



REVIEW ESSAY

REFABRICATING 1948

BENNY MORRIS

Fabricating Israeli History: The "New Historians," by Efraim Karsh. London: Frank Cass, 1997. 205 pages. Index to p. 210. \$35.00 cloth; \$17.50 paper.

In the late 1980s, a number of (relatively) young historians, most of them Israelis or ex-Israelis, published a series of books and articles about the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948 and about the years immediately preceding and following it. They used the massive documentation from Israeli and Western archives that had then become available and deployed a more objective mind-set than had hitherto been brought to bear on this period by Jewish and Arab scholars. The product, in the phrase coined by one of their number, was a "New Historiography" of Zionism and of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

The New Historiography came under instant attack by Israel's "Old Historians," who refused to abandon the classic, propagandistic Zionist narrative, and by most Palestinian scholars, who similarly stuck to their propagandistic guns. But since then, over the years, most Israeli and Arab academics in the field have read the works in question and have come round to accepting much if not most of this history.

Not, however, Efraim Karsh, an expatriate Israeli who teaches at the University of London. In the past, Karsh produced books (based almost solely on news clippings) of contemporary political-strategic analysis about Saddam Hussein, Soviet military involvement in Syria, and the Gulf War of 1990-91. Now, abandoning the role of armchair strategist, Karsh has made his first foray into the field of Middle Eastern history and finds almost everyone wanting. New Historians, Old Historians, New Old Historians—everyone comes under the axe in a display of boundless egalitarianism. At last, Karsh seems to be saying, someone has arrived on the historiographic scene who really understands what's what. Moshe Ma'oz, of the Hebrew University, no New Historian, is taken to task (pp. 81-82) for being "soft" on the Syrians; Emmanuel Sivan, a noted scholar of the contemporary Middle East and sometime adviser to Israeli governments, also of the Hebrew University, is lambasted as shoddy and inaccurate after having given *Fabricating* a poor write-up in Israel's leading literary supplement (Karsh promises a lot but does not deliver, was the gist of Sivan's review).¹ Gabriel Cohen and Aharon

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Kleiman of Tel Aviv University and the brothers Jon and David Kimche, one a British journalist and the other a former Mossad operative and director general of Israel's foreign ministry, are browbeaten for pioneering the theses that Britain did not seek Israel's destruction in 1948 and that Britain and Jordan's King 'Abdallah colluded in 1948 in sending the Arab Legion, Jordan's army, into Palestine to take over the West Bank (pp. 105-7, 147-49). The list of those subjected to Karsh's wrath is endless (and one can only wonder at the wellsprings of this bottomless anger). Karsh resembles nothing so much as a trigger-happy Wild West gunfighter out to make a name for himself, barging into the saloon of historiography with guns blazing. Inevitably, a legion of innocent bystanders bite the dust. (Or perhaps they are not so innocent, as most are identified in one way or another with Israel's liberal-Labor establishment—a mortal sin, perhaps?)

But Karsh's real targets are the New Historiography and two of its main practitioners, Avi Shlaim, professor of international relations at Oxford, and me. Karsh devotes a chapter (pp. 37-68) and the odd page to me and three chapters (pp. 69-193) and the odd aside to Shlaim. His introduction, first chapter, and conclusion (pp. 1-36 and 195-205) present, more generally, his views on the New Historiography—"the New Israeli Distortography" (p. 7), "phoney," and a "wholesale resort to foul play" (p. 205), to use some of Karsh's less violent turns of phrase. At the end of *Fabricating*, Karsh both trumpets his achievement and pithily conveys his approach:

This book has conclusively demonstrated that the self-styled "new historiographical" gospel is anything but new: Much of what it presents as "new" is effectively a reinvention of the wheel, whereas what is "new" is a distortion. The "new historians" have neither chartered [*sic*] new territory . . . nor made major factual discoveries, nor provided truly original interpretations, let alone developed novel historical methodologies or approaches (p. 195)

One can hardly argue with such a sweeping dismissal. But if there is nothing new in the New Historiography, why all the fuss? Why has it stirred such bitter debate among historians of the Middle East and Zionism, especially in Israel, where entire issues or large parts of issues of serious academic journals—*History and Memory*, *Teoriya U'Vikoret*, *Alpayim*, to name three—have recently been devoted to it? How is it that over the past decade no one—before Karsh—noticed that the New Historiography is based on falsification of documents? Why are the books and articles produced by the New Historians taught in all of Israel's universities and in a variety of courses and disciplines (history, sociology, political science, etc.), not to mention in many universities outside Israel?

