

# Zionism Victorious

## 1948: Clearing the land of Palestinians

### Palestine Book Project

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[In 1947] The United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP), which had no African or Arab members, recommended by a narrow margin that Palestine be divided into a Jewish and an Arab state. The partition plan granted 55 percent of Palestine to the Jews, who were 30 percent of the population and owned only 6 percent of the land. Some 407,000 Arabs, a number nearly equal to the number of Jews, were to live in the area assigned to the Jewish state. The Arab state was to include ten thousand Jews and 725,000 Arabs in the remaining 45 percent of Palestine.

Palestine was divided on November 29, 1947 by a vote of thirty-three for, thirteen against, and ten abstentions. Only three African and Asian states voted in favor: South Africa, ruled by white European settlers, and Liberia and the Philippines, under pressure from the United States.

As the decision was announced, Arab delegates rose and walked angrily out of the Assembly. The United Nations was dead, one declared. "Not dead," said the Syrian delegate, "murdered." In the next days, Syrian demonstrators attacked the French and American embassies. Fifteen thousand Egyptians poured into the streets of Cairo, fighting the police and stoning the British consulate. Lebanese and Iraqis stormed United States offices. Many Arab people saw the hand of the United States behind the partition plan. A Palestinian leader commented: "We do not recognize Jewish and American illusions about partitioning Palestine. We are fighting an advance guard of America."

## Clearing the Land of Palestinians: The 1948 War

"I noticed the tears in the eyes of our people. There was a bitter feeling in every heart. Some of the old men were willing to die fighting for our land. But they were without arms."

—Fouad Yasin, Palestinian radio announcer

On November 29, 1947, the night partition was announced in Palestine, Zionist settlers danced through the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. When some dancers burst into David Ben-Gurion's study, he hurried them away and returned to poring over military maps. The maps showed that over one-half of all Jewish settlers lived in three major cities, while the Palestinian Arabs lived in every city and in Arab villages throughout Palestine.

Ben-Gurion had already ordered a secret mobilization of all soldiers in the Zionist army, the Haganah, and in the Palmach, the assault troops of the Haganah. Earlier in November, four special agents had departed for Europe with three million dollars of credits raised in the United States. Their mission was to buy rifles, machine guns,

airplanes and artillery. In the outlying kibbutzim, secret arms factories, built from smuggled materials supplied by American Zionists, turned out small arms. Zionists were negotiating with Czechoslovakia for a larger arms purchase. Ben-Gurion was preparing a military offensive designed to seize much more of Palestine for the Zionist state than the United Nations had assigned to it. He called this offensive “Plan Dalet.” It would begin as soon as enough British troops withdrew from Palestine.

For Palestinian Arabs, the threat of war hung heavy in the air the night of partition. No arms were arriving from Europe for the Palestinians. The weapons they possessed dated from the 1936 rebellion. In all of Jaffa there were only eight machine guns. The British Emergency Laws, enacted during the 1936 Palestinian rebellion, still condemned to death any Palestinian found with a gun. Two small Palestinian guerrilla groups had continued to train in the hills throughout the Second World War. The only central leadership, the Arab Higher Committee, had been banished ten years ago. Recently re-formed, it no longer had the power to rally Palestinians behind it. The Palestinians faced a Zionist military that was perhaps the best led and best organized of all European settler armies.

In December 1947, the British announced that they would withdraw from Palestine by May 15, 1948. Palestinians in Jerusalem and Jaffa called a general strike against the partition. Fighting broke out in Jerusalem’s streets almost immediately. The Zionists were prepared to seize every opportunity to escalate the fighting. A lightning war was their only hope to defeat the Palestinians, who outnumbered the Zionists and lived in all parts of the partitioned country. A lengthy battle could only favor the Palestinians. Violent incidents mushroomed into all-out war.

