

Nasser and the Palestine War

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Britain went through several lean years after World War II: everyday life in the country was plagued by the shortage of fuel in addition to rationing, queueing and privation. British strategic and political interests would have demanded Palestinian territories to stay under British control but the policy regarding Palestine failed forcing the British to withdraw their mandate in February 1947 and transfer the supervision of the Palestinian problem to the UN. In the subsequent twelve months the British were almost completely occupied with the task of withdrawing troops from India, Ceylon, Burma and, finally, Palestine.

Neither of the opposing parties in Palestine seemed to be willing to reach an agreement: Palestinian Arabs did not have a reason, while Zionists were not in the position to compromise. Jewish and Arab interests diverged to such a degree that solution based on general consensus was widely thought to be impossible.

The Palestine affair was discussed at an UN General Assembly meeting in autumn 1947. The newly founded worldwide organisation passed one of the most significant decisions of the recent historical past on 29th November 1947 with thirty-three votes in favour, thirteen against and ten abstaining: Palestine was split into an Arab and a Jewish state. UN Resolution No. 181 set the territory of the Jewish State in fourteen thousand square kilometres (fifty-five percent of Palestine) with a population of half a million Jewish people, four hundred thousand Arabs and an entirely disregarded Bedouin community counting several ten thousand. The Arab State was to be established on a territory of eleven thousand square kilometres (forty-five percent of Palestine), populated by seven hundred twenty-five thousand Arabs and ten thousand Jews. Jerusalem and surroundings, counting approximately a hundred thousand Jews and as many Arabs was given neutral status as an international zone (*corpus separatum*). The proposal was drawn up with a blind eye to demographic circumstances as well as issues of land possession and the officials who layed it out exhibited a highly creative way of handling statistical data. At the time the resolution was passed as little as six percent of Palestinian land had been bought by Jewish people. Moreover, it was not Palestinians but Syrians and Lebanese owning real estate in Palestine that topped the list of sales.

Due to the fact that two-thirds of Palestine's population were Arabs the independent Jewish state should have been established as a Jewish *and* Arab one. Zionist leaders on the other hand only considered the forming of a sovereign *Jewish* state as an acceptable option. Ben Gurion, wishing to establish an independent state for ten million Jews saw the territory proposed in the UN resolution as unacceptably small. From the very start he conceived of the borderlines set by the UN General Assembly as encompassing but a core of a country for all Jews, which will perforce have to be expanded. The UN settlement plans were

accepted by the Jewish Agency, which, under the leadership of Ben Gurion pressed for the rapid establishment of a state. Although Zionists were dissatisfied with the division lines contained in the UN resolution, they considered them sufficient to anchor future plans. This means that the passing of UN General Assembly resolution No. 181 coincided with the birth of a programme in Zionist leaders' minds to expand territorial boundaries. They considered expansion inevitable; wars had to be faced even if they demanded major sacrifice from the Jewish population.

14th May 1948 was arguably the most important day in the 20th century history of the Middle East. As in April 1948 the UN General Assembly did not outrule options of settling the Arab-Zionist controversy in a way other than the division of Palestine, Ben Gurion quickly made the decision to declare independence. In the afternoon of that day the president of the Jewish Agency announced the formation of Israel State in the building of the Museum of Ethnography in Tel-Aviv and ceremonially read the Declaration of Independence. In establishing a sovereign Jewish state the Zionist politician turned the two-thousand-year dream of all Jewish people into reality – a dream that Theodor Herzl had also envisaged half a century before. After the historic event he nevertheless spoke the words: "it is not joy that I feel but only deep anguish". This statement by Ben Gurion, who excelled in military as well as diplomatic skills clearly points to the fact that the Israeli leader was well aware of the existential danger threatening his country and prepared himself for bitter fights commencing in the region where violence would reach all. Arabs and Jews both knew that the other party was not going to implement the policy of 'eyes shut' i.e. they would not be tolerant of the other. On the formation of the Jewish state such forces were about to be set free that would be very difficult to squeeze back into their bottle.

At the same time, Ben Gurion could certainly expect the fragmentation of Arab forces due to the ever-present division and feud within the Arab world. Zionists had the option of striking individual deals with Arab leaders who were filled with their own individual ambitions. One of the major personalities in this respect was Abdullah, the Emir of Transjordan, who maintained good connections with the Jewish in Palestine from the beginning of the 1920s.