THE ISSUE OF TRANSFER

But let us turn to Karsh's arguments. So far, I have published three books dealing with Israeli-Arab relations during the years 1947-56: *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1988); *1948 and After* (1990, rev. ed. 1994); and *Israel's Border Wars, 1949-1956* (1993, rev. ed. 1997). These works focus on the causes and character of the Arab exodus from Palestine during the 1948 war and on the low-level warfare along the borders leading to the Sinai/Suez war of 1956. In *Fabricating*, Karsh, while claiming to have "demolished" the whole oeuvre, in fact deals with only four pages of *Birth*. These pages tried to show that the Zionist leadership during 1937-38 supported a "transfer solution" to the prospective Jewish state's "Arab problem"—that is, that they supported expelling a large number of Palestine's Arabs. Karsh claims that I "systematically falsified" Zionist documents from the period to prove this point.

Karsh has a point—but it is not the one he makes. It is true that my treatment in *Birth* of pre-1948 "transfer thinking" among the Zionist leaders was superficial and restrictive. The subject requires a full-scale inquiry, covering the period from the 1880s until 1947, to determine the importance of the transfer idea in evolving Zionist thought at different points in time. *Birth* does not undertake such an inquiry, mainly because that was not the book's subject. Perhaps I erred in not attributing enough weight to the Zionists' "transfer" predisposition in explaining what actually happened in Palestine in 1948.

Arab and pro-Arab critics of my work (Nur Masalha, Norman Finkelstein, etc.) have gone to the other extreme of giving far too much weight to the "transfer thinking" during the decade that preceded 1948 in what actually happened in the course of that war. The nexus between thought and action was not so much a matter of "predetermination" and preplanning as of a mind-set that accepted transfer as a legitimate solution. Once that "transfer" got under way, of its own accord, in late 1947-early 1948 (Arabs fled mainly out of fear of bombs and bullets), the Zionist leadership, guided by Ben-Gurion, was predisposed to nudge the process along, occasionally with the help of expulsions. The initial refugee trickle turned into a flood tide during April-July 1948, giving rise to the Palestinian refugee problem that was to bedevil Israeli-Arab relations for the next fifty years.

Be that as it may, my proofs in *Birth* of the existence of this mind-set in 1937-47 are somewhat "skimpy." Indeed, in one instance (pp. 61-68) involving a statement by Ben-Gurion in his speech to the Mapai Central Committee on 3 December 1947 (Karsh wrongly gives the date as 13 December), Karsh appears to be correct in charging that I "stretched" the evidence to make my point. The original transcript of the speech indicates that Ben-Gurion was not referring to "transfer" when he said that the new Jewish state must "think like a state" (though, equally, he does not seem to have been referring to the

need to bring to Palestine one and a half million Jewish immigrants immediately, as Karsh asserts).²

Karsh is also correct (pp. 46–51) in asserting that *Birth* had quoted (with due reference) a passage of a 1937 letter by David Ben-Gurion to his son, Amos Ben-Gurion, from Shabtai Teveth's *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs: From Peace to War* (Karsh misnames the work on p. 47, footnote 16) rather than going to the original manuscript. Had I gone to the original, I would have noticed that the quotation is problematic, as three lines had been crossed out (by Ben-Gurion or someone else, subsequently), vitally changing the meaning of the passage. The text (with the lines crossed out) reads: "We must expel Arabs and take their place . . ." (which is how Teveth quoted the passage). But if the crossed-out lines are deciphered and reintroduced, then Ben-Gurion's stance becomes equivocal, rendering the passage: "And then we will have to use force . . . without hesitation though only when we have no choice. We do not wish and do not need to expel Arabs and take their place. . . ."

It is unclear who crossed out the lines—Ben-Gurion almost never crossed out or changed anything he had written; his voluminous, handwritten diaries are astonishing for their lack of erasures and emendations—and what had been Ben-Gurion's real intention. But in the final analysis what we have today is the letter (with the crossed out lines) reading: "We must expel the Arabs and take their place. . . ." Karsh (p. 50) indulges in elaborate acrobatics in order to "clear" Ben-Gurion and explain this away:

The sentence . . . appears to result from hasty handwriting, not political intention. In the process of writing the letter, Ben-Gurion apparently realized he had repeated himself on the question of the use of force; or he decided to rephrase this sentence. In any case, he crossed out the [three lines]. . . . In so doing, most probably due to an abrupt brush of the pen, he erased the critical words "do not" . . . leaving the sentence as "we need" [or must] rather than "we do not need" . . . As a result, a momentary, fleeting typographical oversight has become a pointed weapon in the hands of future detractors, though only if this sentence is taken out of context. . . .³

Shakespeare could have been thinking of Karsh when he wrote: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

