

## CHAPTER 4

*Between Nakbah and Independence:  
The 1948 War*

## THE UNSCOP DAYS

Bernard Newman, a British tourist, could still enjoy a normal day in Jerusalem towards the end of the Mandate, strolling in the Kedron Valley, on the way up to the city. He chose an hour of the day that a few weeks later would be particularly dangerous for foreigners, the time of the evening prayer. His is almost the last account we have of the situation before violence broke out. His report is full of sounds: snatches of the muezzin's from the minarets drowned by the many-toned bells of the Orthodox churches, or the more solemn boom from the bells of the Catholic churches. Nearby, goat-bells tinkled, and the shrill voices of children playing could be heard from the south. But he also noted the harsh sound of klaxons and the rattle of armoured cars.<sup>1</sup>

This picture, which gives a background to daily life in Palestine at the time, was to change radically. The script for this drama was written outside Palestine. Previous attempts on the part of the Mandate to end the conflict gave way to dependence on the new international policeman, the United Nations. Palestine was the first serious regional conflict to be dealt with by the organization. From its foundation, the UN was paralysed by Cold War politics. On the basic outline for Palestine, however, Russia and the USA, the two superpowers concurred: Palestine was to be divided between the Zionist movement and the Palestinians.

The eleven members of the official UN body appointed to decide the fate of Palestine, UNSCOP, the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, also arrived at this conclusion. These officials had no experience in the Middle East or any knowledge of the Palestine situation, and had visited the area very briefly. They seemed to be more impressed by their gloomy visit to the camps of the Jewish Holocaust survivors in Europe than by what they saw in Palestine. In Europe, however, the tragedy had already occurred; in Palestine it was about to happen.<sup>2</sup> It took UNSCOP nine

months, between February and November 1947, to make a decision on the country's fate. They had been given a ready-made partition programme by the able and well-prepared Zionist representatives, while the Palestinian and Arab side failed to propose any coherent alternative. Despite this, the Palestinians' consensual rejection of partition was fully known to UNSCOP. For the Palestinians, leaders and common people alike, partition was totally unacceptable, the equivalent in their eyes of the division of Algeria between the French settlers and the indigenous population. The strong Palestinian objection prevented a unanimous decision on partition, but it was not strong enough to avert a majority one, achieved to a certain extent by American and Russian pressure.<sup>3</sup> In their infrequent tours of Palestine, the committee members were welcomed by the Zionist leadership, but boycotted by the Palestinian politicians, an imbalance that also contributed to their decision to back the Zionist demand for partition as a logical solution to the conflict. The last British attempt to limit illegal Jewish immigration, the return of the *Exodus*, full of Holocaust survivors, to Germany, which coincided with one of UNSCOP's visits, accentuated even further the nexus between the Holocaust and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

In the months of the UNSCOP deliberations, life in Palestine continued much in the same pattern as it had since the end of the Second World War. The rural areas were now more stable, as the number of people leaving them decreased. They were also less affected by Zionist settlement. The Jewish effort was directed to uncultivated land in the northern tip of Palestine's desert, the Negev, and to other areas allowed by the restrictions of the White Paper of 1939, and thus was experienced less in the heart of the region. The towns continued to be sites of bi-national cohabitation and economic interaction opposed strongly by the political leaderships on both sides. The number of people involved in politics did not grow dramatically, and the fate of the majority was still decided by the few.

Such ordinariness was an illusion. Those who were most aware of the abnormality of the situation produced by the British insistence on leaving Palestine without any proper arrangements for a transitional period or any substitute regime were best prepared to fill the vacuum to their advantage. Since May 1946, the Zionist leadership had been preparing itself for what it saw as a final showdown with the local population. There was no clear blueprint until 1948, but there was a clear mind-set that went back to the 1930s, when Zionist leaders had, as one of many options for a solution, begun toying with the idea of an enforced eviction of the local Palestinian population.<sup>4</sup> The difference now was that the Palestinian refusal to accept

a UN solution provided a pretext for implementing a systematic expulsion of the local population within the areas allocated for a Jewish state, areas already demarcated in the UNSCOP report. In fact, the Yishuv's leaders felt confident enough to contemplate a take-over of fertile areas within the designated Arab state. This could be achieved in the event of an overall war without losing the international legitimacy of their new state.

While Palestinian peasants and Jewish settlers continued at that time to cultivate their land, and in some cases to maintain agricultural ties and other forms of interaction, active Zionist officials began assessing the wealth of Palestinian villages within the territory allocated to the Jews in the UNSCOP report. They accumulated vital information about these places and put it into a kind of intelligence almanac, or register of Palestinian villages. This register included information on the villages catalogued according to parameters such as population, agricultural production and their history in relation to the Zionist movement. A brief account of this register was provided later to commanders of units attacking these villages during the civil war before the end of the Mandate, and also during the more 'official' war with the Arab armies between May 1948 and January 1949. It transpires from these summaries that the strategic location of villages was also an important factor in their fate, apart from their wealth or previous relationship with the Zionist community. Villages that were near vital routes or in proximity to Jewish settlements had very little chance of remaining intact after being occupied by the Jewish forces.<sup>5</sup>

These confident preparations did not mean, however, that the majority of the Jewish community was not living in fear at the prospect of the end of the British Mandate. Many of its members anxiously awaited war with a large Arab army. This distress was very efficiently exploited by the leadership to recruit the community for winning the battle over post-mandatory Palestine. Intensified enlistment, coercive taxes, the prevention of emigration from the land and increased attempts to bring in new immigrants were all part of a well-orchestrated mobilization. At the highest political level, the gaps between the different ideological movements were narrowed and the military command centralized. Although there were cracks in this united front, compared to the situation on the other side, the Zionists' readiness was impressive.<sup>6</sup>

