It was not that Arab chiefs-of-staff failed to coordinate their battle plans; rather they refused outright to place their own troops under another state's command. Far from raising the banner of the Arab nation, the Arab armies nearly came to blows over the size and placement of their respective national flags when troops from different states were billeted in the same town. No one country was willing to risk its forces to come to the rescue of a "fraternal" Arab state under Israeli attack. And when they had had enough, each Arab state negotiated its own armistice with Israel with no concern for inter-Arab coordination.

By the time the first accounts of the Palestine War were being penned in the 1950s, Arab nationalism had become the dominant nationalist discourse in the Arab world. The defeat in Palestine and the toppling of the *ancien régime*s responsible for "the catastrophe" had galvanized public opinion behind the pan-Arab agenda. Arab Nationalism now had a popular champion of remarkable charisma. Egyptian president Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasir enjoyed grass-roots support not just in his own country but

across the Arab lands. The Arab nationalists execrated the narrow self-interest of the Arab leaders of 1948, and turned angrily against their successors in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. However, the Arab nationalists proved no more effective in achieving the liberation of Palestine or the defeat of Israel than had their predecessors. This led to two tendencies in the history writing on 1948: the defensive Arab states adopted "an apologetic mode, geared towards enhancing political legitimacy" while the Arab Nationalists wrote in "a mode of self-examination that sought to elicit historical lessons and motivate radical social, political, or ideological change in preparation for the 'next round' against Israel."[13] Neither placed much importance on the historical accuracy of their accounts.

A victor's privilege

While there is certainly scope for new Arab histories of the Palestine War, Arab intellectuals lack the material for the task. Unlike in Israel, there is no thirty-year rule which governs the declassification of government archives. Archival material on the Palestine War is still not available in Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon, and there is no immediate prospect for its declassification. This has forced writers to return to available sources with at most a new interpretation reflecting changes in political realities over the fifty years which separate us from the events of the Palestine War. Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi has written a series of works marking the half century since the UN Partition Resolution and the 1948 War on the basis of the documentation he personally has gathered over the years, without a footnote or reference embellishing his texts.[14] Egyptian journalist Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal was driven back to his own war diaries for his reassessment of the Palestine War.[15] Even where archival materials exist, such as the papers of the Hashemite Court in Jordan, access has been strictly limited to historians of demonstrated loyalty to edit and publish documents which reinforce the Jordanian government's official line on the Palestine War.[16] Arab scholars would find no support for critical revisions of their national historiography. Indeed, many Arab countries limit free expression in ways which are prohibitive to critical scholarship. And so a decade after the publication of the first major Israeli revisionist histories of the Palestine War there is still no analogous literature by scholars from the Arab side.

The link between a national historical narrative and the political legitimacy of the state makes any challenge to official truths controversial. The arguments put forward by the new Israeli historians have provoked tremendous debate in Israel, spilling out of academic forums into the

press and public consciousness. The fact that the challenge has come
from Israeli academics, who have found their most controversial material
in Israeli archives, has made the findings of the new Israeli historians all
the more disturbing to domestic opinion in Israel.

Yet the freedom of this debate is a measure of the security of
Israeli political institutions. It takes a great deal of political stability for the
right of free expression to be preserved over state-sanctioned truths.
Perhaps because Israel emerged victorious in 1948 and in subsequent
Arab–Israeli conflicts, new historians can challenge the consensus of
public memory captured by the traditional historians without jeopardiz-
ing public belief in the legitimacy of the civil and military institutions of
the state of Israel. The old aphorism, that history is written by the victors,
doesn't quite apply. Given that the defeated Arab states have written their
own histories of the Palestine War, perhaps it is more accurate to say that
the *critical revision* of a nation's history is a victor's privilege.

By the fiftieth anniversary of the Palestine War, Egypt had been at peace
with Israel for twenty years and Jordan for four years. The Palestinians and
the Israelis had exchanged recognition and established a framework for
peace which permitted the Palestine Liberation Organization's chairman,
Yasir ʿArafat, to return to a narrow autonomy in parts of the Gaza Strip
and the West Bank. With the end of hostilities, a new level of interaction
between Arabs and Israelis undermined the aims which informed the
earlier historical traditions of the Arab–Israeli conflict. With no prospect of
the liberation of Palestine or another round of war with Israel, the ideologi-
cal underpinnings of the old history are irrelevant. The old fabric of myths
is now almost subversive of the direction taken by the former confrontation
states. To say that the Arabs need to embark on a critical examination of
their history is not a simplistic call to imitate the historical debates which
have taken place in Israel since 1988. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that
a history which is no longer credible serves neither to legitimate the state
nor to inspire or inform its citizenry. The contributors to this book propose
as a first step the rewriting of the Palestine War.