But this is Karsh's way, to belabor minor points while completely ignoring, and hiding from his readers, the main pieces of evidence. Had he been honest with his readers, Karsh would have told them that, since writing *Birth*, I had gone back to researching Zionist "transfer thinking." Some of this research has been published, substantially reinforcing the point made in those four pages in *Birth*, namely, that the Zionist leadership in the late

1930s and early 1940s almost consensually and persistently supported the idea of transfer, whether “voluntary” (with Arab agreement and compensation) or compulsory, as a solution to the “Arab problem.”⁴

In *Fabricating*, on the contrary, Karsh maintains that far from supporting transfer or expulsion of the Arabs, Ben-Gurion in the 1930s and 1940s looked forward to a “Jewish-Arab semitic alliance” and “true partnership among equal citizens” (p. 68). (Needless to say, he devotes no space to describing how this “fraternal” outlook translated into action vis-à-vis Palestine’s Arabs in 1948 and 1949–56.)

The author reaches this conclusion by quoting extensively from a number of Ben-Gurion’s speeches and memoranda. But Karsh appears unaware of the fact that politicians say different things to different audiences at different times and that what distinguishes good from bad historians is the ability to sort out the (heartfelt) wheat from the (propagandistic) chaff. Karsh also fails to take note of that fundamental rule that what statesmen, politicians, and generals *do* is far more telling than what they *say* and a more certain indicator of their real desires and intentions. Ben-Gurion was both more devious and more straightforward than Karsh gives him credit for. He often rolled his eyes to heaven and spoke of the vision of the prophets and of justice for all. And it is true that Ben-Gurion did occasionally say that the Zionist movement must be careful *not to go on public record* in support of transfer, because doing so could cause the movement political harm, and occasionally expressed doubt whether the idea was *practicable*.

Ben-Gurion was both more devious and more straightforward than Karsh gives him credit for.

But *at no point* during the 1930s and 1940s did Ben-Gurion ever go on record against the idea or policy of transfer. On the contrary, Ben-Gurion left a paper trail a mile long as to his actual thinking, and no amount of ignoring, twisting and turning, manipulation, contortion, and distortion can blow it away.

On 7 August 1937 Ben-Gurion told the Twentieth Zionist Congress, meeting in Zurich (against the backdrop of the publication of the Peel Commission recommendations):

We must carefully examine the question whether the transfer is possible, whether it is necessary, whether it is moral, and will it bring benefit. We do not want to dispossess. [But] transfer of population happened in the past, in the [Jezreel] Valley, in the Sharon [i.e., Coastal Plain] and in other places. You know of the Jewish National Fund’s actions in this regard. Now the transfer will have to be carried out on a different scale altogether. In many parts of the country new Jewish settlement will not be possible unless there is a transfer of the Arab fellahs [i.e., peasantry]. The [Peel] Commission dealt with this matter seriously, and it is

important that this plan [i.e., the commission proposal that 225,000 Arabs be transferred out of the prospective Jewish state] came from them and not from us. . . .

The transfer of the population is what makes possible a comprehensive settlement plan. Thankfully, the Arab people [in Palestine] have large, empty areas [outside Palestine]. Jewish power in the country, which is continuously growing, will also increase our possibilities to carry out the transfer on a large scale. You must remember, that this method contains an important humane and Zionist idea, to shift parts of a people [i.e., Palestine Arabs] to their own country and to settle empty lands.⁵

And a year later, at the meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive on 12 June 1938, Ben-Gurion declared: "I support compulsory transfer. I don't see in it anything immoral."⁶ And six years later, at the meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive on 7 May 1944, Ben-Gurion declared: "The transfer of Arabs is easier than any other transfer. There are Arab states around [Palestine] . . . and it is clear that if the Arabs are dispatched [out of Palestine], this will ameliorate their situation, not the contrary."⁷ And a month later Ben-Gurion declared: "I do not reject transfer on moral or political grounds. . . ."⁸

Nor was Ben-Gurion alone in the Zionist hierarchy in supporting transfer. Indeed, the majority of the movement's leaders in the 1930s and 1940s went on record (at least in closed fora) in support of the idea. Chaim Weizmann, the movement's liberal, moderate elder statesman, briefed his close colleagues on 30 January 1941 on his meeting with Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador to London, in the following terms:

Mr. Maisky said there would have to be an exchange of populations [in solving the Palestine problem]. Dr. Weizmann said that if half a million Arabs could be transferred, two million Jews could be put in their place. That, of course, would be a first instalment; what might happen afterwards was a matter for history. Mr. Maisky's comment was that they in Russia had also had to deal with exchanges of population. Dr. Weizmann said that the distances they had to deal with in Palestine would be smaller; they would be transferring the Arabs only into Iraq or Transjordan. Mr. Maisky asked whether some difficulties might not arise in transferring a hill-country population to the plains, and Dr. Weizmann replied that a beginning might be made with the Arabs from the Jordan Valley; but anyhow conditions in Transjordan were not so very different from those of the Palestine hill-country.⁹