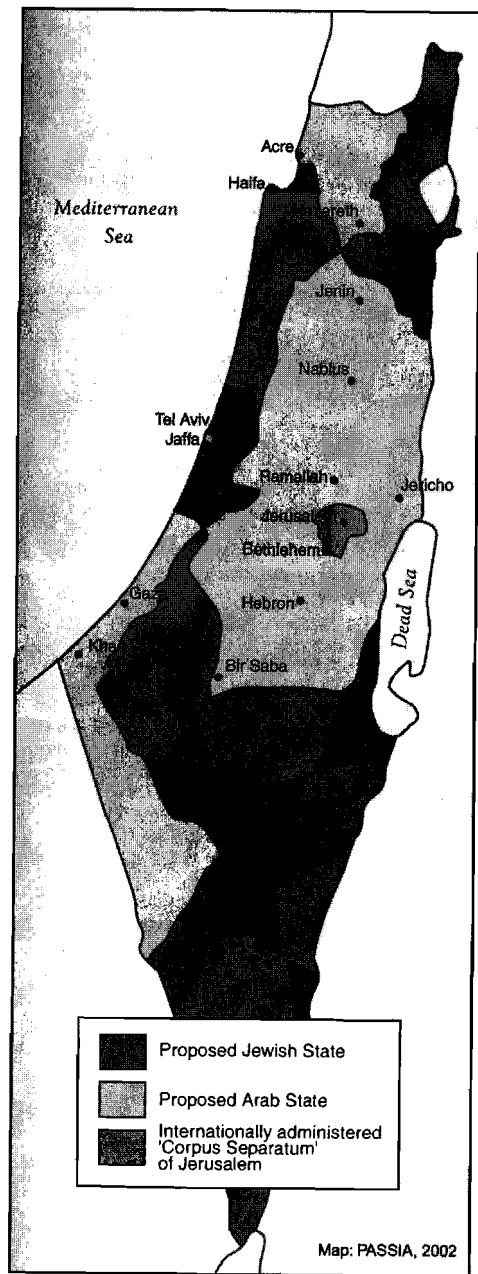
The Palestinian nationalist notables, although more alert than ever to the Zionist mobilization, were helpless, even when the will to act was there. Once they had surrendered diplomacy to the Arab League, the diplomatic battle was no longer in their hands. They still boycotted the UN, joining in with the Arab League's general handling of the crisis, which consisted of

a policy of brinkmanship between warlike rhetoric and secret negotiations aimed at postponing any international resolution. This policy was complicated by the independent approach taken by King Abdullah in Jordan (Transjordan became Jordan in March 1948), who, with British blessing, began serious negotiations with the Jewish Agency over his partition plan of dividing Palestine between his kingdom and the Jewish state. The plan was accepted in principle by the Jewish side and implemented during the war itself, ensuring a safe annexation of eastern Palestine to Jordan in return for limited participation by the Hashemite Legion in the overall Arab war effort.<sup>7</sup>

The nationalist notables were unaware of both these diplomatic manoeuvres and the intensive preparations activated by the Jewish political elite. They sensed the tension in the Arab world between the high level of military rhetoric and the low level of military preparedness, but continued to hope it would be enough to deter the UN from implementing the partition resolution. They probably underestimated how the absence of any serious groundwork on the Arab side, compared with the vigorous military build-up on the Jewish side, affected the final balance of power in the region. They put their effort into recruiting a few thousand soldiers and collecting money in those UNSCOP days; they even resurrected the national committees, but failed to put them under one unified command. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, each committee was loyal to a different faction in the political make-up of Palestine, torn between parties loyal to the Husayni family or to their rivals, the Nashashibis.

On 31 August 1947, UNSCOP presented its recommendations to the UN General Assembly. Three of its members were allowed to put forward an alternative recommendation. The majority report advocated the partition of Palestine into two states, with an economic union. The designated Jewish state was to have most of the coastal area, western Galilee, and the Negev, and the rest was to become the Palestinian state. The minority report proposed a unitary state in Palestine based on the principle of democracy. It took considerable American Jewish lobbying and American diplomatic pressure, as well as a powerful speech by the Russian ambassador to the UN, to gain the necessary two-thirds majority in the Assembly for partition. Even though hardly any Palestinian or Arab diplomat made an effort to promote the alternative scheme, it won an equal number of supporters and detractors, showing that a considerable number of member states realized that imposing partition amounted to supporting one side and opposing the other.

