

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87598-1 - The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948, Second Edition

Edited by Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim

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The War for Palestine

Rewriting the History of 1948

The 1948 War led to the creation of the state of Israel, the fragmentation of Palestine, and to a conflict which has raged across the intervening sixty years. The historical debate also continues, and these debates are encapsulated in the essays contained in a second edition of *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, updated to include chapters on Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. In a preface to the new edition, the editors survey the state of scholarship in this contested field. The fragmentation of the Israeli “new historians” and the continued unwillingness of Arab societies to engage critically with their own past constrain the field, while new research opportunities are opened through private papers and oral history. The impact of these debates goes well beyond academia. There is an important link between the state of Arab–Israeli relations and popular attitudes toward the past. A more complex and fair-minded understanding of that past is essential for preserving at least the prospect of reconciliation between Arabs and Israel in the future. The rewriting of the history of 1948 thus remains a practical as well as an academic imperative.

EUGENE L. ROGAN is University Lecturer in the Modern History of the Middle East and a Fellow of St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford. He is the author of *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire* (1999) and editor of *Outside In: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East* (2002). He is editor of The Contemporary Middle East series published by Cambridge.

AVI SHLAIM is Professor of International Relations and a Fellow of St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford. He was a British Academy Research Professor in 2003–6 and he was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 2006. His previous publications include *War and Peace in the Middle East: A Concise History* (1995) and *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (2000). His biography of King Hussein of Jordan will be published in 2007.

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A list of books in the series can be found after the index

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SECOND EDITION

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University of Oxford

and

Avi Shlaim

University of Oxford



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Contributors

FAWAZ A. GERGES holds the Christian A. Johnson Chair in international affairs and Middle East Studies at Sarah Lawrence College.

MATTHEW HUGHES is Reader in History at Brunel University.

RASHID KHALIDI is Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies and Director of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University.

JOSHUA LANDIS is Co-Director of the Centre for Peace Studies and Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

BENNY MORRIS is Professor of Middle East History at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

LAILA PARSONS is an Assistant Professor at McGill University. She holds a joint position in the Department of History and the Institute for Islamic Studies.

MADAWI AL-RASHEED is Professor of Social Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Religious Studies, King's College London.

EUGENE ROGAN is a Fellow of St. Antony's College and lectures in the modern history of the Middle East at the University of Oxford.

The late EDWARD W. SAID was University Professor at Columbia University.

AVI SHLAIM is a Fellow of St. Antony's College and Professor of International Relations at the University of Oxford.

CHARLES TRIPP is Professor in Politics with reference to the Near and Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