Ben Gurion declared the Jewish state (and became its first Prime Minister) without settling the borders. In assigning fifty-five percent of Palestine's territory to the Jews, UN resolution 181 dated 29th November 1947 had already disregarded the situation of the Jewish accounting for a third of the population in Palestine while owning a mere six percent of the land. The policy of unlimited Jewish immigration spearheaded by Ben Gurion made it impossible for the Israeli state to remain contained within the borders set in the UN resolution.

As soon as the day following the declaration of the Jewish state, while the last British troops were leaving the territory of the country upon termination of the British mandate at dawn, five Arab states (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan and Iraq) attacked Israel, which defined itself as a Jewish state. When Arab regular forces advanced into the territory of Palestine, armed conflict had already developed between Zionists and Arab volunteer units arriving to help Palestinian Arabs. The first major struggle of two peoples for one holy land, which in reality unfolded as a multi-dimensional clash of several forces, nevertheless started then and there.

Several historians claim that the Arab invasion commenced at the behest of the British. The Arab offensive doubtlessly coincided with British imperialist interests and aims; moreover, the Arab military column, the Arab Legion counting eight to ten thousand soldiers operated under British command (gen. Sir John Bagot Glubb and his staff) and received British financial backing. Britain did not merely behave neutrally concerning the issue of Arab armed offensive but actively supported it. The British saw the simplest way of returning to Palestine by watching Arabs and Israelis mutually exhausted in fighting to the point that they themselves invite back British presence. These hopes would fail.

Israel's first war against the Arabs would have demanded mobilising significant military forces on the Arab side but Arab political leaders underestimated the military prowess of the Jewish state and overrated their own. When the war broke out statesmen of neighbouring populous Arab countries were convinced that their armies were better equipped and far larger than the Israeli one and thus they would quickly annihilate Israel. Their overconfidence shrank within a few weeks when it became clear that they were unable to organise arms supplies from abroad and it was Israel rather than the Arabs that managed to achieve significant military supremacy both in numbers of forces and their concentration. Even fortune of war worked for the Zionists.

The first phase of the war lasted for little less than a month. The Jewish state, which seemed to have worse chances for victory proved to be able to defend itself. The first truce came into effect on 11th June. With the Jewish state only freshly established, Prime Minister Ben Gurion was already concentrating on expansion, most daring images of regional aggression floating before his eyes. A diary entry from 21st May 1948 reads: "Then, when we have broken the strength of the Arab Legion and bombed Amman, we would also liquidate Transjordan; after which, Syria would fall. And if Egypt still dared to make war on us, we would bomb Port-Said, Alexandria and Cairo."¹ Menachem Begin leading a Zionist terror organisation named Irgun also declared at the beginning of the war that all armed conflict should be made use of in order to create Greater Israel. The first armistice did not last long. During the renewed fights in the first half of July the Israelis, who had largely improved their military potential with arms purchased from Czechoslovakia won several victories over the Arabs. David Ben Gurion's political 'examination piece' proved to be viable and resulted in significant territorial growth: Israel managed to double its area during the war, i.e. it now possessed three-quarters of the territory of mandatory Palestine.

Israel not only proved to be capable of driving out invaders in the few weeks of fighting but also managed to launch counter-attacks against Arab territories as fights acquired an increasingly defensive nature for the Arab side.

Nasser was thirty years old at this time; he had married and started a family a few years before. The talented Egyptian officer was not immediately involved in military operations at that time. He only knew of World War II battles between the Germans and the British in North Africa from hearsay.

Despite the fact that the Egyptian staff of officers had opposed entering the war from the outset in May the leaders of the country sent a part of the fifty-five-thousand-strong regular forces (ten thousand soldiers) to the Palestinian front. Egypt, being the leading state

¹ Ben Gurion's diary entry quoted by Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben Gourion, le prophète armé*. Fayard, Paris, 1966. 183-184.

of the Arab League could not avoid involvement in this armed conflict simply on the ground of prestige. At the same time the war proved a convenient occasion for King Farouk to send politically unreliable officers to far-off battlefields in service of a noble cause: the defence of Palestinian Arabs.²

Following the declaration of the Jewish state Egypt deployed nine battalions against Israel. The first Egyptian troops advanced into the Negev Desert on 15th May. Within the Egyptian ranks there were several young officers who would play an important role in the birth of the new Egypt. A few names are Gamal Abdel Nasser, Abdul Hakim Amer, and Zacharia Mohieddin. Second-in-command of Egyptian troops sent to Palestine was none other than general Ali Muhammad Nagib (1901–1984), who headed the Revolution Command Council in 1952 and became the first president in the Republic of Egypt. At the time of the Palestinian war Nasser cooperated with the Society of the Muslim Brothers; its founding leader, Hassan al-Banna had mobilised his armed volunteers against the Jewish state before the termination of the British mandate in Palestine. The Arab League, whose secretary general Pasha Azzam was on friendly terms with Hassan al-Banna took on funding the fighters and the medical staff of the organisation. Due to the good contacts dating back earlier, in the Egyptian revolution on the night of 22nd July 1952 Nasser could rely on the Muslim Brothers who in turn were widely supported by the populace.