The next day brought the first outburst of intra-communal violence, activated by hot-headed youth on both sides. It was less spontaneous than



Map 3 The UNGA Partition Plan, 1947

it seemed to outside observers. A month earlier, Israel Galilli, the chief of staff of the military force, had ordered the concentration of troops in the north and south of Palestine. These forces were ready to respond by force to angry and violent demonstrations, and were attacked by the *shabab*, the local Arab youth.<sup>8</sup>

A slow deterioration into a widespread civil war in the next few months generated second thoughts in the UN, and in Washington, about the desirability, indeed, the feasibility, of the partition plan. But it was too late for a large number of Palestinians, evicted from their houses after their leaders lost the early battles with the Jewish forces. Twelve days after the adoption of the UN resolution, the expulsion of Palestinians began. A month later, the first Palestinian village was wiped out by Jewish retaliation to a Palestinian attack on convoys and Jewish settlements. This action was transformed into an ethnic cleansing operation in March, which resulted in the loss to Palestine of much of its indigenous population.<sup>9</sup>

The UN reassessment was also too late for those Jewish settlers and Palestinians who lost their lives in the more organized confrontations that ended in mutual slaughter. It was also too late to prevent the surge of warlike rhetoric in the Arab world, where more serious preparations for a military campaign were begun. In short, the Mandate disintegrated before the UN could make up its mind how best to replace it. The British government did not help by prohibiting the arrival in Palestine of UN officials who wanted to supervise the transition according to the partition resolution. It is doubtful whether their arrival would have prevented the Palestinian catastrophe or the war. At best, we would have had an additional source for what took place in those months leading to the actual Arab–Israeli war. These developments extended from December 1947 to 15 May 1948, when the last British soldier left Palestine.

The deteriorating situation meant that, from January 1948, increasing numbers of Palestinians were drawn into the political and military drama in which Palestine had been embroiled since the British decided to evacuate in February 1947. At the beginning of 1948, the first units of Arab volunteers entered Palestine, organized within the Arab Salvation Army, a paramilitary organization sponsored by the Arab League and commanded by Fawzi al-Qawuqji, a veteran Syrian soldier who had fought in Palestine as a volunteer in 1937. The official mission of this force was to counter the upper hand initially seized by the Jews via their swift possession of army bases and civilian posts evacuated by the British. There was another force in the country, the Arab Legion, the units of which were an integral part of the Mandate's police force. These units did not withdraw

with the rest of the British forces, and were stationed in the west bank of the River Jordan.

Al-Qawuqji's forces were not very effective in defending the local civilians; they also introduced a foreign, at times alien, element into the lives of local Palestinians. They were reported as being condescending and acting as military rulers in the areas in which they stayed.<sup>10</sup> Their presence was also strongly felt due to the hasty departure of many members of the local Palestinian elite, who left in fear of the oncoming conflict and in the hope of returning to a calmer Palestine (70,000 left between September 1947 and March 1948). This exodus produced a collective sense of insecurity and terror among many segments of the Palestinian urban population. On the other hand, Arab Legion forces were somewhat more effective in protecting Palestinians, but were used mainly in strengthening pro-Hashemite elements within local politics at the expense of persons known to be loyal to the Arab Higher Committee. The legionaries were preparing the ground for the future annexation to Transjordan of as much of eastern Palestine as they could seize.

#### THE ETHNIC CLEANSING OF PALESTINE (MARCH–MAY 1948)

In March 1948, the military campaign began in earnest. It was driven by Plan D, a military blueprint prepared by the Hagana in anticipation of combating the Arab forces in Palestine and facing the Arab armies after 14 May 1948. Until March 1948, clashes between the two communities, beginning the day after the UN partition plan was accepted by the General Assembly, were scattered, random and uncontrolled. Plan D was prepared as an attempt to organize the Jewish effort; an attempt not mirrored in any way by the Palestinian leadership. The latter made some effort at uniting paramilitary groups under one command, and fusing the various national funds into one budget. They also tried to create an overall apparatus that would run the 'national committees', and would be responsible for defending villages and neighbourhoods as well as for sustaining law and order once the British forces were evacuated. Compared with the systematic Jewish preparations, these efforts were ineffectual and risible. There was enough military will to try to capture vital road junctions and attack isolated Jewish settlements, but not the resilience to sustain those achievements. For a while, the paramilitary forces led by Abd al-Qader al-Husayni and Hasan Salameh succeeded in cutting the road between Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, the designated capital of the Jewish state, but all these actions collapsed once Plan D was put into operation in April and May 1948.

The Jewish leadership felt the need to be more systematic, less because of possible Palestinian successes, than because it apprehended a change in the international, in particular the American, mood and approach to the Palestine question. In March 1948, the American administration developed second thoughts about the practicability of the partition plan. The American delegation to the UN offered an alternative solution: an international trusteeship over Palestine for five years, followed by a review aimed at a permanent settlement. Strong lobbying by the Jewish community in the United States averted this change of policy, but it indicated the feebleness of the UN's commitment to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Plan D was put into full operation in April and May. It had two very clear objectives, the first being to take swiftly and systematically any installation, military or civilian, evacuated by the British. The success of this goal depended on the sympathies of the British officers or officials in charge. Those with pro-Zionist affinities provided the necessary prior information to enable the Hagana to occupy headquarters of essential services and key military bases. The pro-Palestinian Britons, on the other hand, could not always locate those they wished to help.

The second, and far more important, objective of the plan was to cleanse the future Jewish state of as many Palestinians as possible. The main military force was the Hagana, which had several brigades. Each brigade received a list of villages it was to occupy. Most of the villages were destined to be destroyed, and only in very exceptional cases were the soldiers ordered to leave them intact.