Palestinians fought in small guerrilla bands, in village militias, or in the ranks of the Arab Liberation Army, a poorly armed force of a thousand Palestinians and three thousand volunteers from other Arab countries. The people of Palestine supported the fighters as best they could. Women organized groups called “daisy chains” to smuggle arms into the hills, to dig trenches and to organize medical supplies. Casualties were high. By February the Palestinians were outmatched with 25,000 Arabs fighting 50,000 Zionist troops.

## **Plan Dalet**

Throughout the winter of 1948 Haganah and Irgun soldiers carried out night raids on Arab villages. The Haganah defined the purpose of these raids as “not to punish but to warn.” Soldiers attacked quiet villages that had not been involved in the fighting to demonstrate “the Haganah’s long arm.” Haganah troops entered a village and silently placed dynamite around the stone houses, drenching the wooden doors and window frames with gasoline. Then, stepping back, they opened fire with their guns. The sleeping inhabitants died in the explosion and fire that destroyed their homes.

Such “warnings” caused some villagers to flee from their homes, but often only to another part of Palestine, not far enough away for the Zionists. The Zionist goal was to “clear the land” of its Arab inhabitants, but Palestinian leaders urged the people to stay and fight. In March Ben-Gurion put Plan Dalet—an all-out attack throughout the whole of Palestine—into effect. At the heart of his strategy was the systematic expulsion of the Palestinian Arab population. As long as most Palestinians stayed in Palestine, the Zionists could not win a decisive victory.

The attack began with the use of psychological terror. On March 28, the Zionist Free Radio broadcast this warning in Arabic: “Do you know it is a sacred duty to inoculate yourselves against cholera, typhus and similar diseases, as it is expected that such diseases will break out heavily in April and May among Arabs in the cities?”

Such broadcasts were not directed at Palestinian soldiers. Their purpose was to create fear in villagers, farmers and families in the cities and encourage them to flee. At Deir Yassin, a small Arab village near Jerusalem, psychological terror turned into a full-fledged massacre.

Deir Yassin was a quiet village. Its inhabitants had cooperated with the Jewish Agency and kept Arab troops out of their town. On April 9, Irgun soldiers entered the village and told the residents they had fifteen minutes to abandon their homes. Then the bands of soldiers attacked. In a few hours, the Irgun had murdered two hundred fifty-four people—men, women and children—in cold blood. Over the protests of the Jewish Agency, Jacques de Reynier of the International Red Cross visited Deir Yassin a few days later. He met the soldiers of the Irgun in the process of “cleaning up.”

This is what he reported: "I found some bodies cold. Here the "cleaning up" had been done with machine guns, then hand-grenades. It had been finished off with knives, anyone could see that...As the [Irgun] gang had not dared to attack me directly, I could continue. I gave orders for the bodies in this house to be loaded on the truck, and went into the next house, and so on. Everywhere, it was the same horrible sight. I found only two more people alive..."

The Irgun took the few survivors to Jerusalem and paraded them through the streets as crowds spit upon them. Although the Jewish Agency piously condemned the massacre at Deir Yassin, the Irgun was admitted to the Joint Command of the military with the Haganah the same day. The actions of the Irgun served the Zionist plan well. The destruction of Deir Yassin, which was skillfully publicized by the Zionists, sparked an exodus of Palestinian families who feared a similar fate. During the joint Irgun-Haganah attack on the Palestinian quarter of Haifa, the news of the massacre which had occurred twelve days before convinced many to flee.

On April 21, 1948, the British commander of Haifa advised the Zionists that he was withdrawing his troops. He did not tell Palestinian leaders. At sundown the Zionists began their attack on Haifa Arabs with Davidka mortars, which hurled sixty pounds of explosives about three hundred yards into the crowded Arab quarter. Barrel bombs, which were casks filled with gasoline and dynamite, rolled down the narrow alleys and crashed, creating an inferno of flames and explosions. Haganah loudspeakers broadcast "Horror recordings" that filled the air with the shrieks and anguished moans of Arab women, interrupted by a booming sorrowful voice that called out in Arabic, "Flee for your lives! The Jews are using poison gas and atomic weapons!" As Palestinians fled their city, the Irgun commander reported that they cried, "Deir Yassin! Deir Yassin!"

