

Forty Years since the Seizure of Palestine

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Forty years ago, on the eve of 15 May 1948, the leaders of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish settler community in Palestine declared the establishment of a Jewish state, which they called Israel. This came about amid bloody clashes between Arabs and Jews, which followed the 29 November 1947 United Nations General Assembly resolution that partitioned Palestine into two states, one Arab and one Jewish. The fighting escalated when five Arab states joined the fighting against Israel, in what became known as the first Arab-Israeli war. This war ended, officially and in fact, with the signing of the armistice agreements between Israel and her four Arab neighbors, Egypt, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Syria, during the first months of 1948. By then Israel had succeeded in gaining control of about 70 percent of the area of Mandatory Palestine, territory from which most of the Palestinian Arab inhabitants had left. The remaining 30 percent of the country comprised two areas. The larger of these, in central Palestine, which later came to be known as the West Bank, was officially annexed by Jordan. The smaller, the Gaza Strip in southern Palestine, came under the control of the Egyptian army.

This marked the start of what came to be known in international

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parlance as the Arab-Israeli conflict, to describe the state of constant struggle and tension between the Arabs and Israel. This struggle periodically took the form of bloody clashes and, as happened in 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982, into full-scale war. With the passage of time this conflict became more deeply rooted, developing into one of the facts of international politics in dealing, whether positively or negatively, with the Middle East region.

Obviously the seeds of this conflict did not germinate suddenly with the declaration of the establishment of Israel in 1948; this declaration was just one stage in its development, albeit one of particular importance. The roots of the conflict stretch back more than a century, to the emergence of the Zionist idea, followed by Zionist infiltration into Palestine. From the start and throughout the entire period, numerous factors—international, regional, and local—played extremely important and sometimes decisive roles in the development of the conflict. Therefore, any attempt to conduct a survey of the Arab-Zionist conflict in the fortieth year after the establishment of Israel, to forecast what course it may take in the future, or to determine the possibility of a settlement, requires a comprehensive, if rapid, glance at these factors, their dimensions and relative importance, since without them the state called Israel would never have come into existence.

The International Factor: Securing Control of the Arab East

The international factor was one element that played a principal, if not decisive, role in enabling the Zionists to establish a Jewish state in Palestine; indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that without the intervention of foreign forces in support of the Zionists, they could not have established themselves in the country.

Zionist reliance on foreign forces for help in implementing their plans dates to the emergence of the Zionist movement. The founding fathers of Zionism, all of whom were of European origin, put forward their ideas under the influence of the "Zeitgeist" which prevailed in Europe in the second half of the last century. This "Zeitgeist" was spawned by two principal developments in Europe. The first was the emergence of the idea of nationalism and the establishment of a number of states in Europe on a nationalist basis. This was followed by the achievement of independence by a number of European peoples on the same basis. The second was the expansion of European colonialism, as European powers gradually came to dominate, in one way or another, the whole of Asia and Africa. The influence of these developments on Zionist thinking, from its inception, is

extremely clear. In putting forward their solutions to what they called the Jewish question, most, if not all, Zionist thinkers had in mind the course followed by the European peoples: if those peoples had the right to independence, the Jews had the same right. And if those peoples had the right to rule areas and peoples in Asia and Africa and to subordinate them to their wishes, the Jews also had the right to establish an entity or a state of their own. It was not long before these ideas came to be embodied in what was known as political Zionism, whose aim was, in one way or another, to establish a state for the Jews in Palestine.

While these ideas were taking shape and gaining adherents, during the second half of the nineteenth century a number of Jewish immigrants, most of them from Tsarist Russia and Poland (which at that time was under Tsarist rule), were coming to Palestine and establishing settlements in the form of small agricultural villages. However, from the start this activity met with little success, for two main reasons. The first was the limited economic resources of these settlers: their settlements were practically bankrupt from their inception. The second was the opposition of the Arab population and later the Ottoman authorities to this immigration. The Ottomans soon began to impose restrictions on the entry of these immigrants into Palestine, and from time to time prevented their entering at all. The only way these settlers could find to overcome these obstacles was to turn to various international forces for help. This help at times entailed asking for contributions from various Jewish personalities and organizations, especially in Western Europe and at others involved asking European states to protect them or to intervene with the Ottoman authorities regarding the continued entry of Jewish immigrants into Palestine. This was something that those states were usually quite willing to do, if only with a view to expanding their influence in the Ottoman Empire in general and the Holy Land in particular.