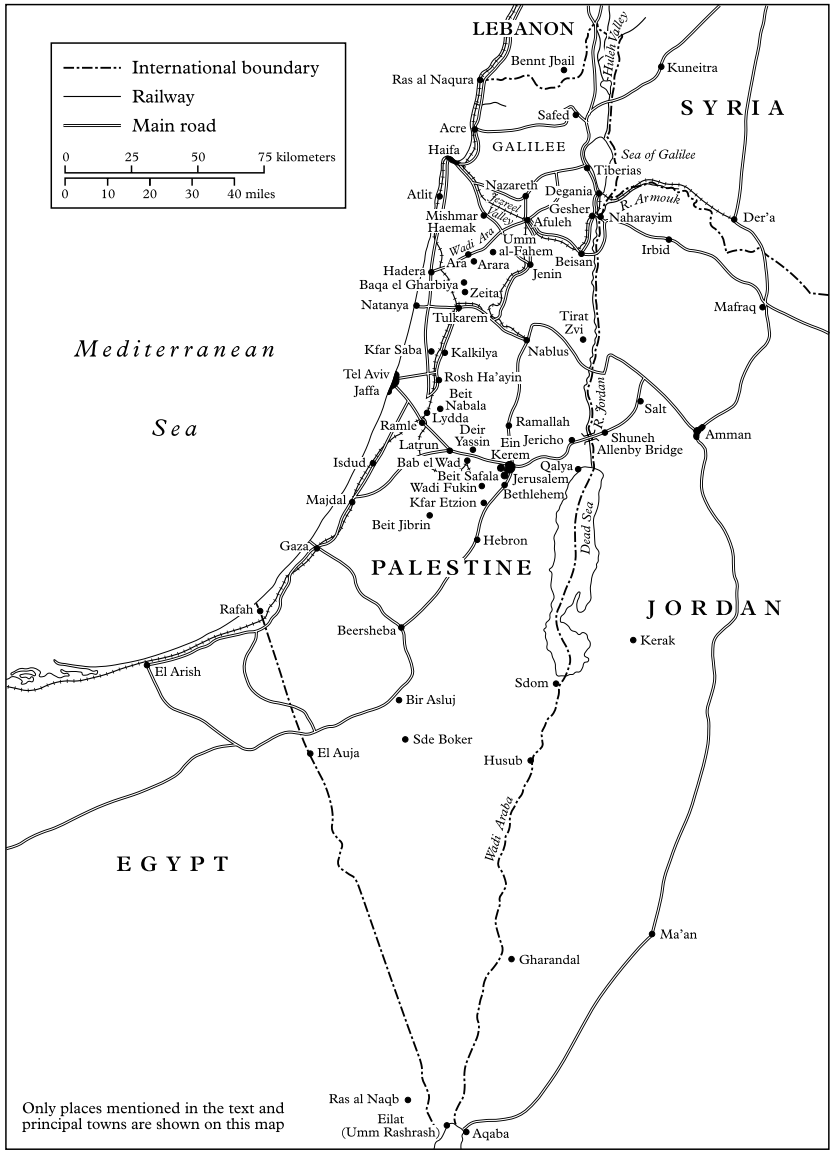
Chronology

29 November 1947	United Nations adopts Palestine partition resolution
30 November 1947	Outbreak of civil war in Palestine
10 March 1948	Plan D adopted by the Haganah for the capture of Arab villages, neighborhoods and towns
19 March 1948	US proposes suspension of partition plan and a trusteeship for Palestine
3–15 April 1948	Operation Nahshon: Jewish military offensive to open the road to Jerusalem
8 April 1948	Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni killed in the battle for Kastel
9 April 1948	The massacre of Deir Yassin
18 April 1948	Tiberias captured by the Haganah
22 April 1948	Haifa captured by Haganah
10 May 1948	Golda Meir meets King ‘Abdullah in Amman
11 May 1948	Safad captured by the Haganah
13 May 1948	Gush Etzion captured by the Arab Legion
13 May 1948	Jaffa surrenders to the Jewish forces
14 May 1948	Termination of the British Mandate over Palestine
15 May 1948	Proclamation of the State of Israel
15 May 1948	Armies of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Egypt enter Palestine
20 May 1948	UN appoints Count Folke Bernadotte as mediator for Palestine
28 May 1948	Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem falls to Arab Legion
11 June 1948	Four-week truce begins
8 July 1948	Arabs resume fighting; Israel gains on all fronts
11–12 July 1948	IDF captures Lydda and Ramla
18 July 1948	Second truce begins
6 September 1948	Arab League decision to create the All-Palestine Government with a seat in Gaza