Karsh can shout until he is blue in the face that the Zionist leaders in the 1930s and 1940s rejected all thought of transfer: Mountains of evidence speak to the contrary. And, let me add, it was reasonable that the Zionist leaders should have supported transfer: From the Zionist perspective, it offered the easiest, natural solution to the "Arab problem." But how exactly this transfer thinking affected what happened in 1948 is another, and more complex, matter.

DOUBTING THE YISHUV-HASHEMITE AGREEMENT

And now to turn to the bulk of Karsh's book—the attack on Shlaim's *Collusion Across the Jordan*. Shlaim, in his well-argued, generally well-founded book had maintained that (a) years of Zionist-Hashemite contacts and shared political interests had resulted, in 1946–47, in the conclusion of an unwritten agreement between the leadership of the Yishuv and 'Abdallah, king of Jordan, not to fight each other but to split Palestine between them, with the Hashemites (rather than the Palestinians) receiving what is today called the West Bank, and eventually to make peace; (b) in early 1948, Britain tacitly approved the Yishuv-Hashemite agreement by supporting a Jordanian takeover of the West Bank (rather than the creation in that territory of an independent, Husayni-led Palestinian state, as the UN General Assembly had ruled), and cautioned 'Abdallah not to attack the Jewish state; (c) the Yishuv-Hashemite agreement, while somewhat shaken, in effect weathered the Jewish-Palestinian battles of November 1947–May 1948, and resulted in limited and indecisive warfare between the Israel Defence Forces and Jordan's army, the Arab Legion, in May 1948–April 1949; and (d) following the war, 'Abdallah wanted to reach peace with Israel but due to the internal weaknesses of his position and Israeli unwillingness to make concessions, no peace treaty was achieved.

Karsh disputes Shlaim's theses save (d), which he substantially ignores. He charges him with twisting certain documents and ignoring others in order to make his case. Karsh kicks off his argument with a piece of absurd sophistry: The agreement reached between 'Abdallah and the Jewish Agency was not an agreement because it was never honored. Or, as Karsh puts it (pp. 70–71): "an agreement that is 'not necessarily binding' constitutes a contradiction in terms. . . . Whether formal or informal, explicit or tacit, written or unwritten, an agreement is always binding in the minds of its makers; otherwise it would not have been reached in the first place." Apparently, Karsh was dozing in his international relations classes when his teachers explained (for example) the Anglo-French-Italian-German Munich Agreement of September 1938 and the Ribbentrop-Molotov Agreement of August 1939. Otherwise, he would no doubt know that many, perhaps most, international agreements were signed by parties not intent on honoring them and, indeed, were sooner or later broken.

Jordan and the Yishuv in 1946-47 had reached an unwritten mutual nonbelligerency-and-division-of-Palestine agreement, sealed in the famous 17 November 1947 meeting between King 'Abdallah and Jewish Agency representative Golda Meir. The contemporary Zionist documents describing that meeting—the report of Ezra Danin, who had been present at the meeting, and Eliahu Sasson's cable to Moshe Shertok of 20 November 1947—attest to this. (Sasson, indeed, had cabled that 'Abdallah had sought to put the "agreement" in writing¹⁰); and most Zionist documents written during the following months refer to the existence of the agreement.¹¹ Lastly, most historians since then, including non-New Historians such as Avraham Sela,¹² agree that an agreement was reached, that both sides understood that there was an agreement, and that for months they acted on that basis. Karsh, incidentally, cites Sela (p. 3) in support of his thesis, just as later he cites recent work by Hebrew University historian Amitzur Ilan (see below). But the work of both contradicts, indeed, demolishes, Karsh's main theses, as Karsh well understands (though he hides this from his readers).