At first, the Zionists relied on the international factor only when it was essential. Later, however, this reliance became a definite strategy. Indeed, when the time came to unite all the Zionist organizations—a task accomplished by the First Zionist Congress, which was held in 1897 and which founded the World Zionist Organization (WZO)—it was clear that reliance on foreign forces for the achievement of Zionism's aims had become one of the pillars of the movement's ideology. Under the influence of Dr. Theodor Herzl, who was elected president of the WZO, and his associates, the aim of Zionism was defined as that of striving to establish a home for the Jews in Palestine that was recognized by public law. The new Zionist leadership attached great importance to the second half of the

definition “recognized by public law”—sometimes, it seems, greater than that which they accorded the first half. Throughout the whole of the Herzl era and up to his death in 1904, the Zionist leadership focused on completing the establishment of the institutional infrastructure of the Zionist movement, refraining from almost any practical activity either inside or outside Palestine; this they postponed until such time as their aims were recognized and adopted at the international, which at that time meant essentially the European, level. Herzl himself spent most of his time travelling from one European country to another, in a vain attempt to induce them to adopt the Zionist project and declare support for the Zionists’ efforts to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Even after Herzl’s death his opponents, who led the movement after him, did not altogether abandon his policies, but instead combined Herzl’s “political” methods with “practical” ones of their own.

Despite this change, the Zionists were not conspicuously successful, remaining a marginal force, on both the political and practical levels, inside and outside Palestine. Their golden opportunity came with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. A short time thereafter and within the framework of the preparations made by the Allies, headed by Britain and France, for the war, agreements were concluded on how German and Turkish territories would be brought into their respective spheres of influence or divided among them.

In 1915, as the scope of the war expanded and reached the Middle East, the British entered into negotiations with the Sharif Hussein of Mecca, with a view to persuading him to ally himself with them and to call for a revolt against the Turks to expel them from the Arab territories. In return, the Allies would recognize the Arabs’ independence after the end of the war. In 1916 the Allies concluded an agreement, known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, by virtue of which an understanding was reached regarding how the Ottoman Mashriq territories should be divided up into British, French, and Russian and spheres of influence, with Palestine being under an international Russian administration in which all the Allied states were to participate.

But this agreement, like that with the Sharif Hussein, was not enough for the British, who sought to ensure even greater influence for themselves in the Arab East, with as little interference as possible by the other Allied states. To achieve this aim the British reconsidered past Zionist demands in an attempt to resuscitate them. On this basis they renewed their contacts with the Zionists and encouraged them to submit their demands again within the framework of an agreement between the two parties to the effect

that the British would recognize the Zionists' demands and would take action to ensure that they were implemented. In return the Zionists were to cooperate with Britain and use their influence in the various Allied countries to ensure that Britain alone would control Palestine after the war.

On 2 November 1917 the Balfour Declaration was issued which declared that the British government would view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jews. The Zionists seized on this statement and proceeded to make the most strenuous efforts to secure wider recognition for it; eventually they succeeded in inducing France and Italy, and then the U.S. to declare their approval of it. And during the deliberations of the peace conference, the Zionists seized every opportunity to persuade the conference to agree to the establishment of a British Mandate over Palestine. Eventually they got what they wanted.