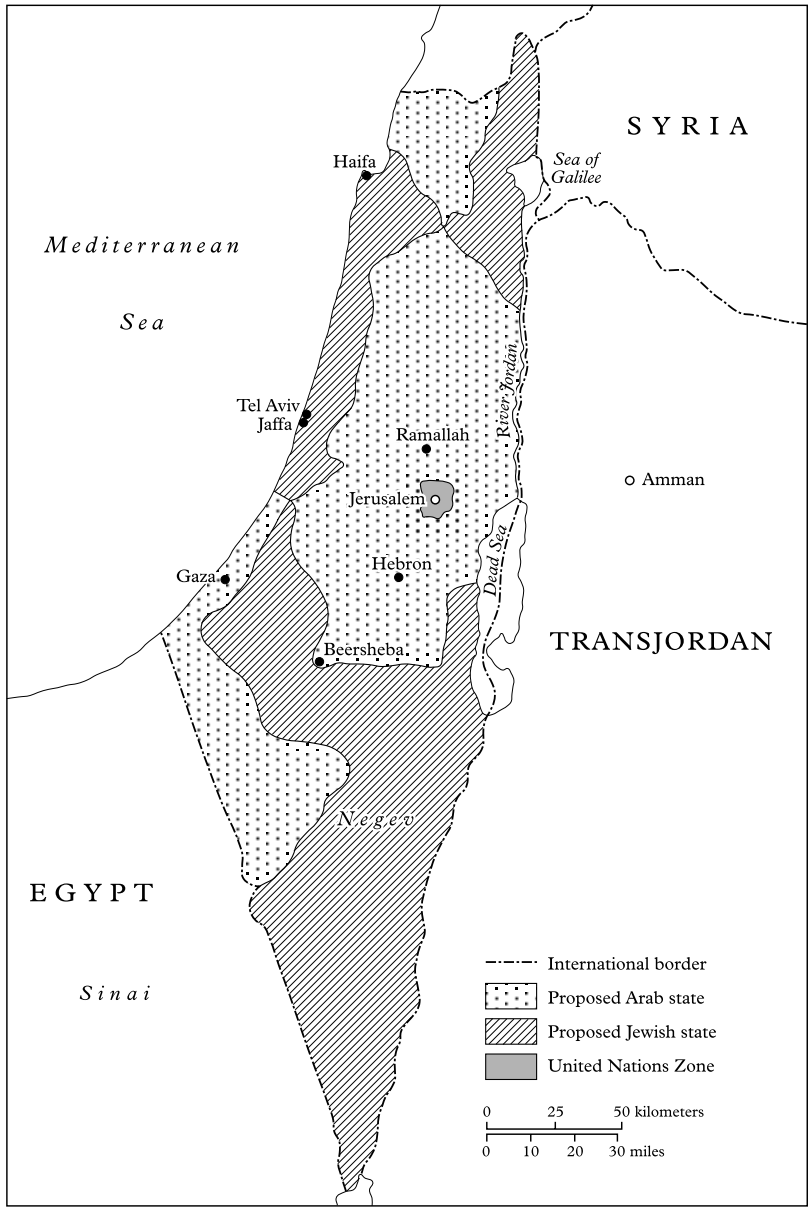
x	Chronology
17 September 1948	Count Bernadotte assassinated by the Stern Gang; Dr. Ralph Bunche appointed acting mediator
20 September 1948	Bernadotte plan published by the UN
15 October 1948	Israel launches an offensive against the Egyptian army in the Negev
29–31 October 1948	Operation Hiram: IDF expels Arab Liberation Army from the Galilee and crosses the border into Lebanon
16 November 1948	UN Security Council calls for armistice talks
11 December 1948	UN established Palestine Conciliation Commission and calls for repatriation or resettlement of refugees
22 December 1948	Israel launches a second offensive; Egyptian forces driven beyond mandatory borders but retain the Gaza Strip
7 January 1949	End of hostilities
13 January 1949	Israeli and Egyptian delegations meet in Rhodes for armistice talks, chaired by Dr. Bunche
24 February 1949	Israel and Egypt sign Armistice Agreement
23 March 1949	Israel and Lebanon sign Armistice Agreement
3 April 1949	Israel and Transjordan sign Armistice Agreement
20 July 1949	Israel and Syria sign Armistice Agreement