In addition, some of the brigades were to engage in the take-over of the mixed Arab–Jewish towns of Palestine and their environs. This meant occupation and the expulsion of the Palestinian population. This was the fate of Jaffa, Haifa, Safad and Tiberias. (In some Israeli, and even critical Israeli, historiography, Haifa is singled out as a place where there was a genuine attempt by the Zionist leadership to persuade the local population to stay.) The campaign for Haifa began on 20 April 1948. A few days earlier, the Jewish forces had committed the Dir Yassin massacre, a well-publicized bloodbath. The local people were terrorized, and further intimidated by explosions set off by Jewish forces in Arab neighbourhoods and harassed by sniper fire all around. Very few Palestinians stayed in the city, and their leaders considered the Jewish offer to stay deceitful and hypocritical. Their fear for their lives was accentuated by massacres committed in Balad al-Shaykh, where in January 1948 scores of Palestinians were slaughtered in retaliation for a terrorist attack on Jewish workers in the nearby refinery.<sup>11</sup>

Several massacres were committed near the mixed towns, sometimes in retaliation for Palestinian attacks on Jewish convoys, but quite often they were unmitigated acts of brutality. They may have been meant to, as they eventually did, force Palestinians living in areas falling into Jewish hands to flee under the threat of death or eviction. These atrocities were not randomly committed; they were part of a master plan to rid the future Jewish state of as many Palestinians as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Like many master plans throughout history, Plan D was general, and in parts vague. No less important than the plan was the atmosphere created, which paved the way for the ethnic cleansing operation in Palestine. Thus, while the actions of the Hagana were part of a master plan, it had no clear and specific local directives. The plan was executed because the soldiers in the battlefield were oriented by a general attitude from above and motivated by remarks made by the Yishuv's leaders on the need to 'clean' the country. These remarks were translated into acts of depopulation by enthusiastic commanders on the ground, who knew that their actions would be justified in retrospect by the political leadership.

By the time the British left in the middle of May, one-third of the Palestinian population had already been evicted. The British were officially responsible for law and order during the early phases of the removal of the indigenous population, a depopulation that was assisted by a first wave of about 70,000 Palestinians belonging to the social and economic elite of the country, who had fled Palestine by January 1948. This departure of the urban elite explains in part why the expulsion policy was so effective in that first phase of the war in and around the mixed Arab-Jewish towns as well as in western Jerusalem. The end of the Mandate also signalled the end of the first phase in the 1948 war, which was akin to a civil war situation, and lasted for six months from December 1947 to May 1948. In the second phase, established participants, such as the British army, disappeared, and new ones, such as regular Arab armies, appeared for the first time.

#### THE PALESTINE WAR (MAY 1948-JANUARY 1949)

The second phase consisted in part of trench warfare and the occupation of military positions. It had features of a modern war, with random air bombardment of civilian targets and heavy shelling of neighbourhoods in mixed towns. It was a long war, punctuated by considerable lulls. Two truces were signed during the second phase, and from January 1949 onwards almost all the Arab armies concluded an armistice agreement with the new Jewish state.

That the Arab states succeeded in fielding any soldiers at all is remarkable. Only at the end of April 1948 did the politicians in the Arab world prepare a plan to save Palestine, which in practice was a scheme to annex as much of it as possible to the Arab countries participating in the war. Most of these armies had very little war experience, and were barely trained by the end of the Mandate. The co-ordination between them was poor, as were the morale and motivation of the soldiers, apart from a large group of volunteers, whose enthusiasm could not compensate for their lack of military skills. The Arab world, its leaders and societies, vowed to save Palestine. The politicians were hardly sincere; the soldiers and their commanders were probably more genuine in their commitment to salvage Palestine.

The poor level of performance on the battlefield was not just an Arab phenomenon; it was evident on the Jewish side too, which was at first handicapped by lack of firepower. This was amended during the first truce in the war, in June 1948, when the Zionist leaders managed to purchase arms from the Eastern bloc, while Britain, obeying a UN decree, imposed an embargo on three armies that used only British-made ammunition: Egypt, Iraq and Jordan.<sup>13</sup> Among the Jewish troops was a large number of fresh immigrants with no war experience; but the core of the army was better prepared and more experienced. The number of fighting men on both sides, including those from neighbouring Arab countries, was equal almost throughout the war.

The Arab governments fielded about 25,000 troops, and as the war went on raised the number to 100,000. Similar numbers were deployed by the Jewish community, including both the Hagana and the Irgun.

Before May 1948, the crucial elements in the two camps were the Hagana's special forces, the Palmach, and the paramilitary units of the Palestinian side. The Palmach had 7,000 men at its disposal in 1948. These were well-trained soldiers, facing an equal number of Palestinians with poor arms and hardly any military discipline or experience and divided into factional units owing their allegiance to clans, or at best to ideological parties.

On 14 May 1948, the state of Israel was declared. At 1 a.m. the next day, the American president, Harry Truman, announced his country's *de facto* recognition of the new state. An hour earlier, Sir Alan Cunningham, the last British high commissioner, had left the country. Two days later, the Soviet Union added its recognition, but went further than its rival superpower and granted a *de jure* recognition. One after the other in the following days, other states recognized Israel. No one seemed to consider or dwell on the possible implications of this act on the fate of the majority of Palestine's people, the Palestinian Arabs.

At midnight on 15 May, while Cunningham was leaving, an Egyptian force of about 10,000 troops (half of which were trained soldiers) crossed the border between the Sinai and the Negev. On the same day, this contingent proceeded quickly to the coast, attacking isolated Jewish settlements along the way and capturing some of them. Egyptian aircraft bombarded Tel-Aviv from the air. Syrian and Lebanese troops crossed their respective borders with ex-Mandate Palestine, but were halted by the fierce resistance of Jewish settlements near the borders. The Arab Legion forces only faced resistance near four isolated Jewish settlements in the Gush Etzion area near Jerusalem; every major town they entered in the West Bank, or what would be called the West Bank, offered no Jewish resistance. The Legion paused near the city of Jerusalem, the fate of which remained undecided despite the tacit understanding before the war between the Hashemites and the Jews on the partitioning of post-Mandate Palestine between them.

