

FROM WAR

A STUDY OF THE CONFLICT
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COERCION
IN THE CONTEXT OF INTER-ARAB
AND BIG POWER RELATIONS.

PEGASUS 
NEW YORK

TO WAR

The Arab-Israeli
Confrontation,
1948-1967

Nadav Safran

DS 119.7

S32

COPYRIGHT © 1969
BY WESTERN PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUE CARD #69-27991

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THIS BOOK, OR PARTS
THEREOF, MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM
WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHERS.
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To "the tribe"

did not do this, and that they did not accept earlier British proposals of compromise, was undoubtedly due in part to their belief in the absolute Tightness of their cause. But this rigid posture was also the result of Uveak political organization and rivalries among the leadership, which put a premium on intransigence and exposed the advocates of greater flexibility to political loss.

Their absolutist moral position having failed of recognition, the Palestinian Arabs now fell back on the only alternative such positions usually leave their adherents and, with the assistance of the neighboring Arab countries, resorted to arms to prevent partition. The fortunes of the ensuing civil war were initially favorable to the Palestinian Arabs to such an extent that the United States government became convinced by March 1948 that partition, for which it had voted and lobbied, was impracticable, and "submitted to the General Assembly a proposal for a United Nations trusteeship over Palestine^ However, while the United Nations became entangled in a discussion of trusteeship and how it could be enforced, the Jews of Palestine, having received a shipment of Russian arms and enjoying greater freedom of action as British withdrawal from the country continued, launched a series of offensives that reversed the tide of the war, decisively defeated the Palestinian Arabs, and brought most of the area allocated to them by the partition plan under their control. On May 15, 1948, they proclaimed the establishment of their state, Israel, which was immediately recognized by the United States, Soviet Russia, and other nations.) The Jews barely had time to celebrate; for no sooner did they proclaim their state than armies of the neighboring Arab countries crossed the Palestine borders in another attempt to nullify the partition resolution by force. The Jewish-Arab conflict over Palestine thus became a war between the Arab states and Israel. The conflict entered a new phase.

The War of 1948 and Its Immediate Results

The War of 1948 constitutes an indispensable subject of study for anyone wishing to understand the intricacies of the Arab-Israeli conflict it inaugurated. We cannot, in the limited space we are able to devote to the subject, undertake the detailed analysis the war deserves. We will therefore have to content ourselves with a few comments and observations aimed at highlighting those aspects most pertinent to understanding its outcome as well as the subsequent attitudes of the participants regarding the problems it bequeathed.

The first observation is that, Transjordan aside, the leaders, soldiers,

politicians, writers, journalists, not to speak of the common people of the Arab countries, had had tftio contact with the Jewish community in Palestine and therefore had but a faint idea of its composition, organization, achievements, guiding ideals, aspirations, and strength. The Arab governments had been drawn into the diplomatic arena of the Jewish-Arab conflict only a short time before and did not expect to become directly involved in it militarily^ In any case they were so certain of their superior strength that they did not think it worthwhile to assemble more than perfunctory intelligence at the very last moment before the opening of hostilities. The Arabs' almost total lack of non-belligerent contact with the enemy's people and country, and the Israelis' only slightly less sweeping lack of contact with the Arab states, was to continue after the war and to provide what is probably a unique example of nations at war that had never known one another in peaceful commerce. This mutual ignorance accounts for much of the extreme fluctuation" in the sensitivities and mutual assessments of intentions that has been characteristic of the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The near-success of the Palestinian Arabs, despite their primitive equipment, training, and organization, in preventing the establishment of the Jewish state had convinced the Arab governments that a small regular force could succeed in destroying Israel. They therefore initially entrusted the task of military intervention to Transjordan's 6,000-strong Arab Legion alone. King Abdallah, who disposed of British advice and intelligence and whose British-officered Legion had served in routine duties under the Mandatory administration in Palestine, knew better than this. He therefore overtly accepted the mandate of his Arab League partners while he covertly maintained contact with the Jewish side with a view to arranging for the Arab Legion to take over only the parts of Palestine allocated to the Arabs by the partition plan.) In the event, this modified partition scheme was nullified by the sudden decision of Egypt's King Faruq, against the advice of his government, to send his troops to Palestine, which in turn induced the other Arab governments to follow suit and led to the adoption of a common plan of action aimed at destroying Israel or constricting it to the narrowest confines. However, the Arab governments remained under the impression that the task could be accomplished with only a small proportion of the forces they intended to engage. Their decision to participate jointly in the action was more a function of their mutual) suspicious-which in retrospect proved not to be misplaeed-than of { an estimate of military requirements. J