Abbreviations

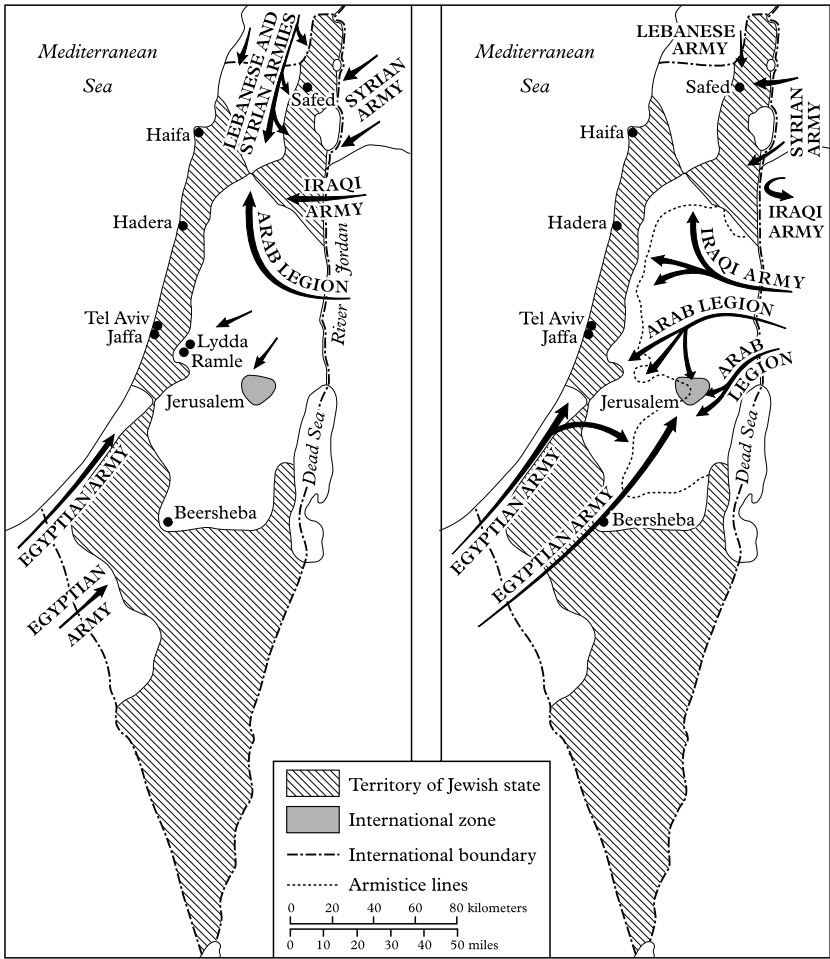
AACOI	Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry
ALA	Arab Liberation Army
BG Archive	Ben-Gurion Archives, Sede Boker, Israel
CZA	Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, Israel
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IDFA	Israel Defense Forces Archive, Givatayim, Israel
IEF	Iraqi Expeditionary Force
IJMES	International Journal of Middle East Studies
ISA	Israel State Archives, Jerusalem, Israel
ISA, FM	Israel State Archives, Foreign Ministry Papers
IZL	Irgun Zvai Leumi or simply “Irgun,” lit. National Military Organization
JAE	Jewish Agency Executive
JNF	Jewish National Fund
LHI	Lohamei Herut Yisrael or simply “Stern Gang,” lit. Freedom Fighters of Israel
PRO	Public Records Office, Kew, UK
PRO, FO	Public Records Office, Foreign Office Papers
USNA	United States National Archives, Suitland MD and Washington DC



Map 1 Mandate Palestine
Source: Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford University Press, 1988), frontispiece