Rewriting the Palestine War

This book re-examines the role of all participants in the Palestine War on
the basis of archival sources where they exist, and on new materials which
have entered the public domain such as memoirs and other published
primary sources. The collection brings together leading Israeli new histo-
rians with prominent Arab and Western scholars of the Middle East,
to revisit 1948 from the perspective of each of the countries involved in
the war. In many cases, authors address issues raised by the Israeli new

historians on the conduct of war and diplomacy between Israel and the
Arab states. However, the essays on the Arab states have drawn deliber-
ately on local sources to re-examine the history from an Arab perspective.
In many cases, the paucity of new materials limits the scope of revision.
The authors present their work in the hope that official documents will be
made available in Arab archives to permit a more thorough revision of the
Arab–Israeli conflict.

This collection contains essays on all of the Arab states that took part in
the Palestine War bar one: Lebanon. Despite the editors' best efforts it
proved impossible to find a contributor to examine Lebanon's role in the
war. Lebanese–Israeli relations remain an extremely sensitive topic in the
last active front of the Arab–Israeli conflict, exacerbated by a history of
Maronite cooperation with Zionism, the Israeli occupation of a large strip
of South Lebanon, and Syria's influence over Lebanese foreign policy. Two
studies have been published on the Zionist–Maronite "special relation-
ship" on the basis of Israeli sources. Laura Eisenberg has examined the
diplomacy which led to a still-born Zionist–Maronite treaty in 1946,[17] and
Kirsten Schulze has looked at the persistence of Israeli attempts to inter-
vene in internal Lebanese affairs.[18] Both works have been translated into
Arabic and published in Beirut, though ominously Schulze's book was
seized upon by Lebanese censors and its author accused by the state's secu-
rity forces for "instigating sectarian strife."[19] Neither work has much to say
about Lebanon's military role in the 1948 War, which was minimal.
Lebanon committed only a token contingent of under 1,000 troops who
crossed into the northern Galilee only to be repulsed by Israeli forces who
in turn occupied a strip of South Lebanon until the two sides signed an
armistice agreement on 23 March 1949. However, Lebanon played an
important political role in the lead-up to the war. The Lebanese prime min-
ister, Riyad al-Sulh, was strident in his rhetoric for a comprehensive victory
in Palestine. Indeed, Sulh was criticized by other leaders for taking the
hardest line in Arab League meetings while his country made the smallest
commitment to the battlefield. The conservatism of President Bishara al-
Khuri, the stridency of his prime minister, the nature of Maronite–Zionist
relations and the Lebanese experiences in battle and under brief Israeli
occupation provide the material for a fascinating *Lebanese* history of 1948
which seemingly must await a more auspicious political climate.

Most of the essays in the book address a national history – Palestine,
Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria. Two exceptions are Benny Morris'
re-examination of the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem, and Laila
Parsons' study of the Druze in the Palestine War. Morris' original study
provoked tremendous controversy, both from those Israelis who believed
he was discrediting his country and from Palestinians who argued that the

archival material Morris uncovered was more damning of Israeli actions
than Morris' conclusions that "the Palestinian refugee problem was born
of war, not by design."[20] In the years since the publication of *The Birth*, a
considerable body of new Israeli documents has been declassified, partic-
ularly the archives of the Israeli Defense Forces and the Defense Ministry.
In his reassessment of the Palestinian exodus of 1948, Morris addresses
one of the most controversial points raised by his earlier critics: Zionist
thinking on "transfer," or the expulsion of Palestinians from lands to be
included in the projected Jewish state. Morris documents a shift in
Zionist thinking on the subject from "haphazard" to a "virtual consensus
in support of the notion from 1937 on" which "contributed to what hap-
pened in 1948." The second part of his essay examines the expulsion of
Palestinians from the northern Galilee in Operation Hiram (28–31
October 1948), with clear evidence of atrocities committed by Israeli
forces against the Palestinian villagers. However, Morris continues to
refuse to link "transfer thinking" to a *policy* of expulsion, denying that
"any overall expulsory policy decision was taken by the Yishuv's executive
bodies . . . in the course of the 1948 War."