On 19 May, the Legion attacked the city of Jerusalem. Its troops succeeded in capturing the Jewish quarter in the Old City, but otherwise had put little effort into defending Arab neighbourhoods on the western side of the city, which enabled the Jewish forces to create their own enclave in that part of Jerusalem. They also found a way of opening the road to Tel-Aviv, the designated capital of the Jewish state. The Iraqis, the Jordanians' main partners, recorded one victory: they averted an Israeli attempt to occupy the city of Jenin. Apart from this they were used by the Jordanians to maintain law and order in Samaria, now practically under Jordan's control.

Five days into the fighting, the UN did what it should have done long before: it reassessed its policy on Palestine. On 20 May, the General Secretary appointed a mediator. Count Folke Bernadotte was given the task of recommending an alternative solution to partition. The Security Council called for a cease-fire, which was answered only two weeks later.

A week of fighting passed. The only Arab successes were against isolated Jewish settlements, but the attackers were unable to hold onto the areas they occupied, and were retreating by the time the first week of fighting ended. The basic Egyptian achievement was in joining forces with the Arab Legion around Bethlehem and southern Jerusalem, but this was short-lived. The two Arab contingents lost this vantage point, and the Jewish forces drove a wedge between the Egyptian troops there and those stranded in the Negev in an area known as the Faluja pocket (where incidentally Gamal Abd al-Nasser served as a young officer). The Syrians and the Lebanese began losing ground as soon as they started their operations. On 18 May, the Jewish forces occupied Acre. Those Palestinians who had

arrived from Haifa in the middle of April as refugees were driven out once more, this time making their way to Lebanon.

By 24 May, the situation on the northern front was clearer. The Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese forces, which had entered northern Palestine, began a hasty withdrawal. A Syrian counter-attack on 6 June failed, and the Arab forces were left within a small zone of Palestine adjacent to the Sea of Galilee. After the 1948 war, this area became the main bone of contention between Syria and Israel, the struggle for which ignited the tensions leading to the 1967 war. In other fronts the situation was similar. The lack of ammunition, long supply lines and an absence of military experience left the Arab side unable to withstand the Jewish forces, which, although consisting of a similar number of troops, were more experienced and better equipped.

On 10 June, the first truce was signed. Parts of southern Palestine were still in the hands of the Egyptians, and the West Bank and East Jerusalem were in Jordanian hands. In at least two places there was a readiness to accept this situation as positive and a basis for a post-war settlement: Amman, where King Abdullah was happy to have such a large portion of Palestine in his hands, and London, where the foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, and his Middle Eastern experts saw such a division of Palestine as fair and functional. For the British policy makers, this formula was a plausible solution to the conflict, as well as an arrangement that served the British interests in the area quite well.

But in Tel-Aviv, Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad, there was a will to continue the bloodshed, with each party hoping to make more territorial gains. For some of the Arab politicians, this was a case of political survival, as stopping the military operations might have signalled an admission of defeat to the growing nationalist opposition at home. They should have known better, as on the eve of the lull Israel flaunted its military power and superiority by bombarding all the nearby Arab capitals.

During the lull in the fighting, the Arab armies failed to replenish their arms supplies, since Britain was resolved to observe the UN arms embargo on the warring parties. The Jewish forces, on the other hand, continued to circumvent the sanction by importing considerable quantities of heavy arms from the Eastern bloc countries that were disobeying the UN policy. The parity of the first week was replaced by a Jewish superiority once fighting was resumed in the middle of June 1948.

The flow of arms to the Jewish forces was to have a grave effect on political stability. In the middle of the truce, the Jewish side was slipping dangerously towards civil war. The attempt to unite all the underground factions into a single military unit had proved very difficult. In particular,

the Irgun, with its fanaticism and nationalism, refused to accept a central authority. On 22 June, it tried to smuggle in a shipload of arms to strengthen its own military power. The ship was discovered by the Hagana and destroyed. Two persons directly involved in the incident would carry the consequences of this clash into Israeli politics. One was Menachem Begin, who was on the ship and would make a political career out of his attempt to vindicate those on board the ship. The other was Yitzhak Rabin, one of the Hagana commanders on the ground, whom veteran Irgun supporters would regard as a traitor. Many years later they brought up the incident again after Rabin signed the Oslo accords, fuelling the campaign of hatred that culminated in his assassination.

On 8 July, fighting recommenced for ten days before a second truce was imposed. The initiative was now firmly on the Jewish side. Israel's leaders, furnished with new weapons but apprehensive lest the international community impose an unfavourable solution on them, made an effort to complete a take-over of most of Palestine. In the coming months the successful Israeli campaigns continued, leading to their complete control of Palestine, apart from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Both sides lost many troops in the battles, but the Arab armies in particular suffered high casualties. The Israeli government lost no time in capitalizing on its military successes in order to radically transform the political situation in Palestine. In August, the Israeli coin, the lira, replaced the existing currency. In the same month, the Israeli government began to lay claim to the spoils left behind by the British. They took over many bank accounts, both public and private. Some of the governmental accounts were of course kept in London, and it was the British government that completed the total dispossession of the Palestinians from any share in the ex-Mandate's wealth by handing over those remaining accounts to the Jewish state in the early 1950s. The Palestinians, to this day, have failed to gain access to any of the money accumulated during thirty years of British taxation in Palestine.<sup>14</sup>

August also saw a huge wave of Jewish immigration. This placed an economic burden on the Zionist community, which was already fighting for its life. In particular, the people of Jerusalem were living in harsh conditions under military rule, and could hardly absorb newcomers. Fortunately for them, however, the Hashemites were withdrawing from the battlefield by August, and a weak limb in the Zionist body was saved.