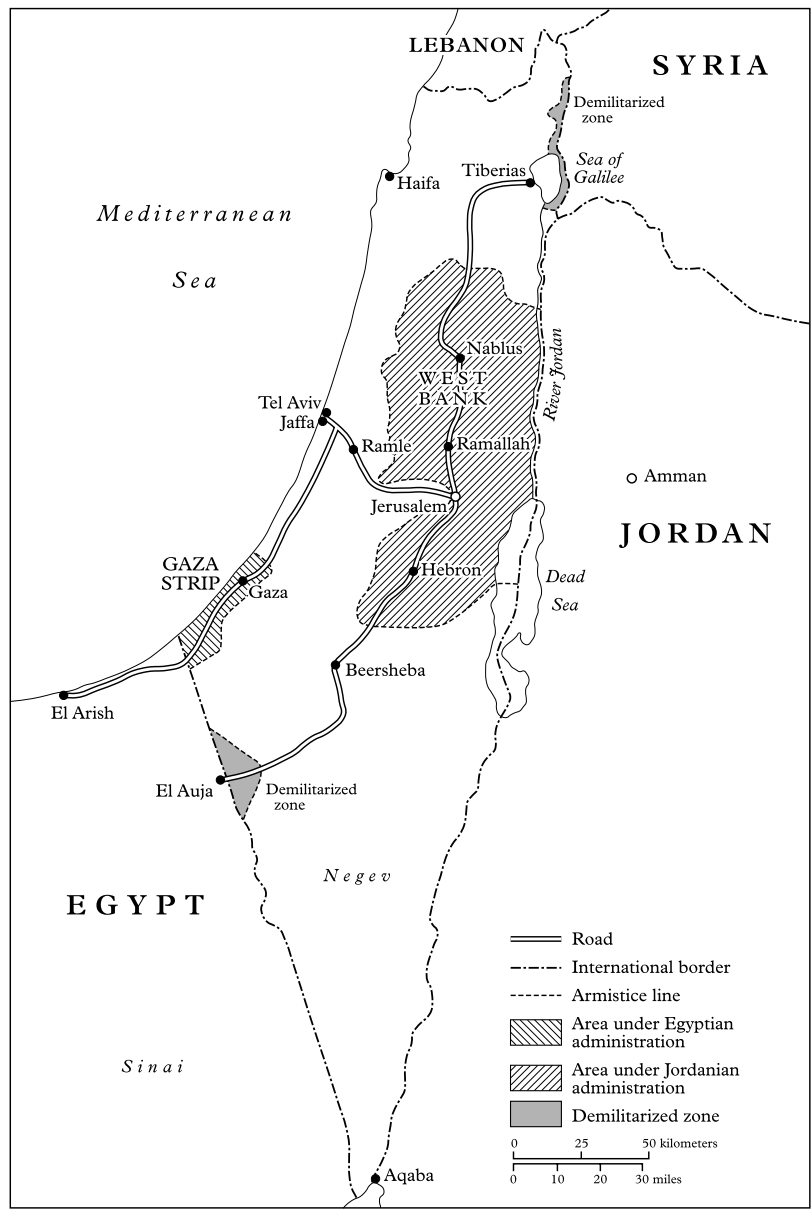


Map 2 The United Nations Partition Plan, 1947
Source: Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 118



Map 3 The Arab League invasion plan compared with the actual invasion

Source: Simha Flapan, *Zionism and the Palestinians* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 322



Map 4 Israel following the Arab–Israeli armistices, 1949
Source: Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 429

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Preface to the second edition

The first edition of *The War for Palestine* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2001. The success of this book surpassed all our expectations. It received considerable critical acclaim; it sold over 8,000 copies; and it was translated into three languages – Arabic, French, and Italian. The book was a first attempt to encourage the rewriting of the history of 1948 from Arab and Israeli perspectives alike. It originated as a series of lectures held at the Middle East Centre of St. Antony's College, Oxford, in the autumn of 1998. Its aim was to re-examine the role of all the local actors in the struggle for Palestine in the light of old and recently declassified archival resources. The contributors to this volume came from different backgrounds: some from Israel, some from the Arab world, and some from the West. Regardless of our provenance, we were all united by a commitment to explore, with the help of the best evidence we could find, the causes, the course, and the consequences of this fateful war. Our common purpose was to understand, not to impute shame or allocate blame.

It was Edward Said, a long-time friend of the Middle East Centre in Oxford, who first suggested to us the idea of bringing Arab and Israeli scholars together to rewrite the history of the Palestine War. Edward himself wrote eloquently, in his contribution to this volume and in other places, on the need for Arab intellectuals to come to terms with their history and on the importance of looking simultaneously at both sides of the hill, of writing history contrapuntally, as he liked to put it. He also believed that a broad understanding of the historical roots of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is essential for its resolution. Edward Said died on 25 September 2003. His essay, “Afterword: The Consequences of 1948,” is reprinted here without any changes. We wish to dedicate this second edition of the *The War for Palestine* to the memory of this outstanding intellectual who spent a lifetime grappling with the complexities of the Palestine question.

The original version of this book was a product of its time: a contribution to the rewriting of the history of the first Arab–Israeli war rather than

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a definitive or comprehensive study of the subject. In the Introduction to the first edition we noted that there were some omissions, notably a treatment of Lebanon. Despite our best efforts, we were unable to find a historian capable of writing a chapter on Lebanon in 1948. Nor could we think of a possible contributor on Saudi Arabia and the 1948 War. Recently, however, we identified two scholars who were able and willing to fill in these two particular gaps. This encouraged us to start thinking about a second edition of *The War for Palestine*. The volume in front of you is the result.

This is a revised and expanded edition of the book that first appeared in 2001. All the original contributors to that book, with the exception of the late Edward Said, were offered an opportunity to revise their chapters. All the authors, including the two editors, were content to let their chapters be reprinted in their original form.

