

**Book Review**

**1948: The First Arab-Israeli War**, by Benny Morris. Yale University Press, 2008.  
524 pages. \$32.50, hardcover.

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From the opening gambit, Benny Morris, a professor of history in the Middle East Studies Department of Ben Gurion University (Israel), stakes his claim at offering the most thorough analysis of the initial war between the Arab and Jews over a single state.

Here, he states, “The War of 1948 was the almost inevitable result of more than half a century of Arab-Jewish friction and conflict that began with the arrival in Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel), or Palestine, of the first Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the early 1880s” (p.1).

Morris tenders a well-documented work with more than one-hundred pages of endnotes that support every major point.

That fair-minded, impartial balancing of Arab and Jewish standpoints is what distinguishes not only *1948: The First Arab-Israeli War*, but all of Morris’ other works. The best of these other works appears to be *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. Morris is often mentioned as being on the forefront of Israel’s “New Historians,” those revisiting some of the past assumptions about Arab-Israeli relations and drawing different conclusions.

Although the central feature of this work is the conflict of 1948, Morris provides a review of the antecedent causes that paved the way for a civil conflict and then war between the newly declared State of Israel and her Arab neighbors. A good example of this is how the British are depicted. While many authors go out of their way to present the British Mandate period as one of neglect and maltreatment by an imperial state, Morris writes “The spread of national consciousness during the 1920s and 1930s clearly paralleled, and probably drew sustenance from, the dramatic increase in literacy among Palestine’s Arabs, one of the fruits of the enlightened British Mandate administration” (p.12). He further adds that such administrative policy led the Palestinian Arabs to become more radical as their expectations from the British rose.

Although there is little provided on the years during World War II, Morris summarizes the end of the British Mandate in another pithy way that characterizes the entire work. He offers page after page of detail, and then a summation point that seems to illuminate the foregoing passages. Here, regarding the end of British rule, he asserts, “With no acceptable military solution on the Jewish guerrilla-terrorist and immigration campaigns, and with no political solution to the Zionist-Arab impasse, the British had reached the end of the road” (p.36). With the Jews demanding a state and the Arabs demanding that Jews leave, we are forced to return to his central thesis. This conflict was almost inevitable. Morris does admit, however, that there was a minority position even among the Arabs to have a “full-scale General Assembly debate” for a possible state sharing arrangement, but this was never within reach of the UN members (p.40).

Beginning in early 1947, the British were expediting their departure from this expensive endeavor. Thus, the issue of how to satisfy the needs and desires of two peoples looking to establish a state on the same parcel of land was handed over to a newly formed United Nations. Within a few weeks, the UN established the Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to research the issue and make formal recommendations to the General Assembly. After months of reports, inspections and cajoling, especially by the Jews who were the “most vigorous lobbyists...who bombarded UNSCOP with memoranda and wined and dined its members” (p.46), the recommendation was to partition the Land of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state.

Morris divides the initial conflict before the full-scale war into two distinct phases: the First Stage of the Civil War, November 1947 - March 1948 (pp.75-112); and the Second Stage of the Civil War, April – mid-May 1948 (pp.113-179).

It is in these two chapters that one begins to grasp how precarious the Jewish position was. Ambushes, incursions and attacks on civilians should have been able to break the resolve of the immigrants. But Morris claims that the ability of Jewish paramilitary and then military organizations made the difference. He articulates, "The Haganah troops were too skilled and highly motivated, the bands and the Arab Liberation Army too poorly equipped, trained and led" (p.106) to prevent a Jewish state or to cause enough mischief to prevent the British from pulling out.

The heart of this work is found in chapter five. Here, Morris presents particulars about the Pan-Arab Invasion (May 15 - June 1948) that echo much of what was discussed earlier. The Arab states failed to act in a consistent, unified manner while publicly providing "military bluster" (p.181). The difference for the new Israeli state was obvious. The Arabs were looking to simply take land. The Jews were fighting for survival. He adds, "The mobilization of the Yishuv for the invasion was a giant and fateful undertaking; its existence hung in the balance, as all realized" (p.198).

Another important point that Morris makes about the War period that is as vital as U.S. and Soviet recognition and Czechoslovakia providing weapons to Israel was how the international community, especially the UN, responded. He observes that following some initial Israeli setbacks, the "strategic initiative had passed from Arab into Israeli hands and was to remain there for the duration of the war. And, politically the Israelis enjoyed hesitant international support whereas the Arabs were commonly seen as the aggressors" (p.263).

Once the armed hostilities ended and the phase to develop armistice agreements began (January - July 1949), both sides found themselves in a strange position. Israel had "won" the War of 1948, but could not fight much longer without exhausting its limited forces, despite its superiority. The Arab states had been embarrassed by their armies and were now going to have to accept, even if only for the moment, a partitioning plan by the UN that all said was impossible.

But, as Morris summarizes, "The negotiation was between unequal parties" (p.375). Ultimately, all parties (except Iraq) signed some form of an armistice, but refused to recognize Israel's right to exist. This meant that the Arabs "refused to accept the establishment of a Jewish state in any part of Palestine" (p.396). So, instead of an armistice leading to peace, it simply aggravated this conflict to the point of being intolerable for all sides.

Over the next several decades, Arabs and Jews would ignite the skies with rockets and blanket the land with bullets. While there have been peace treaties, there has been little peace for either side. Also, for many Arab states, defeat at the hands of Israel has fostered regime change.

Morris leaves us thinking in the end: Why should this conflict still have little end in sight? From the Arab perspective, he says, it's because "a cosmic injustice" (p.420) has been perpetrated. From Israel's perspective, wars (mostly successful from a military point-of-view) have been able to grab land, but not yet ensure security.

Reconciliation of these incommensurate positions appears about as unlikely today as in 1948, despite any recent efforts.