The woeful underestimation of the Jewish forces was due to the Ar-

abs' faulty, static conception of Israeli strength. Generalizing from their own condition, the Arab leaders thought of the Jewish forces *in being* at the time they decided to invade, in April 1948, as constituting the total forces they would have to confront. In fact, because of the extraordinary cohesion and spirit of the Jewish community of Palestine and the foresight of its leaders, who had accumulated vast stores of arms and equipment on ships in foreign ports ready to move as soon as British authority in Palestine ceased, these forces grew at a very rapid rate from one week to another. It is a rarely known fact that already by the beginning of the war, the Jews—numbering 700,000 in all—had far more men (and women) mobilized than the Arab countries, whose population was 40 times more numerous, and that they maintained and increased this numerical superiority in the course of hostilities. ^the Arabs had a chance of winning the war, it was in the first few weeks, when the Israeli forces were not yet adequately organized and had not yet received and assimilated all the equipment they had accumulated. Once they missed this chance, they were condemned to worse and worse defeat the longer the fighting persisted.

The Palestine war was not, like "normal" wars, a free contest of force; it was repeatedly interrupted by truces and cease fires imposed from the outside. Officially, the war lasted about eight months, from the time of the invasion to the time Egypt sued for an armistice. Actual fighting, however, took place during only about one-fourth of that time, in four intervals spread over the entire period) The course of the war is best described by reference to each of these phases separately.

The first phase of fighting lasted four weeks ^and was the most critical "3f the entire war. Although the Israelis had more men and women in the field at the time, the Arab armies had an overwhelming superiority in firepower, were much better organized, equipped, and supplied, had the strategic initiative, and were able to occupy key undefended positions. The Israeli troops had had little experience in large-scale operations, were awed by guns, tanks, and planes against which they had not yet fought, and their best units were already exhausted by six months of fighting in the civil war against the Palestinian Arabs. Victory was within reach of the Arab armies had they coordinated their battle plans and pursued them with determination. As it was, however, their ^isunity ^nabled the Israelis to switch their forces from one front to another to deal with critical situations as they developed, while the timidity of the Arab commanders enabled the Israelis to stem dangerous possibilities with little more than dash and tactical initiative^^ By the time the Arab governments felt Compelled to obey a United Nations injunction to keep a month-long truce, they had defi-

nately failed to win. Their armies had occupied most of the portions of Palestine allocated to the Arabs plus some small Jewish portions, the Arab Legion had Jerusalem under siege, and the Egyptian army had cut off the Negev by several thin and long lines of positions; but they had failed to destroy the Jewish fighting strength and to develop a serious threat to the heartland of the Jewish state in the coastal plain, {ezreel, and the upper Jordan valley. In fact, they had succeeded in capturing only half a dozen Israeli villages.

Both sides used the month-long truce to rest, reorganize, and reinforce their troops, replenish their supplies, and improve their equipment in spite of a United Nations embargo and the presence of supervisors intended to prevent the parties from altering the size and equipment of their forces. The Israelis, however, took much greater advantage of the respite than the Arabs. For one thing, they were much more (adept), from the White Paper days, at smuggling in men and equipment under the nose of supervisors than were the Arabs. For another thing, they already had equipment and men assembled in (Europe on which to draw, whereas the Arabs could only improvise.) Furthermore, they had considerable ^unutilized or underutilized reserves at home which they now mobilized and trained, whereas the Arab countries could only reshuffle their existing forces so as to allocate somewhat greater proportions of them for the forthcoming fighting—the bulk of the Arab forces during, before, and after the truce being tied to internal security tasks at home. Finally, the Israelis needed the time to organize their hastily ^established state and army and to rest their troops much more than the Arabs.^The results showed themselves clearly when the fighting was resumed.

The second phase) of fighting lasted for (ten days)) In the course of it, the Israelis were able to hold the Egyptians at bay in the south while they launched small attacks in the north and a major offensive in the center, against Transjordan's Legion. In the latter front, they made considerable territorial gains and opened the way to besieged Jerusalem; and though the Arab Legion eluded destruction, it was forced to pass to the defensive and fell under very heavy pressure from which it was saved only by a second cease-fire imposed by the United Nations.") Henceforth, the Arab Legion and the Iraqi contingent that worked in close cooperation with it had their hands full consolidating their positions for defense and were incapable of initiating any large-scale offensive operations. The Syrians had already been contained in the previous stage in a small bridgehead in eastern Galilee, and the Lebanese and irregular Palestinian and volunteer forces held on passively to a sizeable rectangle in central Galilee. The Egyptians remained the

most formidable force and still retained intact their lines that cut off the Negev.