The two substantive additions to this volume are the chapter by Matthew Hughes on Lebanon and the chapter by Madawi Al-Rasheed on Saudi Arabia. In the vast literature on the 1948 War Lebanon hardly features at all, because it was the weakest of the Arab states and because the role played by its army in the fighting was extremely marginal. Matthew Hughes begins by noting that Lebanon was a belligerent in 1948 in name only but goes on to shed a great deal of new light on the internal sectarian divisions that went such a long way to account for the country's military passivity. In particular he shows that the Christian-dominated government had a long history of collusion with Zionists and that it deliberately held back the army following the outbreak of hostilities. By giving details of the size of the Lebanese forces, Hughes helps to further undermine the myth of a Jewish David confronting an Arab Goliath. He also engages with the arguments of the other contributors on the discord and disharmony that prevailed within the ranks of the Arab coalition that confronted Israel. And he joins in the consensus that it was the inability of the Arab states to coordinate their diplomatic and military strategies that was in no small measure responsible for their defeat on the battlefield.

Madawi Al-Rasheed's chapter on Saudi Arabia fits very neatly into this general picture of a divided and dysfunctional Arab coalition. Like Lebanon's, Saudi Arabia's attitude to the War for Palestine was hesitant and ambivalent, and its contribution to the fighting was totally insignificant. And like all the other Arab states, Saudi Arabia pursued a national agenda while paying lip-service to Arab unity. Rivalry with Jordan rather than commitment to the Palestinian cause emerges as the driving force behind Saudi policy during the war. Madawi Al-Rasheed draws on a wide range of hitherto unused Arabic sources to get beyond the official history of Saudi Arabia and the Palestine War. In doing so, she

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makes a major contribution to our understanding of the complex dynamics that led to the Arab defeat in the War for Palestine.

Benny Morris's essay on "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948" is reprinted here without change, but it is not his last word on the subject. In 2004 Cambridge University Press published a very long and substantial book by him under the title *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*.¹ This was a sequel to his path-breaking 1987 book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*.² The original book sought to examine the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem that, along with the establishment of the State of Israel, was the major political consequence of the 1948 War. In the years that followed publication, an enormous amount of additional material was released for research in Israel's archives. Some of this material is reflected in Morris's contribution to the first edition of *The War for Palestine*. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, however, gives a much fuller and more comprehensive account, based on nearly three decades of assiduous research. It incorporates a great deal of new archival material and gives largely expanded accounts of some of the main episodes. The other innovation is a new chapter on the link between Zionist thinking about "Transfer" – a euphemism for mass expulsion – and the actual policies pursued by Israel in 1948.

A vast number of official documents on the refugee issue and on all other aspects of the 1948 War have been declassified in Israel in the last two decades. Israel adopted a British-style thirty-year rule for the declassification of official documents, but in recent years this rule was applied much more liberally. The Israel State Archive declassified almost all the Cabinet protocols for 1948–49. The IDF, the Haganah, the Labour Party, the Ben-Gurion, and other archives have between them released hundreds of thousands of documents. This enriched data-base has fed into a steady stream of scholarship on various aspects of the 1948 War, as well as two comprehensive accounts of this war, one by Yoav Gelber³ and the other by David Tal.⁴

By far the most controversial of the recent crop of books is *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* by Ilan Pappé of Haifa University.⁵ Pappé is a prominent member of the original group of "new historians" and the most radical among them. He is the author of several serious books on the making of the Arab–Israeli conflict and on the history of Palestine. Many Palestinians regard him as Israel's most courageous, most principled, and most incisive historian. Within Israel, on the other hand, he is isolated, ostracized, and much maligned. The main charge against him is that he has a political axe to grind. His critics allege that he writes not as a dispassionate scholar but with the aim of delegitimizing the State of Israel and

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generating international sympathy and support for the Palestinian cause. By publishing a book with such a provocative title, Pappé has put himself further out on a limb. The vocabulary of ethnic cleansing is simply unacceptable even in the most liberal circles in Israel. His latest book, like the previous ones, is therefore unlikely to have any impact on the way that the great majority of Israelis view the history of 1948.