Israel managed to check and repulse Arab offensives launched a day after its declaration of independence. The first truce had not expired when the Egyptian army restarted its offensives against Israeli troops. The Egyptian operation however lost thrust within a week and the latest Israeli advance was only halted by the Egyptians on 18th July in the area of Falluja. The same day the second armistice came into effect.

Three months after mutual consent to the UN Security Council's armistice resolution the united Israeli armed forces launched a new military operation (*Operation Joav*) to control the Negev Desert in mid-october 1948; this time there were twenty thousand Egyptian soldiers on the opposing side. The southern wing of the Israeli army commanded by Colonel Yigal Allon³ where Yitzhak Rabin also served was aiming at driving back Egyptian forces previously attacking Israel from the south. As operations conducted by other Arab countries had largely finished, and both regular and irregular Arab forces had invariably been defeated by the Israelis, the Jewish state concentrated all its military power on Egypt. The Egyptian army, although greatly extended in number, proved to be unable to carry out successful offensives against Israel in order to assert political aims.

Nasser spent part of the second truce in Cairo and arrived back in Palestine at the beginning of September. Meantime his troops had been commanded to defend the Falluja junction of primary strategic significance. A few days after the Israeli offensive commenced in October the Israeli army occupied Beersheba; it also encircled and immobilised the last Egyptian troops forced to withdraw from the Negev at Falluja, halfway between Jerusalem and Gaza. The Israelis counted on the Egyptians surrendering themselves but the blockaded troops decided to resist. Their decision was declared by Nasser to the Israeli officer arriving to negotiate. The Israeli troops managed to repulse the

² Robert Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography*. Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1971. 75-76.; Mohammed Neguib, *Egypt's Destiny*. Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1955. 15.

³ Yigal Allon had been commander of the most significant Zionist armed organisations: *Palmah* and *Haganah*.

exhausted Egyptian army to the Gaza Strip in the beginning of November but the most violent fights unfolded in the area of Falluja in November. Nasser exhibited exceptional military capabilities as staff major of the encircled Egyptian sixth battalion and acquired the nickname *The Tiger of Falluja* within the Egyptian army. On 28th December Israeli forces were successful in penetrating Egyptian defence lines at two points and annihilated the strongest centres of Egyptian resistance.

The Israeli offensive launched in the last week of December (*Operation Horev*) proved to be so successful that the Israeli army found itself marching on the territory of Egypt in the Sinai. The truce marking the end of the first Arab-Israeli war came into effect at the beginning of January, after Israeli soldiers had been driven back to the territory of the former Palestine by Britain and the United States on the request of King Farouk.

Following the Falluja crisis two young officers with military career ambitions represented opposing Israeli and Egyptian regular armies: captain Nasser on the Egyptian and Yitzhak Rabin on the Israeli side conducted negotiations on the demilitarisation of the area.

King Farouk and his government were unable to counter Jewish expansion at the cost of Arab territories and also failed to protect the interests of Palestinian Arabs. Indeed, it was Egypt's leaders who were the main retarding factor in the matter, filling their people's and soldiers' ears with empty promises. The Egyptian army was commanded to Palestine with an overwhelming sense of self-confidence and an utter lack of training and combat experience. The level of their military preparedness was exceptionally low; certain troops were deployed without any previous training. Problems of arms supplies and malfunctioning remained unresolved. Ammunition and arms supplies were quickly exhausted. After a few years, Nasser recalls the days of the worst fights: "Faluja was surrounded, and the enemy was subjecting it to a terrific air and artillery bombardment. I used often to say to myself: Here we are in these foxholes, surrounded, and thrust treacherously into a battle for which we were not ready, our lives the playthings of greed, conspiracy and lust, which have left us here weaponless under fire."⁴ These problems, as mentioned both by Nasser and Nagib in their memoirs characterised the war from the very beginning. The Egyptian army had to experience chaos resulting from inadequate preparation on a daily basis. "Neguib recalls that when he got beyond the Egyptian railhead he had to hire local trucks from the Palestinian Arabs to carry his troops forward and was compelled to leave behind some six-pounder guns because there were no tractors to tow them. [...] During the first truce when both sides were trying frantically to buy arms on the international black market to get round the United Nations official arms embargo, the Egyptians found themselves supplied with Italian grenades that blew up in the thrower's face, with defective Spanish field-guns and 1912 Mauser rifles."⁵

When the Egyptian troops were defeated during the attacks on Negba, Nasser suffered minor injury and was hospitalised. Confronted with conditions there he jotted down the following: "I should think a thousand times before sending our soldiers to war. I should

⁴ Gamal Abdul Nasser, *Egypt's Liberation. The Philosophy of the Revolution*. Public Affairs Press, Washington, DC, 1955. 23.