Laila Parsons disputes this conclusion on the basis of Israeli actions
toward the Druze, also focusing on Operation Hiram. Parsons docu-
ments a special relationship between the Yishuv and the Druze in the
Mandate period which developed into a "secret wartime alliance" by
1948. The numerous examples of Druze–Israeli cooperation in the
course of the war, and the fact that no Druze were expelled from their
towns or villages, she argues, undermines Morris' claims of the random-
ness of the expulsion of Palestinians. Indeed, even in one village where the
Palestinian Druze broke their pre-battle agreement and fought against
the IDF, the Druze villagers were not expelled following the battle. If the
Druze were allowed to remain by design, Parsons argues, this implied "at
least a partially coherent policy to expel Muslims." Clearly the wealth of
documentation in the Israeli archives still leaves scope for differences of
interpretation between scholars.

In a concluding essay, Edward Said examines the consequences of the
1948 War fifty years on. The imbalance between Israeli military and insti-
tutional strength and Palestinian efforts at state formation within Gaza
and parts of the West Bank puts in question the viability of the two-state
solution envisaged by the United Nations Partition Resolution in 1947.
The best solution for the Palestinians, Said argues, might well be a bi-
national state. With few champions for this vision on either the Israeli or
Palestinian sides, Said's idea comes well before its time. Indeed, it might
gain ground when, in half a century's time, a new generation of scholars
chooses to revisit the Palestine War at its centenary.

Notes

1 Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (New York, 1987); Avraham Sela, "Arab Historiography of the 1948 War: The Quest for Legitimacy," in Laurence J. Silberstein, ed., *New Perspectives on Israeli History: The Early Years of the State* (New York, 1991), pp. 124–54.

2 E.J. Hobsbawm analyzes the analogous fostering of patriotism in Europe in his *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 85–91. For the different uses of history to achieve civic loyalty in the French Third Republic and the German Second Empire see Hobsbawm's "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 272–74.

3 Flapan, *Birth of Israel*, p. 5.

4 *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, 1988).

5 *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford, 1988).

6 *Britain and the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1948–51* (London, 1988).

7 *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State* (Princeton NY, 1998).

8 Benny Morris, "The New Historiography: Israel and its Past," in Morris, *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 1–48; Avi Shlaim, "The Debate About 1948," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27 (1995) 287–304.

9 Walid al-Khalidi, *Khamsun ʿaman ʿala harb 1948, ula al-hurub al-sihyuniyya al-ʿarabiyya* [Fifty Years since the 1948 War, the First of the Arab–Zionist wars] (Beirut, 1998), pp. 13–14.

10 *Mythes Politiques Arabes* (Paris, 1995).

11 Sela, "Arab Historiography," pp. 125, 146.

12 Sylvia G. Haim, ed., *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* (Berkeley CA, 1962); Michael Doran, *Pan-Arabism before Nasser: Egyptian Power Politics and the Palestine Question* (New York, 1999).

13 Sela, "Arab Historiography," p. 125.

14 *Al-Sihyuniyya fi miʾat ʿam, 1897–1997* [A Century of Zionism] (Beirut, 1998); *Khamsun ʿaman ʿala taqsim filastin, 1947–1997* [Fifty Years Since the Partition of Palestine] (Beirut, 1998); *Dayr Yasin (Beirut, 1998); Khamsun ʿaman ʿala harb 1948* [Fifty Years Since the 1948 War] (Beirut, 1998).

15 *Al-ʿUrush waʾl-juyush: kadhalik infajara al-siraʿa fi filastin*, vol. 1 [Thrones and Armies: Thus Erupted the Struggle in Palestine] (Cairo, 1998).

16 Muhammad Adnan al-Bakhit, Hind Abu al-Shaʿir and Nawfan Raja al-Suwariyya, eds., *Al-Wathaʾiq al-Hashimiyya: awraq ʿAbdullah bin al-Husayn* [The Hashemite Documents: The Papers of ʿAbdullah bin al-Husayn], vol. 5, Palestine 1948 (Amman, 1995).

17 *My Enemy's Enemy: Lebanon in the Early Zionist Imagination, 1900–1948* (Detroit MI, 1994).

18 *Israel's Covert Diplomacy in Lebanon* (London, 1998).

19 As reported in the English-language Lebanese newspaper, *The Daily Star*, 27 February 1999.