On the Arab side little progress has been achieved in securing access to the official records. The asymmetry between the Arab and the Israeli records that are available is therefore more pronounced today than ever before. All the political and institutional constraints on the release of official government documents in the Arab world relating to the 1948 War continue to operate. A new initiative to establish an archive of Arab private papers, to be based in Beirut, Lebanon, is gaining ground, though as we go to print the archive exists on paper alone. Some private papers from the Arab world have been deposited in libraries and archives in the Arab world and in the West. The Centre for Lebanese Studies deposited in the Middle East Centre Archive of St. Antony's College, Oxford, the extensive papers of Emir Farid Chehab (1908–85), the former Director of General Security in Lebanon. Matthew Hughes is among the first Western scholars to access this valuable new material for his essay on Lebanon in this book.

For the Palestinians, statelessness has always posed a real problem in the archiving of historic documents. The Institute for Palestine Studies, established in Beirut in 1963, has long sought to fill the gap in documentation through its library, which also holds an extensive collection of original documents “pertaining to Palestinian political leaders, national committees, and political parties, consisting of personal papers, memoirs, minutes of meetings and conferences, and photographs.”⁶ The Institute has published a number of memoirs giving first-hand Palestinian accounts of the 1948 War, several since the first edition of *The War for Palestine*.⁷ Perhaps the most significant new primary source on the Palestinian experience of 1948 has come through oral history. A number of oral history projects preserving the memories of the *Nakba*, or Palestinian “Catastrophe,” on audio and video record are accessible via the universal archive of the internet.⁸

There is a full-length study of the role of Jordan in the War for Palestine. The book is by Ma'an Abu Nowar and it is called *The Jordanian–Israeli War, 1948–1951: A History of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*.⁹ The author served as a junior officer in the Jordanian army in 1948, he retired from the army with the rank of Major-General, and he proceeded to do a doctorate in history at the University of Oxford. His latest book is based on extensive Arabic sources, both published and unpublished, research in the Public

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Record Office, and personal information from other participants in the war. Although it contains a great deal of new and valuable information, the book adheres firmly to the loyalist view of Jordan's role in the struggle for Palestine. It does not engage, for example, with the thesis of collusion between King Abdullah and the Zionist movement against the Palestinians before, during, and after the war. Consequently, it might be helpful to assess Ma'an Abu Nowar's book in relation to the work of two Israeli scholars who advance the thesis of "collusion across the Jordan," Uri Bar-Joseph¹⁰ and Avi Shlaim.¹¹

One major change between the first and second editions of the present book relates to the political context in which history is written. History is the past seen through the prism of the present. In the late 1990s, when this project was conceived, public opinion in Israel seemed increasingly receptive to the ideas of the "new history." Many of the claims that a decade earlier were denounced as dangerous revisionism began to be incorporated into the intellectual mainstream. Some of the findings of the new history, like those of Benny Morris on the expulsion of Palestinians, even found their way into history textbooks for secondary schools. Our unspoken assumption at the time was that the new historians would bring about a quiet revolution in the way in which their compatriots viewed their past. This assumption turned out to be overly optimistic. In the last few years various developments in the political arena have made the Israeli public more suspicious of the new interpretations of the past and more receptive to the old ones. The breakdown of the Oslo peace process, the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada, and the rise to power of Ariel Sharon at the head of a Likud-dominated government in February 2001 resulted in a swing in public opinion away from the new history towards the old history.

Six months before the election, Ariel Sharon was asked what changes he thought the education system needed. Sharon replied: "I would like them to study the history of the people of Israel and the land of Israel . . . the children must be taught Jewish-Zionist values, and the 'new historians' must not be taught." Underlying this reply was a sense, widely shared among the country's conservatives, that the new historians were undermining patriotic values and young people's confidence in the justice of their cause. Sharon's aim was to nullify the effect of the new historians and to reassert traditional values in the educational system.

Likud's return to power brought in its wake a regression to fundamentalist positions in relation to the Palestinians and the reassertion of a narrow, nationalist perspective on Israel's history. Limor Livnat, the education minister, launched an all-out offensive against the new history, post-Zionism, and all other manifestations of what she views as the

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defeatism and appeasement that paved the way to the Oslo Accord. One of the first things that Ms Livnat did on becoming minister of education was to order new history textbooks for secondary schools to be written, removing all traces of the influence of the new historians.