Another symbol of change was the arrival of American and Russian diplomatic representatives in Tel-Aviv, although this diplomatic prestige was endangered when Jewish extremists assassinated Count Bernadotte in September 1948, thereby clashing for the first time with the UN, which

until then had been openly pro-Zionist. For the Jewish leader David Ben-Gurion, the least acceptable part of Bernadotte's plan had been to cede the Negev and annex it to Jordan, a plan fully supported and encouraged by the British government. With Bernadotte's demise, the way was clear for a complete military take-over of that part of Palestine. The Israelis occupied Beersheba in October 1948 and the Israeli army even threatened to enter Sinai and the West Bank; i.e. to enter Egypt proper and ignore the tacit understanding with Jordan. The UN tried to deter the Israelis with sanctions, the USA sent a sharp warning, and the British gave an ultimatum that the Israeli operations were a *casus belli* in London's view. These moves succeeded in keeping the Israelis within the cease-fire lines.

There was little the Arab states involved in the war could do in the face of such a military conquest. They consented to enter, under UN supervision, a series of dialogues between Israel and the Arab countries involved (apart from Iraq, which did not have a border with Israel). The negotiations produced armistice lines that held in the case of Syria, Jordan and Egypt until 1967, and in the case of Lebanon until 1978. However, these arrangements did not permanently prevent another war, and were a source of frequent border skirmishes. In a way, it appears that the Nobel Prize granted to their architect, Ralph Bunch (Bernadotte's deputy when the mediator was murdered), was unwarranted. At the time, at least, they stopped the fighting.

#### THE ETHNIC CLEANSING OF PALESTINE (MAY 1948-JANUARY 1949)

While a conventional war raged in several parts of Palestine, in others it took a very different form. The conventional war occurred on the edges of what was to be the Jewish state and within areas the Jews coveted in the proposed Palestinian state. Within the Jewish state proper, a strange and chilling situation developed around 300 or so Palestinian villages. In order to convey to readers what happened, I will focus briefly on the chronicles of 64 villages out of the 370 wiped out by Israel, in order to highlight a situation within the heart of rural Palestine that led to its almost complete disappearance.

These villages lay in the area between the coastal towns of Tel-Aviv and Haifa. One of the Hagana's brigades, the Alexandroni, was entrusted with the mission of Judaizing this part of Palestine. From the end of April until the end of July 1948, a grim scene was repeated in almost every village. Armed Israeli soldiers surrounded each village on three sides, and put the

villagers to flight through the fourth side. In many cases, if the people refused to leave, they were forced onto lorries, and driven away to the West Bank. In some villages, there were Arab volunteers who resisted by force, and when these villages were conquered they were immediately blown up and destroyed.

By 14 May, the day the Jewish state was declared, 58 villages had already been wiped out. Six remained. Three, Jaba', Ijzim and Ein Ghazal, would be obliterated in July. Two, Fureidis and Jisr al-Zarqa, about 35 kilometres south of Haifa, are still there today. These two villages provided cheap labour to the veteran Jewish settlements of Zichron Yaacov and Binyamina, and thus were spared.<sup>15</sup>

Tantura, the largest of the six remaining villages, was caught in the middle of Jewish territory like 'a bone in the throat', according to the Alexandroni official history of the war.<sup>16</sup> On 23 May, its day came too. Tantura was an old Palestinian village, large by the standards of that period, with around 1,500 inhabitants, and dependent on agriculture and fishing. Two or three notables, including the mukhtar, the head of the village, were offered terms of surrender by the Jewish intelligence officers. They rejected them, suspecting, quite rightly it seems, that surrender would lead to expulsion. At first, the Jewish commander contemplated sending a van with a loudspeaker calling on people to surrender, but this did not happen. On the night of 22 May, the village was attacked from four sides. This was uncommon, as we have seen. Lack of coordination led to a complete encirclement of the village, a situation that left a large number of villagers in the hands of the occupying force.

The captives were moved to the beach. There, the men were separated from the women and children, who were expelled to nearby Fureidis. (Some families were reunited eighteen months later.) Two hundred men between the ages of thirteen and thirty were massacred by the Alexandroni and other Jewish forces. Both revenge and a calculated wish to kill men of fighting age motivated this bloodshed. There were similar incidents in many other locations, the details of which still await the research of future scholars.<sup>17</sup>

In Galilee and the Negev, as on the coastal plain, other Israeli brigades used similar strategies for Judaizing the new state. The Israeli operations in Galilee were based on a systematic plan of expulsion, but one that depended heavily on local circumstances, which created a pattern that in hindsight seems illogical, to say the least. For example, the city of Nazareth and the town of Shafamru, not on particularly good terms with the Jewish settlement, were left intact, while a village near Mount Tabor that wished

