

Endless War



Associated Press

Arab refugees in northern Israel on the road to Lbanon, November 1948.

By DAVID MARGOLICK
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It was not one of the celebrated moments of what the Israelis call the War of Independence and the [Palestinians](#) call Al Nakba, the Catastrophe. But it is one of the more arresting ones.

**1948
A History of the First Arab-Israeli War.**

By Benny Morris.
Illustrated. 524 pp. Yale University Press. \$32.50.

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In late August 1948, during a [United Nations](#)-sanctioned truce, Israeli soldiers conducting what they called Mivtza Nikayon — Operation Cleaning — encountered some Palestinian refugees just north of the Egyptian lines. The Palestinians had returned to their village, now in Israeli hands, because their animals were there, and because there were crops to harvest and because they were hungry. But to the Israelis, they were potential fighters, or fifth columnists in the brand new Jewish state. The Israelis killed them, then burned their homes.

As much as in any other scene in this meticulous, disturbing and frustrating book, the ineffable tragedy of Israelis and Palestinians resides in that brutal, heartbreaking image. On the one hand, the Jews were fighting for a safe haven three years after six million of them had been murdered. Undoubtedly some of those soldiers on patrol that day were survivors themselves, who'd lost their entire families in Europe and been handed rifles after washing ashore in Haifa or Tel Aviv.

And then there were the Palestinians, who had watched in horror over the past 75 years as these aliens first trickled, then poured, into their homeland. Were he an Arab leader, David Ben-Gurion once confessed to the Zionist official Nahum Goldmann, he, too, would wage perpetual war with Israel. "Sure, God promised it to us, but what does that matter to them?" he asked. "There has been anti-Semitism, the Nazis, [Hitler](#), Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They only see one thing: We have come here and stolen their country."

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The history of the 1948 war desperately needs to be told, since it's so barely understood or remembered and since so many of the issues that plague us today had their roots in that struggle. Much of that history is military: how the dramatically outnumbered Jews managed to defeat first the Arabs of Palestine, then the combined armies of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Syria, along with a smattering of Sudanese, Yemenites, Moroccans, Saudis, Lebanese and others. But arguably even more important than the soldiers are the civilians, specifically the 700,000 Palestinians who fled as the war raged. To understand the Palestinians who now fire rockets from Gaza or become suicide bombers from Nablus, it helps to know how their fathers and grandfathers wound up in Gaza or Nablus in the first place.

No one is better suited to the task than Benny Morris, the Israeli historian who, in previous works, has cast an original and skeptical eye on his country's founding myths. Whatever controversy he has stirred in the past, Morris relates the story of his new book soberly and somberly, evenhandedly and exhaustively. Definitely exhaustively, for "1948" can feel like 1948: that is, hard slogging. Some books can be both very important and very hard to read.

On Nov. 29, 1947, the United Nations [General Assembly](#) approved a plan to split Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The as yet unnamed Jewish state — or, as they say in Arabic, "Zionist entity" — would be tiny and divided: nearly half its citizens would be Arabs. Still, the Jews danced the hora that day on the streets of Tel Aviv. Ben-Gurion, who'd spent 40 years working toward that end, didn't join. "I could only think that they were all going to war," he said.

Within hours, he was right. Through the following May, when the British Mandate expired, civil war raged in Palestine. On paper and on the ground, the Palestinians had the edge: there were twice as many of them, they occupied the higher altitudes and they had friendly regimes next door. But isolated and outnumbered as they were, the Jews were far better organized, motivated, financed, equipped and trained than their adversaries, who were so fragmented — by geography and tradition and clan — that the term "Palestinian" was either unwarranted or at least premature. The war became a rout once the Jews took the offensive, and the Palestinian refugee crisis began (if "crisis" can be used to describe anything so chronic). On all this, Morris excels.

Transfer — or expulsion or ethnic cleansing — was never an explicit part of the Zionist program, even among its more extreme elements, Morris observes. The first Arabs who left their homes did so on their own, expecting to return once the Jews lost or the fighting stopped. The Jewish mayor of Haifa begged Arab residents to stay; Golda Meir, then head of the Jewish Agency Political Department, called the exodus "dreadful" and even likened it to what had befallen the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. While Jewish atrocities — notably, the infamous massacre at Deir Yassin — were very real, apocalyptic Arab broadcasts induced further flight and depicted as traitors those who chose to stay behind.

But once the Palestinian exodus began, Jewish leaders, struck by their good fortune, first encouraged it, then coerced it, then sought to make it stick. After all, the country needed room for Hitler's victims, as well as for those Jews fleeing Arab countries. And it also had to protect itself against insurrectionists in its midst. The Arabs, it was said, had only themselves to blame for the upheaval: they'd started it. And, Morris notes, the Jews were only emulating the Arabs, who'd always envisioned a virtually Judenrein Palestine.

Matters took another turn in May 1948, when the British left, Israel declared statehood and the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq marched in. Again, for all their numerical superiority, the Arabs were ill-equipped, inexperienced, unprepared. Some Arab leaders knew they were in over their heads. But given the anger over the Jewish state on their streets and their own tenuous hold on power, not to invade was even more perilous.

Within five and a half months, they were crushed, militarily and psychologically. But for international intervention, their defeat would have been still worse; the Egyptian army would have been annihilated. Only King Abdullah of Jordan, with the best

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(British-trained) army and limited objectives (not to destroy the Jewish state, but to annex the West Bank), got what he wanted. Meanwhile, Israel grew beyond the partition lines, gained more defensible borders and — by destroying Arab villages — further reduced the Palestinian population.

The Israelis, Morris says, committed far more atrocities than the Arabs, but this was partly a function of success: they had far more opportunities. But had the Israelis committed systematic ethnic cleansing, he argues, there would not be 1.4 million Arabs in Israel today. Of course, by promptly driving out their own Jews, the vanquished Arab leaders became the greatest Zionist recruiters of all.

Deep inside Morris's book is an authoritative and fair-minded account of an epochal and volatile event. He has reconstructed that event with scrupulous exactitude. But despite its prodigious research and keen analysis, "1948" can be exasperatingly tedious. The battlefield accounts, dense with obscure place names and weapons inventories, are so unrelenting, and unrelentingly dry, that you are grateful for the full-page maps (which themselves are hard to follow). The narrative cries out for air and anecdote and color.

Even Ben-Gurion himself isn't much illuminated, apart from occasional parenthetical potshots. (It seems the guy was megalomaniacal and hyperbolic.) But Morris shares Ben-Gurion's bleak outlook on the Israeli-Palestinian future. If anything, in fact, his views are even darker. "Whether 1948 was a passing fancy or has permanently etched the region remains to be seen," he concludes. In other words, by whatever name you call it, the 1948 war has yet to end — and the winner is still not clear.

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