The British knew of the clandestine Yishuv-Hashemite agreement and approved of it. B. A. B. Burrows, director of the Foreign Office's Eastern department, already in early November 1947 wrote: "There is a possibility that such an arrangement [i.e., a Jewish-Transjordanian partition of Palestine] might come about through agreement between King 'Abdallah and the Jews, who we hear from top secret but unconfirmed sources are already in contact."¹³ General John Glubb, the commander of the Arab Legion, wrote in August 1948: "The original Transjordanian plan was based on the supposition that, at the end of the British Mandate, the Jews would proclaim a Jewish state within the boundaries laid down by the United Nations Organisation partition scheme. . . . The Arab Legion would march in and occupy [the Arab areas of Palestine]. . . . There would be no conflict between the Arab Legion and the Jewish forces. . . . The British Government were [*sic*] aware of this plan."¹⁴ Indeed, on 22 March 1948, Bevin had brought the plan—Jordanian annexation of the West Bank in place of Palestinian Arab statehood—before the British cabinet for approval.¹⁵

The real question about the Jewish Agency-Hashemite agreement is not whether it existed but what happened to it in the course of the Israeli-Jordanian battles of May-July 1948. Clearly, it partially unravelled in April 1948 under the impact of the Haganah's military successes, the gradual disintegration of Palestinian society, and the Dayr Yasin massacre. 'Abdallah felt unable to stand aside or to break ranks publicly with the other Arab leaders.

But did he really renege on the agreement? Karsh, of course, maintains that there had not been any agreement in the first place. But brushing aside such nonsense, let us examine the facts. On 10 May 1948 Ben-Gurion sent Golda Meir to meet 'Abdallah once again in a last-ditch effort to avert a Yishuv-Hashemite clash. Returning to Tel Aviv, she reported to the Mapai Central Committee: "We met [on 10 May] amicably. He is very worried and looks terrible. He did not deny that there had been talk and understanding

between us about a desirable arrangement, namely that he would take the Arab part [of Palestine]. . . ." But 'Abdallah had said that he could now, on 10 May, only offer the Jews "autonomy" within an enlarged Hashemite kingdom. He added that while he was not interested in invading the areas allocated for Jewish statehood, the situation was volatile. But he voiced the hope that Jordan and the Yishuv would conclude a peace agreement once the dust had settled.¹⁶

On 15 May the Arab Legion, along with the other Arab armies, invaded Palestine. But far from unravelling, the agreement, at least in 'Abdallah's mind, appeared to hold fast. 'Abdallah's troops kept meticulously to the 17 November 1947 scenario: At no point in May, or thereafter, did the Arab Legion attack the Jewish state's territory. The Legion occupied the northern half of the West Bank and advanced as far westward as Latrun, Lydda, and Ramla (all UN-allocated Arab areas); and, acceding to local Arab pressures, drove into (Arab) East Jerusalem, essentially to secure the area (and its holy sites, including 'Abdallah's father's tomb on the Temple Mount) against Jewish conquest. But Jerusalem, allocated by the United Nations partition resolution neither to Jew nor to Arab, had not been covered in the Meir-'Abdallah agreement. Moreover, apart from securing the Old City (including conquering its Jewish Quarter), the Legion had refrained from attacking Jewish positions and areas (except for forays around the Mandelbaum Gate and the Notre Dame Monastery designed to safeguard the Legion's line of communication from Ramallah into the city).

No doubt, 'Abdallah was not motivated solely by his adherence to the agreement. His army was small, numbering only some 7,500–9,000 troops at the start of hostilities, and he hardly had enough soldiers to secure the West Bank, let alone attempt to conquer Jewish state territory or fight in costly street battles in West Jerusalem. Moreover, the British had warned him against attacking the Jewish state (see below), and he had promised to refrain from doing so.

Before 15 May, various Jewish officials—Yaacov Shimon, Moshe Shertok (Sharett), etc.—feared that 'Abdallah might attack the Jewish state nonetheless ("Can any Arab be trusted?"). But in effect, when it came to brass tacks, 'Abdallah adhered strictly to the letter and spirit of the agreement. Rather, it was the Jews who broke it when the Haganah/IDF repeatedly attacked the Legion in Latrun (in late May and June), in Lydda-Ramla (in July), and near Tarqumiya (October). It was Ben-Gurion—because he sought to lift the siege of Jerusalem and expand Jewish territorial holdings beyond what the UN had earmarked—who violated it. Incidentally, this is not meant as condemnation: It was a reasonable course of action. At war, act as war demands. Besides, 'Abdallah had pointedly declined to reiterate his commitment to the agreement in his meeting with Golda Meir on 10 May 1948 (even though, subsequently, he had meticulously cleaved to it).

THE ARAB LEGION AND THE WAR

At all events, after the battles of the "Ten Days" in mid-July, Israel in effect reverted to a strategy based on the November 1947 understanding—and, apart from the local engagement near Tarqumiya—generally avoided attacking the Arab Legion and the West Bank (though the IDF was clearly stronger than the Legion throughout the remaining months of the war). Thus it was that, after July 1948, the first Israeli-Arab war in effect devolved into an Israeli-Egyptian struggle, with Jordan (and Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria) merely looking on from the sidelines. Ben-Gurion certainly preferred 'Abdallah in control of the hill-country of Samaria and Judea to a Husayni-controlled Palestinian entity (much as 'Abdallah preferred the Jews to Husayni as his neighbor). And he continued to fear British military intervention should the IDF invade the West Bank and/or crush the Legion.