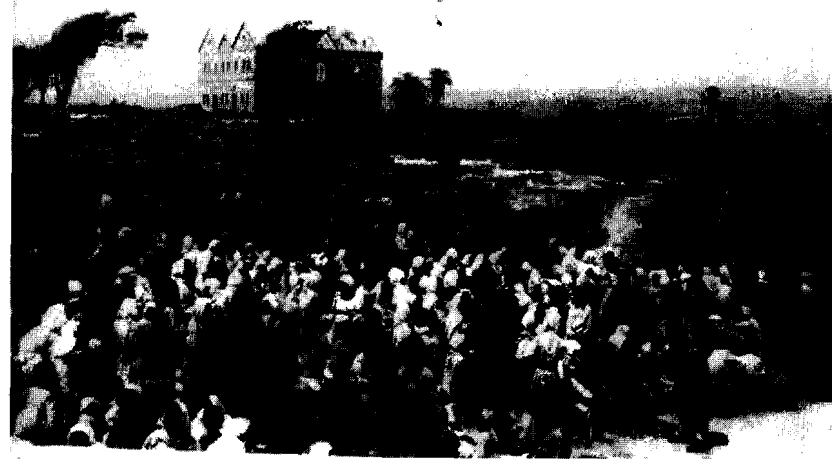


Figure 5 The women and children of Tantura shortly after the occupation in May 1948

to conclude a non-aggression pact with the Yishuv was destroyed and its inhabitants expelled. The systematic aspect was in the methods employed, of first terrorizing the population, executing a few to induce others to leave, and then inviting an official committee to assess the value of land and property in the deserted villages or neighbourhoods.

By the winter of 1949, the guns were silent. The second phase of the war had ended, and with it the second, but not the last, stage of the 'cleansing' of Palestine was over. The third phase was to extend beyond the war, until 1954, and will be dealt with in the next chapter. While in the first phase it was urban Palestine that was subjected to expulsions and massacres, the bulk of the population living in the rural areas became victims of this policy after May 1948. Out of about 850,000 Palestinians living in the territories designated by the UN as a Jewish state, only 160,000 remained on or nearby their land and homes. Those who remained became the Palestinian minority in Israel. The rest were expelled or fled under the threat of expulsion, and a few thousand died in massacres.

Thus, when winter was over and the spring of 1949 warmed a particularly frozen Palestine, the land as we have described it in this book – reconstructing a period stretching over 250 years – had changed beyond recognition. The countryside, the rural heart of Palestine, with its colourful and

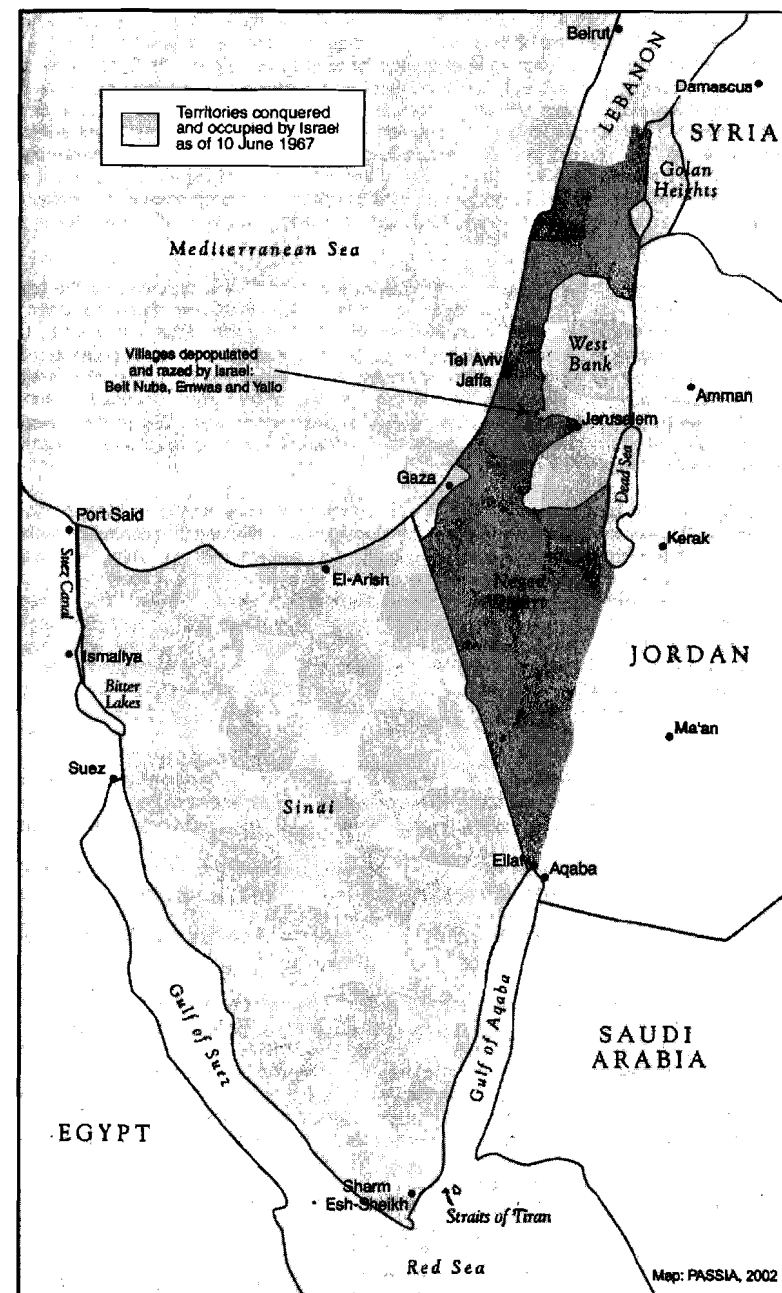


picturesque villages, was ruined. Half of the villages had been destroyed, flattened by Israeli bulldozers which had been at work since August 1948 when the government had decided either to turn them into cultivated land or to build new Jewish settlements on their remains. A naming committee granted the new settlements Hebraized versions of the original Arab names: Lubyā became Lavi, and Safuriā Zipori, although Iteit retained its original name. David Ben-Gurion explained that this was done as part of an attempt to prevent future claim to the villages. It was also supported by the Israeli archaeologists, who had authorized the names as returning the map to something resembling 'ancient Israel'.<sup>18</sup>