⁵ Robert Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography*. Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1971. 77-78.; Mohammed Neguib, *Egypt's Destiny*. Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1955. 20 and 17.

only do it if it was absolutely necessary, if the fatherland was threatened, and if nothing could save it but the fire of battle.”⁶

The 1948 defeat suffered by the Egyptian army in Palestine was not only due to the fact that soldiers were deployed unprepared or that lack of supplies was permanent because of financial corruption. The Arab military failure was largely caused by a lack of unified political and strategic aims; the Arab invasion was not coordinated and there was no intention to establish cooperation between Arab troops. The Arabs did not agree on a *single* stratagem with a *sole* command centre.

Although in the autumn of 1944 the leaders of Arab states agreed on Egyptian initiative to document their links in a treaty and as a result the Arab League was formed in Cairo on 22nd March 1945, they did not establish common political guidelines, neither did they compile an unified programme of action. The organisation did not prove to be efficient in its functioning. In the first years only Lebanon and Syria were entirely independent Arab League member states. Egypt, Jordan and Iraq were in fact nominally independent while Britain was trying to keep a strict eye on them for last.

Transjordan, established by Secretary of State for the Colonies Sir Winston Churchill in 1923 had interests that diverged greatly from those of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq but there was intense competition for power between the leaders of those four latter countries, as well. The Arabs did not pay attention to the fact that the challenge they had to live up to had an entirely new face. In order to efficiently combat the new opponent they would have needed a new type of leadership and close cooperation. The Israeli victory of 1948–1949 has to be seen against the underlying rivalry of Arab interest groups and a multi-factored, politically divided community plagued by internal feud. Arthur Goldschmidt clearly states in his fascinating work *A Concise History of the Middle East* that Abdullah, caught up in the dream of Greater Syria struck a deal with the Jews in 1948 to be able to annex part of Palestine as a step toward incorporating Lebanon and Syria into his state. This plan was backed by a certain part of the population in the area. The likewise Hashemite Iraqi royal family was also in favour of Greater Syria and Arab nationalism as long as rule was placed with Baghdad. On the other side, Kings Farouk and Ibn Saud were oblivious to Hashemite demands. Egypt with its large population, a major role in education and the media was reserving the leading role for itself. Egypt also gave the Arab League its centre and the person of secretary general. The idea of a strong Hashemite ruler with plans of expansive policy was not favoured by Farouk or Ibn Saud, who had driven the Hashemite out of Arabia. Most military commanders and ministers in Egypt hoped that war could be diverted as late as May 1948. In the end the conflict was largely the result of enthusiasm among the Muslim Brothers, King Farouk’s personal aspirations and a fear that the country would lose face if it did not act up on the previously passed threats. Emir Abdullah was driven to send in his troops against his previous promises to Jewish envoys so that he could partake of the glory brought by a potential victory. When it came to shooting, Egyptians and Arab Legion fighters crossed each other’s paths. While there was a prospect of victory over Israel in

⁶ Robert Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography*. Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1971. 79.; Georges Vaucher, *Gamal Abdul Nasser et son Équipe I*, Julliard, Paris, 1959. 191.; Gamal Abdul Nasser, *Toute la Vérité sur la Guerre de Palestine*. Cairo, 1955. 18.

1948 Arabs competed with each other for land and glory. When they were gradually driven back, they made a row over responsibility for failure. In the meantime, the cause of Palestinian Arabs came to be neglected.⁷

Aid given to Israel by Jewish communities in the United States was a significant contributing factor to Arab defeat in Palestine. The Soviet Union also helped to arm Israel by means of weapons delivered from Czechoslovakia. The Soviet arms business did not make distinctions between clients from the Middle East. Egypt purchased large quantities of military equipment and arms from the Soviet Union as early as February and March 1948, before the first war broke out.⁸ At the same time, large deliveries of weapons and military equipment arrived into Israel from Eastern Europe during the months of the war. The previously largely divided armed troops were fused into an unified Israeli army under the leadership of Ben Gurion. Israel could also make use of the favourable circumstances of volunteers arriving in large numbers from the West and the determination shown by European Holocaust survivors.