The imposition of the Mandate over Palestine was a decisive event for the future of both the Zionist project and Palestine. Unlike the mandatory system adopted in the other countries, the aim of which was to assist the peoples of those countries to progress to a stage at which they would be capable of ruling themselves—which did indeed eventually happen in several countries—the Palestine Mandate was so drafted as to make clear that its principal aim was to ensure the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. This was explicitly stated in the preamble to the Mandate and in several of its articles. And this is, in fact, what happened. Under the protection of the Mandate regime and given the facilities it allowed the Zionists to encourage Jews to immigrate to Palestine, the number of Jews in the country rose from about 57,000 at the end of World War I to 608,000 (about one-third of the whole population of Palestine) in 1946. During this period these new immigrants established hundreds of Jewish settlements in different parts of Palestine, and gradually came to constitute an independent Jewish society, separate from the Arab majority that surrounded them, with their own cultural, trade union, political, and, later military, institutions. This society was to form the sinews of the Jewish state established in May 1948.

There can be no doubt that but for the active intervention by the international factor (represented, during that period, by the British) the Zionists could never have established themselves in Palestine and their activities there would have been no more significant than they had been in the days of the Ottomans, when the Jews in Palestine were no more than a small, powerless community, whose—by no means numerous—members were scattered in different places throughout the country.

The Regional Factor: Weakness Resulting from Disunity

It was by no means easy to implement these British-Zionist plans at the regional level, among the Arab peoples of the Middle East and their leaders. Indeed, they expressed their indignation at and opposition to this policy and repeatedly condemned it. The years following the end of World War I witnessed many incidents of protest against and opposition to this policy. However, the opposition was to no avail. During the post-war years the Arab national movement was engaged in a wide-scale struggle for independence in the face of French and British determination to control the Arab East. But Britain and France had divided up these countries into spheres of influence, separated them from each other, consolidated their control over them, and intensified the pressures on their inhabitants. As a result the national movements in each country found themselves in a situation in which they were obliged to defend their very existence against continuous efforts by foreign overlords to contain and repress them. During the 1920s and 1930s the eastern Arab peoples and their leaders were for the most part so engrossed in the defense of their rights and in their efforts to realize their demands that they had few resources left for the support of the cause of Palestine. Thus, in practice, the Palestinians had to confront the British and Zionist schemes alone at a time when the balance of forces was clearly in favor of the foreign rulers and the alien settlers. This situation did not change appreciably until the end of the 1930s after the outbreak of the Great Arab Revolt in Palestine (1936–1939), which drew the attention of the Arabs and others to the dangers that threatened Arab interests in the country. Nonetheless, the help that could be offered to the Arabs of Palestine by their brothers in the neighboring Arab countries and elsewhere was extremely limited for, in the final analysis, supreme authority in all those countries was in the hands of their foreign rulers, who soon put a stop to the “game” when it went beyond what were, in their view, the permissible limits. Nor was there any real change in this situation during World War II or the first few years that followed it. For, although the Arab League was established and some Arab countries did obtain their “independence” or at least a larger degree of freedom during this period, at the beginning of their road to independence they were so weak that they were unable to play an effective role in the conflict over Palestine.

It is therefore accurate to say that, if the international factor provided positive assistance in supporting the Zionist project and making its implementation possible, the regional factor, for all its opposition to that project, was not able to play an effective role in preventing it.

The Local Factor: Weakness Resulting from Underdevelopment

The inability of the regional factor to be effective in confronting Zionist plans can, to some extent, be attributed to the local factor—the Palestinian Arabs. When Zionist immigration into Palestine started at the end of the last century, the situation in the country—socially, economically, politically, and otherwise—was not much different from that in neighboring Arab countries, or for that matter in other third world areas. Although some progress was achieved in certain fields during the first half of the twentieth century, the situation as a whole remained basically unchanged. Even in the 1940s, the last years of the British Mandate over Palestine, more than three quarters of the Arab inhabitants of the country still belonged to the class of poor, illiterate, and powerless peasants. In contrast, although the Jews did not constitute more than one-third of the population of Palestine at the time, the overwhelming majority were European immigrants, generally educated, and equipped to cope with the demands of contemporary life. As such they were potentially more powerful, at the economic, organizational, and military levels, than the Arabs, despite the latter's numerical superiority.

1948: The Inevitable Disaster

Broadly speaking, this is the background against which the Palestine problem should be viewed at the end of World War II. As if the imbalance of forces between the Palestinian Arabs on the one hand and the Jewish settlers on the other was not sufficient, further factors were added during that critical period which soon settled the conflict through the dismemberment of Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel in part of it.