In addition to these officially instigated attacks, two other developments helped to weaken the cohesion and the credibility of the new historiography. One was the Teddy Katz affair; the other was the defection of Benny Morris. Teddy Katz submitted in 1998 a master's thesis that made extensive use of oral history. The thesis dealt with a massacre allegedly perpetrated by the Alexandroni Brigade in late May 1948 in the Arab village of Tantura, 35 kilometers south of Haifa. Katz's finding that more than 200 Tantura villagers were shot after the village surrendered was reported in the Israeli press in January 2000. This unleashed a storm of protest, culminating in a libel suit brought by veterans of the Alexandroni Brigade against Katz. The court case prompted Haifa University to institute an internal inquiry that led to Katz being stripped of his master's degree.

In the academic controversy that ensued, a number of scholars came to the defence of Teddy Katz, notably Ilan Pappé of the University of Haifa. In Pappé's view, the case shed light on the extent to which mainstream Zionists are prepared to go to in discouraging research that brings to the fore such aspects of the 1948 War as "ethnic cleansing."¹² The controversy surrounding the case was bitter and overtly political. The critics called into question the credibility not only of Katz and Pappé but, by extension, of the entire school of new history.

The embattled new historians suffered an equally serious setback as a result of the defection of Benny Morris from their ranks. Following the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000, Morris's thinking about the Arab-Israeli conflict and its protagonists radically changed. In a series of newspaper articles and interviews he laid virtually all the blame for the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the return to violence at the door of the Palestinian Authority. He concluded that signing the Oslo Accord had been a mistake and that peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians is not possible. This pessimistic conclusion made him veer from left to right and to start advocating the "transfer" or expulsion of the Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza. It also led him to re-examine the experience of 1948 in the light of Israel's present predicament. In the past Morris had confined himself to dispassionate description and refrained from passing judgment on Israel's actions. In retrospect, however, it seemed to him that allowing a small minority of Palestinians to stay within the borders of the State of Israel was a mistake; that not only 700,000 but the whole lot should have been expelled. In fairness to Benny Morris it must be pointed out that his scholarly work is untainted by his

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new political and ideological convictions. In his scholarly work he still meets the most exacting standards. Although he has distanced himself from the school of new history of which he was once the leading proponent, his contribution to our understanding of what happened in 1948 remains of critical importance.

The debate about 1948 goes on and may it long continue to do so. Consequently, it is premature to pass a final verdict on the new history. When a journalist asked Chou En-lai a question about the impact of the French Revolution, the wise Chinese leader replied: "It is too soon to tell." The same may be true of the new history. But a review of the last two decades suggests that the new history has already had significant political consequences on at least four levels. First, it acted as a spur to a major advance in the teaching of history in most Israeli high schools. Second, it enabled ordinary members of the Israeli public to understand how Arabs perceive Israel and how they view the past. Third, it presented to the Arabs an account of the conflict which they recognize as honest and genuine, and in line with their own experience, instead of the usual propaganda of the victors. Fourth, it encouraged Arab historians, contributors to this volume among them, to examine more critically the conduct of their own community in this conflict in the light of the evidence that is now available. The result is the welcome development of a new history on the Arab side.

In all these different ways, the new history helped to create a climate, on both sides of the Israeli–Arab divide, which was conducive to the progress of the peace process. As Bishop Tutu pointed out in the South African context, it is difficult to know what to forgive unless we know what happened. In the Middle East, as in South Africa, it is necessary to understand the past in order to go forward. This brief survey also suggests an important link between the state of Arab–Israeli relations and popular attitudes towards the past. Just as disenchantment with the Likud government in the aftermath of the 1982 Lebanon War acted as a spur to the new history, disenchantment with the Palestinians following the return to violence served to isolate, marginalize, and even delegitimize the new historians. The more Israelis feel under threat, the more they retreat into familiar and self-justifying narratives of the past and the less tolerant they become of dissenting voices. But it is precisely in such times of crisis that dissenting voices are most vitally needed. A more complex and fair-minded understanding of the past is therefore essential for preserving at least the prospect of reconciliation in the future. The rewriting of the history of 1948 thus remains a practical as well as an academic imperative.

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- 1 Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge, 2004).
- 2 Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, 1987).
- 3 Yoav Gelber, *Palestine 1948: War, Escape and the Emergence of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (Brighton, 2001).
- 4 David Tal, *War in Palestine, 1948: Strategy and Diplomacy* (London, 2004).
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