Urban Palestine was similarly crushed. The Palestinian neighbourhoods in mixed towns were destroyed, apart from a few quarters that were left empty, to be populated later by Jewish immigrants from Arab countries. The non-mixed towns experienced two very different fates. The people of Lydda, Ramleh and Majdal were evicted by force, suffering massacres and humiliation in the process. Shafamru and Nazareth, on the other hand, remained intact, but were hopelessly overpopulated by streams of refugees fleeing from nearby villages.

Three-quarters of a million Palestinians became refugees. This was almost 90 per cent of those living in what was designated as the Jewish state. By the winter of 1948, they were already in tents provided by international charity organizations, warmed only by the UN resolution promising them a quick return to their homes. Those living in the Gaza Strip became acquainted with Egyptian military rule, harsh at the time, but mostly indifferent, in a packed area that included the largest segment of the refugee community. Those in the West Bank who were still in their own homes and had retained their connection to the Hashemites carved out a new political and economic future for themselves. Those who found themselves as refugees there were crammed into tented camps, living off charity and solidarity. Those who still hoped for an independent Palestine soon encountered the rough treatment of the Hashemite secret service and police, but later succeeded in creating a national political infrastructure for independent action.

Palestine was lost to the Palestinians in the 1948 war, as much on the diplomatic front as on the battlefield. The tacit understanding reached between Israel and Jordan on the eve of the war over the partitioning of post-Mandate Palestine neutralized the Arab Legion, Jordan's efficient, British-led army, which confined its activity to the area around Jerusalem. This was a strategic decision that determined the balance of power in the 1948 war. In all, apart from a short period of parity, the Jewish side had



Map 4 The Near East after the 1967 June War

more, but not significantly more, soldiers and ammunition as the war continued. It was highly mobilized compared to its opponents, and far better organized. The Hagana could draw from a reserve of Western-trained and home-grown officers with military experience. It had an effective centralized system of command and control and fought over a relatively small area, enabling it to operate swiftly and more efficiently than the Egyptian or Iraqi armies, fighting a long way from home.

The settlement policy of the Jewish Agency left many settlements in isolated positions, and the general balance of power was not reflected around these spots. There were, according to the official Israeli foundational mythology, a few Jews against many Arabs in several battles, and Jewish acts of heroism were indeed performed on these killing fields, but this was not universal. Nonetheless, the 660,000-strong Jewish community suffered 6,000 deaths, of which 2,000 were civilians: in all, 1 per cent of the population.

Palestine now became a new geo-political entity, or rather three entities. Two, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, were ill-defined, the first fully annexed to Jordan, but without the population's consent or enthusiasm; the second in limbo under military rule, its inhabitants prevented from entering Egypt proper. The third entity was Israel, bent on Judaizing every part of Palestine, and building a new living organism, the Jewish community of Israel.

The catastrophe that befell the Palestinians would be remembered in the collective national memory as the Nakbah, the catastrophe, kindling the fire that would unite the Palestinians in a national movement. Its self-image would be that of an indigenous population led by a guerrilla movement wishing without success to turn the clock back. The Israelis' collective memory would depict the war as the act of a national liberation movement fighting both British colonialism and Arab hostility, and winning against all odds. Their loss of 1 per cent of the population would cloud the joy of achieving independence, but not the will and determination to Judaize Palestine and turn it into a future haven for world Jewry in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

## *The Age of Partition (1948–1967)*

### DISLOCATION AND DISPOSSESSION

About 2.5 million people now lived within the borders of what had been Mandate Palestine. In the newly created state of Israel, these included newcomers, the majority of them Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Arab countries, but also the 160,000 Palestinians who somehow had been able to stay on the land. Nearly one million of Palestine's indigenous population had been made refugees; many of these had been expelled to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, others to nearby Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

The refugees came from all walks of life, but those who found themselves thrown together in the camps shared a similar socio-economic background. Whether camp dwellers or not, rich or poor, they had all experienced the collective and personal trauma that would consolidate their future ties as a national community, their sense of identity centred on their lost homeland. This allows us, indeed obliges us, to include the history of the refugees within that of the land itself. The majority were farmers, who began to prosper after the Second World War but found that this little changed their standard of living as much of their profits were spent in their villages on the construction of a social and welfare infrastructure that the Mandate had failed to provide. Now, in 1948, expelled by force from their homeland, they were beggars who depended on United Nations hand-outs, and living in the hope of soon returning to their homes. Putting it differently, about one million Palestinians were still living in Palestine itself, where they were now outnumbered by 1.5 million Jews, while another million Palestinians lived near the borders of Palestine, mostly in refugee camps.<sup>1</sup>

The 'society' of what had been Mandate Palestine included others apart from the indigenous people who had been expelled and the newcomers who had settled on their land. These were the veteran Zionists, some from as early as the 1880s. The first half of the 1950s were years in which both