The changes that took place during that period were extremely important, in some ways more so than all the accumulated changes that preceded them. In the first place, as regards the international factor, the Zionists came into open conflict with the British. Since Britain emerged from the war considerably weakened, she lost her former position and prestige as a great power, and was soon to join the club of second class states. Consequently, the Zionists turned to the two new powers that emerged in the wake of the war—the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.—making a point of exerting their influence on the former but without neglecting the latter. This policy bore fruit. It was the U.S. which, although at times hesitant, secured the votes of a two-thirds majority in the UN General

Assembly in favor of the partition plan by exerting direct pressures on a number of states. And when the establishment of Israel was declared, President Truman's administration lost no time in taking an unprecedented step by recognizing the state eight *minutes* after the declaration of its establishment. The U.S.S.R., which had lost the race to be the first to recognize the new state, compensated by announcing its *de jure* recognition two days later, thereby outstripping the U.S., whose recognition was only *de facto*.

Nor was the situation any better at the regional level. When the partition resolution was adopted the Arabs categorically rejected it, and their leaders fumed and raged, threatening to intervene militarily in Palestine to protect Arab rights there. But although fighting between Arabs and Jews in order to obtain control of the country started immediately after the adoption of the partition resolution on 29 November 1947, the Arab leaders, on the pretext of "abiding by" international custom, postponed their military intervention until the end of the British Mandate, on the day of the declaration of the establishment of Israel, when they found themselves obliged to do so. But by then the Zionist forces had succeeded in obtaining control of most of the populated areas allotted to the Jewish state and had also occupied most of the principal Arab towns. The bitterest fact was that the Arab side was not fit to fight that war; they embarked on it as if they were going on a picnic and it ended in disaster. It is true that five Arab states took part in the Palestine War, but all the military forces they threw into the fighting combined were fewer than those that the Zionists were able to marshal. Moreover, the armaments of the Zionist forces improved during the course of the fighting, until they were superior to those of the attacking Arab forces, which soon had to go on the defensive. As if this were not enough, the strongest of the Arab armies at the time in terms of organization and armaments, the Arab Legion of Transjordan, did not fight the war seriously. Indeed, the first concern of these forces was not so much to fight the Zionists as to gain control of the parts of Palestine allotted to the Arabs, especially in central Palestine, so that this territory could be annexed to Transjordan. In such a situation it is not surprising that the Arab armies were defeated and that armistice agreements were imposed on all the Arab states bordering Israel, one after another.

The local factor also contributed its share to the disaster. When the conflict began to intensify, most of the active Palestinian leaders had been expelled from the country by the British during the years of the revolt. Not only were these leaders in disagreement with each other; they also lacked

the ability, in both theory or in practice, to confront and cope with the new situation. Consequently, when the conflict grew fiercer and the fighting spread, the Arabs of Palestine were like a flock without a shepherd, wandering aimlessly, with each group trying to do what it could and in its own way, without coordination or planning. This situation certainly hastened their defeat.

The Arabs and Israel: The Removal of the Palestinians

The first Palestine War (1947–1949) had destructive effects on both the cause and the people of Palestine. When the war ended with the signing of the armistice agreements between Israel and her four Arab neighbors—Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, and Lebanon—Palestine “disappeared,” or nearly so, and her people “disappeared” with her. The area of Palestine which the Jews occupied and in which they established their state, Israel, was almost “cleansed” of its Arab inhabitants, a total of more than 700,000 of whom were forced to leave it, to become refugees in the other parts of Palestine or in the neighbouring Arab countries. Only about 160,000 Palestinians remained in the occupied areas, and they became known as “the Arabs of Israel.” Central Palestine was annexed by Transjordan; the name of the territory was changed to the West Bank of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; and its inhabitants were made Jordanian citizens. The other, smaller area, known as the Gaza Strip, was placed under Egyptian tutelage until such time as its fate should be finally decided when the Palestine problem was “solved.”