Within a week the same "psychological blitz," as the Zionists called it, emptied the port city of Jaffa, a city designated as part of the Arab state. Only three thousand of the eighty thousand Arabs of Jaffa remained. Jon Kimche, a Zionist historian, reported that the soldiers "commenced to loot in wholesale fashion...Everything that was movable was carried from Jaffa [and] what could not be taken away was smashed." From the fertile fields of Galilee to the fortress city of Acre, the Zionist campaign drove the Palestinians from their homes, their villages, their lands. The several hundred thousand who remained lived under Zionist occupation.

During that fateful April of 1948, eight out of the thirteen major Zionist military attacks on Palestinians occurred in the territory granted to the Arab state by the United Nations. By May 15, as the British ended their long rule over Palestine, three hundred thousand Palestinians were exiles, living hand-to-mouth in the Jordan Valley, Lebanon and Syria. The Jewish Agency cynically announced that the exodus of Arabs from Palestine was due to "flight psychosis."

## **"Proclaim the State, No Matter What"**

On Passover, April 24, Ben-Gurion had announced at a victory feast in Jerusalem: "We stand on the eve of a Jewish State." He had already set the date in his mind. As the British ended their rule on May 15, 1948, the Zionists would begin theirs. Ben-Gurion planned to cut off the lingering debate in the UN about the partition plan by confronting the world with the actual existence of the new state. Chaim Weizmann, the elder statesman of Zionism, telegraphed his advice: "Proclaim the state, no matter what else ensues."

Zionist leaders approached President Truman and worked out the details of U.S. recognition. At 6:00 p.m. on May 15, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the existence of Israel. Eleven minutes later, President Truman cabled American recognition of the Jewish state.

As Committees for Palestine called meetings and demonstrations throughout the Arab countries, Arab leaders knew they had to respond. The Arab League hastily called for its member countries to send regular army troops into Palestine. They were ordered to secure only the sections of Palestine given to the Arabs under the partition plan. But these regular armies were ill-equipped and lacked any central command to coordinate their efforts. King Abdullah of Trans-Jordan, the official commander-in-chief, was busy negotiating with British and Zionist leaders for a slice of Palestine. Abdullah wanted to attach to his own kingdom any Palestinian territory not occupied by the Israelis. He promised that his troops, the Arab Legion, the only real fighting force among the Arab armies, would avoid fighting with Jewish settlements. Under Abdullah's self-serving leadership the armies of the Arab League had little effect. A few individual units—most notably those of young Egyptians—fought fiercely, but often with

no support from their generals. Yet Western historians record this as the moment when the young state of Israel fought off the “overwhelming hordes” of five Arab countries!

In reality, the Israeli offensive against the Palestinians intensified. British Major Edgar O’Ballance described the new phase: “The Arab inhabitants were ejected and forced to flee into Arab territory, as at Ramleh, Lydda and other places. Wherever the Israeli troops advanced into Arab country, the Arab population was bulldozed out in front of them.”

On July 11, 1948, Moshe Dayan led a jeep commando column into the town of Lydda. Rifles, Sten guns and submachine guns blasted at everything that moved. Within minutes, the streets were silent, strewn with corpses of men, women and children. The next day, the Israelis seized the adjoining town of Ramleh. Loudspeakers announced that all Arabs had 48 hours to leave. Israeli soldiers stripped each person of all belongings—even food—at the bridges leaving the town. As Israeli troops sacked the town, a hundred thousand Palestinians began a painful march into exile. For three days, without food and water, the refugees walked in the sweltering sun towards the Trans-Jordanian hills. Many old people and children died of thirst.