The second cease-fire had no time limit. It was supposed to be final and to permit the settlement of the conflict by diplomatic means with the help of a specially appointed United Nations Mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte. However, in October 1948, fighting broke out for the third time, in this instance only between the Israelis and the Egyptians, except for some secondary Israeli action against the irregulars in central Galilee.

Hostilities began when the Egyptians responded to Israeli provocations that served to justify a major, carefully planned offensive designed to secure control of the Negev. The Israelis had been prompted to take this action by a proposal submitted by Bernadotte to modify the partition plan so as to give Israel all of Galilee (instead of Eastern Galilee only) and, in exchange, to give Jordan the Negev in addition to the Palestinian territory it already occupied. The Israelis believed that the Bernadotte plan rested on the military status quo between them and the Arabs, and they therefore set out to destroy it by altering the military situation. In a brief, energetic campaign in which they enjoyed the elements of surprise and initiative and were able to have at least tactical numerical superiority everywhere, the Israelis were able to shatter the Egyptian front, capture most of the Negev, trap the best third or fourth of the Egyptian forces into a pocket, and drive the rest of the Egyptian army back to an untenable arc stretching from Gaza to Asluj, some twenty miles south of Beersheba. In the north, the Israelis cleared all of central Galilee in a fifty-hour campaign and moved beyond the international borders of Palestine to occupy some Lebanese villages.

While the Egyptian army was being mauled by the Israelis, the other Arab armies stood perfectly still, thus marking the disintegration of the Arab coalition. The disintegration had already begun in the wake of the previous phase of fighting. Transjordan, which was the main beneficiary of the Bernadotte plan, had wanted to avoid that phase altogether by acquiescing to the prolongation of the first truce indefinitely; but the Egyptians, resentful of the proposal to give the Negev to Jordan, (had forced their partners to resume the fighting on the grounds that the Arabs could still win.) The actual fighting proved the Egyptians to be wrong, but it was Transjordan that paid for the mistake in significant territorial losses. Therefore, it decided to avoid further entanglement through the ill-considered actions of Egypt and, together with its Iraqi partners, remained passive while the Israelis acted against Egypt. As for the Syrians, they were in no position to do

much anyway, while the Lebanese and the irregulars, as we have seen, were not even allowed to sit still and lost Galilee to the Israeli attack.

The last phase of the fighting occurred in December 1948 and the first days of the next year and lasted about two weeks. (On November 16, 1948, the Security Council had ordered the parties to the conflict to conclude armistice agreements.) When the Egyptians refused, the Israelis launched an offensive intended either to secure their acquiescence or to complete the destruction of their army in Palestine. As in the previous offensive, the Israelis prepared their attack by provoking the Egyptians, and the Egyptians obliged by responding and giving the Israelis the legal cover for breaking the truce. As in the previous phase, the other Arab armies sat still while the Israelis concentrated their by now superior forces against the Egyptian front. The Israelis easily broke up the Egyptian lines and drove into the territory of Egypt proper in a flanking movement aiming at el Arish. The entire Egyptian army in Palestine was thus reduced to one complete pocket left over from the previous phase and another almost complete pocket extending from Gaza to el Arish which the Israelis were pounding. With nowhere to retreat, the Egyptians did some of their best fighting in the entire war, but they were saved from a heroic doom only by their government's timely agreement to conclude an armistice to end the war. The fighting stopped on January 7, 1949, and by February 24, the Egyptians had separately signed an armistice agreement with Israel. Other Arab governments followed suit: the Lebanese in March 1949, the Jordanians in April, and the Syrians in July. The Iraqis simply withdrew from Palestine, transferring their positions to the Jordanians, without concluding an armistice with Israel.

The war had far-reaching consequences that have affected the long-run politics of the area in many crucial ways as we shall see throughout this study. At this point we need to note three basic and immediate results: the reallocation of territory, the reshuffling of population, and Arab disunity.

The war involved a far-reaching modification of the United Nations partition plan. The Arab state envisaged by that plan failed to emerge, and the territory allocated to it was divided by the armistice agreements between Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. Israel got the largest share, some 2,500 square miles, which it formally annexed to the 5,600 square miles allotted to it by the partition plan. Transjordan acquired 2,200 square miles, which it formally annexed before the conclusion of an armistice, transforming itself into the state of Jordan. Egypt retained control of the Gaza Strip, some 135 square miles, which it held in the status of Egyptian-controlled territory. As for Syria and Lebanon, the

international frontiers of Palestine became the armistice lines between them and Israel. Jerusalem, intended by the partition plan to be under an international regime, was divided between Israel and Jordan. Several small demilitarized zones were created between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.