With the emergence of this new situation, changes also took place at the international and regional levels. The “Palestine problem” remained on the agenda of the United Nations for a few years after the establishment of Israel; in 1952 the item was then replaced by the problem of the “Palestinian refugees.” The Palestinian problem was, in fact, turned into a problem of refugees, constituting just one element of what came to be known as the Arab-Israeli conflict. As the scope of the conflict expanded, the international factor entered again, this time not in the form of a single state, but of three states at once. In 1950 the U.S., Britain, and France issued a joint statement known as the Tripartite Declaration, in which they made clear that they would oppose any attempt to change the frontiers between the Arab countries and Israel by force. This was understood to be a guarantee for the existence of Israel and for her frontiers. Against the background of this international position, the Israeli-Arab frontiers were, in the first half of the 1950s, the scene of many bloody clashes and raids across

the frontiers. Many were in response to attempts to infiltrate or to desperate attacks carried out inside the so-called green line by the Palestinian refugees. As a result, the hostility between the Arabs and Israel intensified to reach its climax at the end of 1956, with the Israeli-French-British attack on Egypt within the framework of a conspiracy hatched by the governments of the three countries to bring down Nasir's regime, which they regarded as a danger to their interests in and their plans for the Arab world. The plan was an utter failure: Nasir did not fall and the invading forces were forced to withdraw from Egypt. The last to leave were the Israeli forces, which completed their withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in the spring of 1957. Despite this withdrawal, both the political arrangements that accompanied the end of that adventure and the lessons it taught had long term effects. The end of the war assured Israel of ten years of peace, during which she was able to build up and develop her strength in several fields, especially in the military field. This was achieved largely through close cooperation with France, which provided her with indispensable equipment and know-how.

Against this background of relative peace and quiet, and at a time when some Arab countries seemed to be more anxious than Israel about defending their frontiers, for fear of Israeli retaliatory raids, the Palestinian cause virtually disappeared, relegated to being a part of the remote past. In fact, however, this situation gave rise to the very opposite of what one would have expected. As a result of the pressures to which the Palestinians were subjected, and in order to confront the continuing disregard for their cause, they began to play an active role in various Arab nationalist movements and to establish a number of secret organizations of their own, whose activities extended to a number of Arab countries. During the first half of the 1960s the situation had developed in a way that the Palestine problem once again began to cast its shadow over Arab politics: it was no longer possible to ignore it, even in theory. This was the atmosphere in which the first Arab League Council Summit, held in 1964, decided to establish an entity to organize and reunite the Palestinians. This decision was, in fact, the prelude to the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization. At the same time, some of the Palestinian organizations that were not content with these developments were starting to make preparations to wage a "people's war" against Israel. Especially through their activity in organizing raids into the occupied areas, these organizations contributed significantly to the increase in tension between Israel and the neighboring Arab countries, tension which reached its climax in the June 1967 war.

The 1967 War: The Palestine Cause Revived

The 1967 war was one of the worst and most humiliating disasters to befall the Arabs in modern history. Within less than a week the Israeli army succeeded in destroying three Arab armies and occupying vast areas of Arab territory: the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Golan Heights, with a combined area three times as large as that of Israel. With the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip the whole of Mandate Palestine came under Israeli control. The Palestinian inhabitants of these regions who were not forced to leave or emigrate during or after the war, were then subjected to Israeli military occupation.