It is a measure of Karsh's ignorance of what actually went on in the Middle East in 1948 that he writes (p. 97) of "the Arab attack on the newly-established State of Israel, in which Transjordan's Arab Legion participated." Quite simply, it did not. Later (p. 137) Karsh even "engages" the long-dead Alec Kirkbride, Britain's most influential minister in Amman, in debate—because Kirkbride (and none knew Jordan or Jordanian policies better) had asserted as early as April 1948 that Jordanian strategy would be to avoid Jerusalem. Nonsense, says Karsh—'Abdallah all along intended to drive on Jerusalem ("Abdullah's primary political-strategic target," says Karsh). Never mind that the Arab Legion crossed into Palestine on 15 May and drove and deployed northwestward, toward Nablus and Ramallah, and then Latrun, carefully avoiding Jerusalem. Never mind that a stream of appeals, from desperate Arab leaders who feared that the Old City was about to fall to the Haganah, had to reach 'Abdallah during 14–16 May before he reluctantly began to prod an even more reluctant Glubb, who tergiversated, to send his beloved Legion into Jerusalem. (Both men apparently feared that the Legion would be churned up in costly street fighting in Jerusalem, and 'Abdallah was also worried about the possible political fallout should his troops engage the Jews in the city.) Never mind that the Legion only launched its belated drive on Jerusalem on 19 May, in response to the locals' appeals.

"The evacuation of the British forces from Jerusalem [13–14 May] and the success of [the Haganah's] Operation Kilshon [in which the Jews captured positions to the north and south of the Old City] were what finally brought about the Arab Legion's intervention in the fighting for the city," writes Sela.¹⁷ But Karsh knows better than other historians, New, Old, or middling, better, indeed, than the contemporary protagonists (Kirkbride, Glubb, etc.).

The same applies to Karsh's charge that the British government, and specifically Foreign Secretary Ernst Bevin, never assented to the Legion takeover of the West Bank and to his denial that the British warned the Jordanians against attacking Israel. Karsh employs his usual method of focusing on the one document that seems to uphold his argument—often while twisting its

real purport—while simply ignoring the mass of documents that undercut it. Yet the evidence is overwhelming. There was a consensus among Bevin's aides in support of Jordan's takeover of the West Bank: "My own view," wrote Kirkbride in October 1947, "is that strategically and economically Transjordan has best claim to inherit residue of Palestine. . . . A greater Transjordan would not be against our interests. . . . Alternative of a non-viable Palestine Arab state under the Mufti is not attractive. . . ."18 The heads of the British army agreed: "The chiefs of staff have said that the incorporation of the Arab areas of Palestine into Transjordan would considerably increase the economic and strategic strength of Transjordan. This would be in our interest."19 In the Foreign Office, apparently there was unanimity: "There seems to be a general consensus of opinion that both from the point of view of avoiding major bloodshed and from the point of view of our strategical and political interests, it would be extremely advantageous if Abdullah took control of the Arab areas of Palestine. . . . There might be some advantage in previous agreement [about this] between him and the Jews. . . ."20

Nor did Britain's policy change during the following months, though Bevin continuously stressed that Whitehall must not enunciate it in public because it could be construed as undercutting the UN November 1947 resolution awarding the Arab areas of Palestine to Palestinian Arab sovereignty. Bevin said as much during his crucial meeting in London on 7 February 1948 with Jordan's prime minister, Tawfiq Abul Huda:

The Secretary of State [i.e., Bevin] spoke to Mr. Wright and myself [Burrows] on February 7th, just after his conversation with [Abul Huda]. . . . He spoke of the possible entry of Transjordan forces into the Arab areas of Palestine, which might in many respects be generally advantageous, but would undoubtedly cause great difficulty with [Saudi Arabian King] Ibn Saud. He wondered whether we could do anything to promote better relations between Saudi Arabia and Transjordan. . . . A development on these lines [i.e., Jordanian occupation of the West Bank] would seem in many ways the best solution, but we can hardly say so at present, both because, according to the UN decision, the Arab state is supposed to be independent . . . and because overt support for these Transjordanian plans would antagonise the rest of the Arab states. . . . This Transjordanian plan would no doubt be most acceptable to the U.S. Administration. . . .21

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Bevin himself on 11 February reported to Kirkbride about his conversation with Abul Huda in the following terms:

Main points were . . . : Return of Arab Legion after May 15th to Arab areas of Palestine . . . would be generally beneficial and likely to limit bloodshed and chaos. Transjordan Prime Minister realized that if Arab Legion went further than this and attacked civil population of Jewish state, we should be much embarrassed. . . . Opportunity was taken in subsequent conversation between Tawfiq Pasha [Abul Huda] and a member of the [Foreign Office] staff to convey to him the warning [not to attack the Jewish areas]. . . . [T]he Prime Minister said that he fully appreciated the position. . . .²²

Lastly, a week after the Jordanian takeover of the West Bank, Bevin enlightened his American counterpart, General George Marshall, about the true state of affairs:

We understand that the Jews knew the Arab Legion would enter Arab areas of Palestine and that this was not unwelcome to them. We have always thought that there might be considerable advantage in an arrangement by which the Haganah and the Arab Legion might be given responsibility for maintaining law and order in different areas. The Arab Legion have not entered any part of the area recommended for the Jewish state. . . .²³

Is it really possible that Karsh, who went through the relevant Foreign Office files at the Public Record Office, Britain's national archive, missed all these documents or their purport?

A similar ignore-other-historians-and-the-evidence attitude informs Karsh's treatment (pp. 122, 165) of the British and international arms embargoes against the Middle Eastern belligerents. In 1996, Amitzur Ilan published his 287-page study *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race: Arms, Embargo, Military Power and Decision in the 1948 Palestine War* (the Hebrew edition appeared the year before), which examined the effects of the arms embargoes on Israel and the Arab states during 1948. He concluded that the UN-sanctioned embargoes, which resulted, by summer 1948, in a critical shortage of ammunition and spare parts in the Arab Legion, and the Egyptian, Iraqi, and Syrian armies, substantially aided the Israeli war effort. He gives two reasons for this: (a) the Israelis (unlike the Arabs) were not reliant on British and French supplies and (b) the Israelis over the months had managed to develop reliable sources of supply among private arms merchants and in Czechoslovakia, who paid no heed to UN Security Council resolutions. Thus, the last major shipment of small arms ammunition and shells for

the Arab Legion's twenty-five-pounder batteries, the Legion's main artillery units, arrived in Jordan in February 1948; by July, the Legion had to use its firepower very sparingly, for fear that no shells at all would remain should it reengage the IDF.²⁴ The embargoes, as Ilan persuasively demonstrates, had had an asymmetrical effect, proving decisively detrimental to the Arab cause.

What does Karsh do with this information? He obfuscates the exact dates and writes:

When *in the spring* of 1948, Britain imposed an arms embargo of sorts on the Arab states in an attempt to prevent the lifting of an American embargo which in turn would have allowed the Yishuv to obtain weapons in the U.S., the Arab Legion was not only spared of [*sic*] this measure but even received arms deliveries at an *accelerated* pace. [Emphasis added.] (p. 122)

But this runs completely contrary to Ilan's detailed description of what happened:

In March 1948 [Britain imposed] . . . a *de facto* embargo which only excluded Transjordan. As a result, the armies of Egypt and Iraq entered the war in a disorganized manner, and in a desperate state of supply. . . . [On the other hand] the British government gave Abdullah's plans [to conquer the West Bank] its blessing and began carrying out an intensive plan to enlarge and equip the Legion. But Abdullah's subsequent decision to join the other Arab armies and to send the Legion to fight the Jews forced the British to suspend supplies to his army as well; soon afterwards [late May] came the embargo [on Jordan].²⁵

Karsh fails to tell his readers that only a small amount of the ammunition hastily promised and sent off from 20 to 22 May actually reached Aqaba (most of it having been confiscated by Egypt) and that, after 22 May, Britain refused all of Transjordan's increasingly desperate pleas for ammunition. None was sent, leaving the Legion starved of supplies and, from July 1948, essentially *hors de combat*.²⁶

* * *

Karsh resembles nothing so much as those Holocaust-denying historians who ignore all evidence and common sense in order to press an ideological point. One can only assume that, like them, his modest "contribution" to the Israeli historiographic debate will soon vanish.

But the debate itself will undoubtedly go on. It is possible, as some commentators have suggested, that Israeli historiography will follow the usual Western dialectical pattern of an "Old" historiography followed (and assailed by) a revisionist, "New" historiography that, in turn, is then followed by a

"synthesizing" wave of more balanced, objective history. If true, the publication of these future histories will owe much to that revisionist wave which made objective, politically untrammelled historiography possible.