The war also involved a major reshuffling of population. Over 700,000 Palestinian Arabs who had lived in the area that came under Israeli control were displaced in the course of the fighting both before and after May 15, 1948, and ended up as refugees in Jordan (about 60 percent), the Gaza Strip (20 percent), and Syria and Lebanon (20 percent). The armistice agreements, while acknowledging the territorial changes, said nothing about the refugees; but a United Nations resolution of December 11, 1948, before any armistice had been concluded, had ruled that those among them wishing to return and live at peace with their neighbors should be allowed to do so. A major controversy has since raged whether the refugees had left the territory under Jewish control of their own accord or had been compelled to leave by threat and force, the implication always being that the answer to this question is a key determinant to the solution of the problem. This implication is unwarranted as we shall argue further on; nevertheless, it may not be irrelevant to address ourselves briefly to the question anyway.

On the basis of first-hand observation it can be said that until about the end of May-early June 1948, the refugees from areas under Jewish control *left*, and left in the face of persistent Jewish efforts to persuade them to stay. From that time on, they were *expelled* from almost all new territories that came under Israeli control. The number of refugees involved in each phase was approximately equal. The reason for this apparently odd behavior of Israelis and Arabs is rather simple. Until about the end of May, the Jews were not sure that they would be able to make the partition resolution stick in the face of actual and anticipated armed Arab hostility. They consequently had an interest in the Arabs' remaining in the territories under their control since this would have meant a *de facto* acceptance of partition on their part and would have discouraged the Arab states from attacking or pursuing the war energetically by placing so many "hostages" in Israeli hands. For exactly obverse reasons the Arab leaders, confident at this stage in the victory of the regular Arab armies, were eager to have the Palestinian Arabs leave what they considered temporarily Jewish-occupied territories, and urged them to do so. By the time it became clear, with the cease fire of June 11, 1948, that the Jewish state had survived the war, the motivations were completely reversed. The Palestinian Arabs,

unwilling to leave their homes and properties with no hope of return, now wanted to stay; while the Jews, having survived the attempt to destroy their state, thought it advantageous to have in it a homogeneous population and proceeded to push the Arabs out. ^

People with an incomplete knowledge of the facts have argued that even in the first stage the massacre perpetrated by the Irgun in Dir Yasin on April 9, 1948, had caused a stampede among the Palestinian Arabs, who did not differentiate between the dissident Irgun and the official Jewish Haganah, and that consequently it can be said that they fled under the threat of force, real or imagined, in both stages. But the fact is that much before Dir Yasin there were several *mutual* massacres—in the refineries and in Balad al-Shaykh notably—that were reported and exaggerated with relish in the press, and by the soldiery and population *of the side that committed them* without causing any stampede. Indeed, such are the instincts released by war that people on each side took "credit" loudly for massacres they never committed except in their imagination. Furthermore, after Dir Yasin and when the tide of the war had turned in favor of the Jews, the Arabs did not want to leave their homes in areas that fell to the Israeli forces notwithstanding the tales of real and alleged massacres, and had to be physically kicked out. The fear and terror argument, plausible as it sounds, and probably relevant in some individual instances, simply does not accord with the main facts.

A third and no less crucial result of the war was its crystallization of Arab disunity even in the face of a common enemy. The disunity was latent in the disparity of objectives sought by the various Arab countries. Transjordan, backed by Iraq, had wanted to intervene militarily in order to secure for itself the portions of Palestine allocated to the Arab state by the partition plan while Egypt, backed by Saudi Arabia, had sought to foil Transjordan's plan by nullifying partition altogether or securing as much territory as possible for a client Palestinian Arab state. These differences, temporarily papered over, began to manifest themselves as soon as the limits of the joint Arab military advance became apparent; then, Transjordan wanted to stop fighting and hold on to its gains while Egypt wanted to continue in the hope of achieving its objective. When the resumption of hostilities led to losses for Transjordan, it definitely decided to sit out the next round, leaving the Egyptian forces to be defeated and pushed out of the Negev. Finally, the quarrel broke into the open as Transjordan formally annexed the territory under its control while Egypt set up a Palestine Arab government in Gaza which laid claim to the entire country, and formally pulled out of the war by signing a *separate* armistice with Israel. This