The 1967 war seemed at first to demonstrate that Israel had reached the peak of its strength and achieved its goals of effacing the Palestine problem at the political and geographical levels, and of firmly establishing the Zionist entity on its ruins. But it was not long—only a few weeks, in fact—before it became clear that, by fighting this war Israel had made perhaps its greatest historical mistake. For the result of the war was, quite simply, the resurrection of the Palestine cause, since it had led to the “unification” of the population and territory of Palestine. Moreover, the terrible defeat had wounded the Arabs’ pride, stirred their emotions, and put the Palestine problem back on the agenda of all their deliberations. It also helped to escalate the guerrilla war that small, secret groups of Palestinian commandos had begun to wage prior to 1967 across the Arab-Israeli frontiers with the result that their scope expanded after the war into an intensive campaign of daily attacks. In the absence of strong regular armies, the Palestinian resistance movement developed into an overt mass “institution” with a strong presence in the Arab countries, as well as in the occupied territories and various concentrations of Palestinians [abroad]. In less than two years the representatives of this movement had obtained control of the key positions in the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Against the background of these developments, the Arab-Israeli conflict broke out anew. But this time important “modifications” were to be made in it: the Palestinian factor was to play a prominent and more important role. And as the conflict developed, it gradually became an unmistakably Palestinian-Israeli one. In less than ten years after the 1967 war dozens of countries all over the world had in one way or another recognized the PLO as representing the Palestinian people, established relations with it, and supported the quest for what was called “a just solution” of the Palestine problem—a solution that would ensure that both Israelis and Palestinians had their own state.

Amid the spate of political solutions, along with the operations involved in drafting and developing them and the attempts to market them that took place over more than two decades, tangible changes took place in the attitudes of both the Palestinians and the Israelis, to the extent that it seemed that they were about to exchange their "historical" roles. This was the result of a variety of political and ideological developments that are beyond the scope of this discussion. This period witnessed the disappearance of the "flexibility"—to a certain extent, merely for show—that had formerly characterized the Israeli position. This flexibility was exhibited through a declared readiness to reach a solution of the Palestinian problem "without pre-conditions" and with any concerned party. This was replaced by an Israeli rigidity: Israeli leaders declared their readiness to negotiate with any party in order to solve the Palestinian problem with the exception of the Palestinians themselves. This was a clever move aimed at sidetracking discussions and disregarding the rights of the Palestinians. At the same time that this transformation was occurring on the Israeli side, the Palestinians' attitude tended to become more moderate, to the extent that eventually, given certain conditions, they expressed a willingness to recognize Israel and accept the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside it, in only part of the original territory of Palestine.

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In spite of the greater moderation in Palestinian and Arab attitudes, suggesting readiness, in both word and deed, to advance along the road toward a solution to the Palestine problem, the Israeli attitude continued to become more rigid. Instead of seeking to come to an agreement with the PLO in particular and the Palestinians in general to solve the Palestine problem, the Israelis began trying to impose their own "solutions." These attempts reached their climax in the summer of 1982 when Israel waged a total war against the Palestinians in Lebanon with the aim of eliminating the PLO and uprooting it from Lebanon. At the same time, Israel unabashedly tightened its grip on the West Bank and Gaza.

In taking these steps Israel has encountered a wave of opposition and condemnation throughout the world. Nevertheless, she has persisted in her policy, scorning this opposition and paying no heed and being little affected by the international isolation which has resulted. This has been possible, not because of Israel's strength, but to a great extent, because of the abundant economic and political aid provided her by the U.S. Certainly

without this abundant American aid Israel would have been unable to adhere to her hard-line policy.

However, as the saying goes, one mistake leads to another; and it seems that Israel's mistake in trying to eliminate the Palestinians outside the occupied areas and in trying to bind those living in those areas to her policy has had no less serious consequences than the mistake Israel made when she occupied the rest of Palestine in 1967. Constant pressures on the Palestinians, ignoring their rights, and attempts to control them and decide their destiny against their wishes eventually led, by the end of 1987, to the Palestinian uprising. After twenty years of occupation, a popular revolt against the Israeli occupier has spread throughout all the occupied territories. Despite the ferocity of the Israeli response to the *intifadah* and the apparent determination to persist in them or perhaps resort to even harsher measures in the future, it is clear that the Israelis cannot turn the clock back. Opposition to the occupation is widespread and deeply rooted. Even if it dies down for a time, it soon flares up again. It is thus reminiscent of the pattern of struggle of other colonized peoples to win their independence—a trend that has generally, in the second half of this century, led to success.

However long it takes to reach the end of this road, it is clear, on the fortieth anniversary of the disaster, that the Palestinian cause has been reborn, once more bringing the whole question of the destiny of Palestine to the world's attention. It is a question that seems certain to play a critical role in the events of the coming decade.