As for Karsh, he offers no refining correctives or ameliorating syntheses. Rather he proffers for the disingenuous a rehash, in academic guise, of the very worst aspects of the "Old" propagandistic historiography. And he adds to it an unhealthy dose of verbal violence and abuse, which both personalizes and lowers the level of debate. In short, nasty and brutish in tone, lightweight in character, dishonest and manipulative in content, *Fabricating* is not the riposte that the New (or Old) Historians or their readers deserve.

NOTES

1. *Ha'Aretz Sefarim*, review on 25 June 1997 and Karsh letter to the editor, 9 July 1997.
2. Transcript of David Ben-Gurion speech, Meeting of Mapai Central Committee, 3 December 1947, Ben-Gurion Archives (Sdeh Boqer).
3. See Benny Morris, "A New Look at Central Zionist Documents," *Alpayim* 12 (1996), pp. 73-103; and Shabtai Teveth, "Clean Hands and Re-Writing Documents," and Benny Morris, "What Is Hiding Behind the Re-Writing?" both in *Alpayim* 14 (1997), pp. 174-206, for the Morris-Teveth exchange and a photocopy of the disputed Ben-Gurion letter.
4. For example, see Benny Morris, "Comments on Zionist Historiography and the Transfer Idea During 1937-1944," in *From Vision to Revision*, ed. Yehaim Weitz (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 1997), pp. 195-208 [in Hebrew].
5. Protocol of Ben-Gurion's speech, 7 August 1937, Central Zionist Archive (CZA), S5-1543.
6. Protocol of the Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive with the Political Committee of the Zionist Actions Committee, 12 June 1938, CZA. Karsh at one point takes note of this statement but apparently fails to grasp its meaning.
7. Protocol of the Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive of 7 May 1944, CZA.
8. Protocol of Meeting of Jewish Agency Executive of 20 June 1944, CZA.
9. "Short Minutes of Meeting Held on Thursday, January 30th, 1941, at 77 Great Russell Street, London, W.C.1.," Chaim Weizmann Archive (Rehovot), 2271.
10. See Sasson to Shertok, 20 November 1947, CZA, S25-1699.
11. See, for example, "Meeting of the Arab Section of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency (13 May 1948)" in *Political and Diplomatic Documents, December 1947-May 1948*, Gedalia Yogeve/Israel State Archives, p. 789, in which Shimoni, the section's deputy director, stated: "The feeling is that His Majesty [Abdullah] has not completely betrayed the agreement nor is he completely loyal to it, but something in between."
12. See Sela's excellent "Transjordan, Israel and the 1948 War: Myth, Historiography and Reality," *Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 4 (1992), p. 631: "From the summer of 1946 an unwritten agreement of principle existed between the Jewish Agency and King Abdullah, that . . . Abdullah would annex the Arab area to his kingdom, and the Jews would establish their state in the territory designated for that purpose. . . . The understanding was reaffirmed in [the Meir-Abdullah] meeting . . . on 17 November 1947. . . ." Sela diverges from Shlaim in believing that after 15 May, neither Abdullah nor the Yishuv took the agreement into account in their actions.
13. Minute by Burrows, 7 November 1947, Public Record Office (PRO), Foreign Office (FO) 371-62194\E10206.
14. Glubb, "The Trans-Jordan Situation," 12 August 1948, PRO FO 371-68822\E11049\14.
15. Amitzur Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race: Arms, Embargo, Military Power and Decision in the 1948 Palestine War*, (London: MacMillan, St. Antony's, 1996), p. 121. See also Sela, *Transjordan*, pp. 633-35.
16. David Ben-Gurion, *The War Diary 1948-1949*, ed. Elhanan Orren and Ger-

shon Rivlin (Tel Aviv: Israel Defence Ministry Press, 1982), p. 409, entry dated 11 May 1948 [in Hebrew].

17. Sela, "Transjordan," pp. 645-47.

18. Kirkbride to Foreign Office, 29 October 1947, PRO FO 371-62194/E10206.

19. Minute by Burrows, 7 November 1947, PRO FO 371-62194/E10206.

20. Minute by Burrows, 28 November 1947, PRO FO 371-62194/E10806.

21. Minute by Burrows, 9 February 1948, PRO FO 371-68368/E2696. On 16 February, Burrows added to this typewritten minute the following (hand-written) comment: "This was briefly discussed with the Secretary of State who did not

object to the substance of the above minute being confidentially discussed with the State Department."

22. Foreign Office (Bevin) to Amman (Kirkbride), 11 February 1948, PRO FO 371-68818/E1788.

23. Bevin to Marshall, "Note," undated but with covering letter M. R. Wright (FO) to Lewis Douglas (U.S. embassy, London), 22 May 1948, PRO FO 371-68830/E7224\28\80\G.

24. Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race*, p. 234.

25. *Ibid.*, 221.

26. *Ibid.*, 122.