## **“An Insuperable Problem”**

When the fighting persisted and it became clear that the partition plan had broken down, the United Nations sent a mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, to try to arrange a cease-fire and to secure the rights of the Palestinians. Numerous cease-fires which he arranged broke down as the Israelis continued their drives into Arab territory. Bernadotte urged Israel to allow the Palestinians to return to their homes. Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Shertok replied: “On the economic side, the reintegration of the returning Arabs into normal life...would present an insuperable problem.”

In reality, the “problem” was that the new state depended on the homes, land and shops left behind by the exiled Palestinians. New Jewish settlers were already arriving, moving into Arab houses and reopening Arab businesses. The wealth of the exiled Palestinians—80 percent of the land, 50 percent of the citrus groves, 90 percent of the olive groves, and ten thousand shops—was needed to build the new state of Israel.

Bernadotte continued to press for Palestinians’ right to return. His reports documented the forced flight of the Palestinians and their desire to return once peace was established. Finally on September 17, members of the Stern Gang assassinated Bernadotte. Waves of shock rippled through the United Nations and Western capitals at the news of his murder. New pressure mounted on Israel to accept a cease-fire. On January 7, 1949, a prolonged cease-fire went into effect. The new State of Israel encompassed 80 per cent of Palestine! The key to victory had been the forcible eviction of the Palestinian Arab population. Chaim Weizmann observed that the exodus of the Palestinians was a “miraculous simplification of our tasks.”

The Western world celebrated the birth of the new state. In America, Senators, members of Congress and the President applauded the “miracle of Israel.” A rush of books and articles, like the best-seller *Exodus*, told the story of Israel as the victory of a valiant and intelligent people, the Israelis, over hordes of dark-skinned, dishonest and backward Arabs. The story had the drama of the popular Hollywood Westerns that dominated the American screen. It also had the same point: the attack on native people and the conquest of their land, whether Palestinian or Indian, was not only legitimate, but courageous and inspiring. It was a useful lesson to teach as American leaders launched the Cold War. It helped mobilize the American people behind the U.S. drive to seize the resources of other countries. An atmosphere of fear and hatred of “backward and uncivilized” people, from the Koreans to the Arabs, gripped the country. Israel represented a victory that both recaptured America’s pioneer days and gave Israel’s American supporters an emotional stake in the U.S. domination of the Middle East.

The truth about the Palestinian Arabs lay buried in this avalanche of propaganda. In 1959 an American Jew, Nathan Chofshi, who had settled in Palestine in 1908, wrote to the American Jewish Newsletter, protesting an article by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Kaplan had argued that Arab leaders told the Palestinians to leave.

Chofshi wrote, “If Rabbi Kaplan really wanted to know what happened, we old Jewish settlers in Palestine who witnessed the flight could tell him how and in what manner we, Jews, forced the Arabs to leave cities and villages

which they did not want to leave of their own free will. Some of them were driven out by force of arms; others were made to leave by deceit, lying and false promises.”

Over seven hundred fifty thousand Palestinians had been driven out of Palestine to create the state of Israel. King Abdullah annexed the Palestinian West Bank to Transjordan, renaming his enlarged kingdom Jordan. King Farouk of Egypt took over the administration of the Gaza Strip. Palestine disappeared from Western maps.

The people of Palestine did not forget. The memories of the terror of the spring of 1948 mingled with the memory of other springs in Palestine, when the land was theirs and grew under their care. Ghassan Kanafani, an exiled Palestinian writer, described the flight of his family from Jaffa in a story called *The Land of Sad Oranges*. He recalled:

“the long queue of lorries, leaving the land of oranges far behind and spreading out over the winding roads of Lebanon. Then I began to weep, howling with tears. As for my mother, she eyed the oranges silently and all the orange trees my father had left behind to the Jews were reflected in his eyes; all the wholesome orange trees he had acquired one by one were visible in his face and glistened through the tears he could not check, even in front of the officer. When we arrived in Sidon that afternoon, we had become homeless.”

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