The first Arab-Israeli war, viewed as a catastrophe (*nakba*) by Arab countries and a war of *independence* by Zionists was also used as an occasion for territorial gain in Israel. Borders were moved in favour of Israel as a result of the war with six thousand square kilometres of land added to the Jewish state. The victorious country, the Jewish state adopting the perspective of territorial expansion conquered large areas designated to Palestinians in UN resolution No. 181. Israel added a minor yet immensely significant operation to the independence war after combat was finished: the ink had not even dried on the ceasefire treaty signed with Egypt on the island of Rhodes on 24th February 1949 when Israeli troops tacitly backed by Abdullah breached international law and occupied an Arab settlement on the coast of the Gulf of Aqaba, which would develop into the port of Eilat (*Operation Udva*). This meant the Jewish state now had a foothold by the Red Sea, although it was not in the position to use this exit to the sea until the next Arab-Israeli war (1956) because Egypt was keeping the southern mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, the Tiran Straits, closed for Israeli ships.

The international zone planned in Jerusalem and its surroundings did not come into being. Blatantly disregarding the wishes of the international community Jerusalem's Old Town was seized by Transjordan, while the rest of the city passed under Israeli control. A few months after the treaties ending the war had been signed the Israeli government relocated its headquarters from Tel-Aviv into Jerusalem, which officially still had international status. 1948 also marks the period of the sharpest opposition between the Soviet Union and the US – a period to last until 1953. In this tense atmosphere Truman and Stalin consented to Israeli steps aimed at acquiring new Palestinian territories while the international community acknowledged Israel's rights to areas seized during the war. Israel was thus not forced by the superpowers or the international community to revert to territories designated in UN General Assembly resolution No. 181 dated 29th November 1947. As a result, Israel could claim seventy-seven percent of the former territory of mandatory Palestine. It became evident for Ben Gurion that significant political capital

⁷ Arthur Goldschmidt, *A Közel-Kelet rövid története*. Maecenas, Budapest, 1997. 296-297.

⁸ Elie Podeh – Onn Winckler (eds.), *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2004. 232.; Rami Ginat, *The Soviet Union and Egypt, 1945–1955*. Frank Cass, London, 1993. 104.

could be forged by military supremacy and victory and later he would advance this very principle within Israeli strategic thinking and planning.

In conclusion one single independent state, that of Israel was formed on the territory of Palestine in the chaotic circumstances of the age in the Middle East. The New Jewish state is an exceptional piece of history that has proved its viability from the moment it was born. In addition to this, it showed itself in full territorial size as the strongest political-military power of the region, looking upon defeated Arab countries and their leaders who now had to taste bitter failure with the victor's arrogance and sense of supremacy. Israel's history after this point is an almost uninterrupted triumphal march.

Dust churned up by the Palestinian war had settled again by early spring 1949 but the prospect of peace in the Middle East was still out of reach. If one reads into diary entries by Ben Gurion from the first four months of 1949 it becomes clear that the prime minister of the Jewish state was counting on another significant armed conflict following the first Arab–Israeli war, which came to an end in the beginning of January. Ben Gurion – whose political prowess is undebated, as opposed to his morals – knew that the attempt to annihilate Israel had completely failed but the struggle for Palestinian lands was far from over. The borders of Israel, which have not been sanctioned by international law but are recognised by the Western world as the effective borderlines of Israel, are the result of Israeli conquest. The Arabs on the other hand would not recognise either the Israel significantly grown in comparison to the 29th November 1947 UN resolution or the independent Jewish state itself. For this reason from the beginning of 1949 Ben Gurion was apprehensive of an emerging Arab leader capable of unifying those lands and Arabs annihilating Israel with joint forces. The Israeli prime minister envisaged a charismatic personality akin to a Prophet Muhammad or a Muhammad ‘Abd ibn al-Wahhab (1703–1792) or the Turkish Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) as the Arab leader but at the time the identity of the person eventually fulfilling that role was not to be foreseen.⁹ Little were the Israeli politicians aware of the leader heading the Egyptian Free Officers, who would – albeit with great delay – usher Egypt into the 20th century within a few years.

⁹ *Diary of David Ben-Gurion*, 29th January 1949, 27th April 1949, Ben-Gurion Archive, Sde Boker; Elie Podeh – Onn Winckler (eds.), *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2004. 75.