Conflicting Narratives of the 1948 War

Lindsey Weiss

Abstract

The 1948 War was a triumphant victory for the Jews of Israel and a tragic disaster for the Arabs of Palestine. The traditional Zionist rendition of the war, or "old" history, depicts Israel as a fledgling Jewish state heroically thrust into a survivalist fight for independence. Revisionist works of "new" history challenge these accounts, and reject Israel's role as an innocent protagonist in the conflict. While there is extensive literature analyzing these conflicting narratives in depth, there exists a lack of academic writing that objectively compares the two accounts through the lens of specific historical events. This paper discusses the differences in new and old history in the context of the 1948 War, specifically focusing on the issues of the Arab-Israeli military balance, the motivation behind Arab war objectives, and the origins of the Palestinian refugee crisis. It concludes that no narrative has a complete monopoly of historical accuracy, and that it is necessary to consider information from both sides in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the 1948 War.

Introduction

The discrepancy between Israeli and Palestinian narratives of the 1948 War is so pervasive that it manifests itself in the names that the two sides give the conflict. While Israelis know it as "The War of Independence," Palestinians refer to the time between 1947 and 1949 as "*al-Nakba,*" meaning "the Disaster."[1] Traditional Zionist, or "old" history, literature portrays the 1948 War as the Jewish state's first fight for survival, resulting in a miraculous Israeli victory against a powerful, unified, and overall superior Arab military force. The public generally accepted this Zionist history, and it dominated the academic and political arena until Israel released its war archives in the 1980s. The new information in these unearthed documents inspired the wave of revisionist, or "new" history—a critical sociological quest to analytically examine conventional Zionist accounts of the Israeli Arab conflict. New historians argued that old literature was misleading and driven by a political agenda that sought to exonerate Israel from any conflict-related liability. While new history is not characterized as "pro-Palestinian," it emphasized the need for formerly blameless Israel to assume a portion of the responsibility and acknowledge that the state was not always acting with peaceful intentions. This paper will outline the fundamental disagreements between the Zionist and revisionist historical narratives of the 1948 War, specifically those exhibited in the

---

[1] Avi Shlaim, "The Debate about 1948," in *Making Israel*, ed. Benny Morris (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007), 133.

opposing accounts of the Arab-Israeli military balance, the motivation behind Arab war objectives, and the origins of the Palestinian refugee crisis.

Discussion

One of the most hotly debated aspects of the 1948 War is the military balance between the Israelis and their Arab opposition. The traditional Zionist account depicts a heroic battle in which Israel's Haganah—later renamed the Israel Defense Force (IDF)—miraculously defeated a militarily superior Arab adversary. Literature of the old history remembers that on May 12, 1948, Israeli senior military advisors warned the political leadership that the newly formed Jewish state had only a 50 percent chance of surviving the inevitable Arab invasion.[2] The members of the *Yishuv,* the Jewish community in Israel, totaled a meager 650,000 compared to the 1.2 million Palestine Arabs and 40 million Arabs in bordering countries.[3] Proponents of the Zionist account hold that the war was fought between an Israeli David and an Arab Goliath—"the few against the many."[4] The Zionist narrative portrays the Jewish population as a vulnerable, underdog community that astoundingly emerged from the 1948 War victorious due to their determination and heroism, but new history questions whether the Israeli victory was truly as miraculous as old history claims.[5] New historians do not deny the bravery of the Jewish fighters, but they do contest the conventional Zionist belief that the Arabs had a significant numerical and technological advantage over Israel. The new history narrative asserts that the Yishuv's forces enjoyed some advantages that are omitted from Zionist literature. According to the new narrative, Israel won the war because of its larger, better trained and technologically superior military forces.[6] The IDF experienced initial setbacks, but the fighting during the preliminary, unofficial phase of the war strengthened the Yishuv and allowed it to gain the upper hand by the time Arab states enlisted their regular armies. Contrary to the Zionist description of the IDF as a rag-tag militia, Israel's forces were full of Western-trained officers with extensive military experience.[7] Israel lacked weapons during the early stages of the war, but soon gained firepower advantage by importing rifles, machine guns, airplanes, and ammunition from Europe during the first truce.[8] In addition to military expertise, new history literature points out that unlike the armies of the Arab states, Israeli forces had an "effective centralized system of command and control," and "short, internal lines of communication" which allowed them to function quickly and with more mobility than their Arab counterparts.[9] Finally, new historians reject the Zionist claim that Israel was overwhelmingly outnumbered on the battlefield. In fact, they argue that Israeli ground forces were larger in size and that the IDF numerically reinforced its troops at a rate that the Arabs states could not match. In May 1948, Arab states had only 25,000 troops in Palestine while the IDF boasted over

---

[2] Shlaim, "The Debate about 1948," 135.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Avi Shlaim, "Israel and the Arab coalition in 1948," *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the history of 1948*, ed. Eugene L Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 81.
[5] Said Aly, Abdel Monem, Shai Feldman, and Khalil Shikaki, *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 61.
[6] Alan Dowty, *Israel/Palestine* 3rd ed. (Malden: Polity, 2012), 95.
[7] Shlaim, "The Debate about 1948," 134.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

35,000 soldiers in the field. By December of 1948, the IDF mobilized 96,441 men under arms, which outnumbered Arab soldiers at a ratio of almost two to one.[10] According to new history, an Israeli victory was not a miracle, but the inexorable result of a war fought between two sides with an unequal balance of power.

Related to the military balance is the question of the motivation behind Arab war objectives in 1948—why did the Arab states simultaneously attack Israel once it proclaimed statehood? Old historians answer that the invasion was a monolithic attempt to support the formation of the Arab state of Palestine, destroy Israel, and push all the Jews into the sea.[11] The Zionist narrative refers to the fact that all the Arab states involved in the 1948 War, with the exception of Jordan, rejected the United Nations partition plan. The day that the British mandate expired, seven surrounding Arab states invaded Israel, spewing anti-Semetic rhetoric and threatening to wipe out the Jewish population. Old history also focuses on the Arab League's original unified plan for invasion which was obtainable, functional, and dangerously realistic. The new history does not reject the entire Zionist account, but looks into the intentions of the individual Arab states after the beginning of the 1948 War. In contrast with the Zionist narrative, new historians argue that the Arab states were not unified under a common goal to establish Palestinian statehood, ut were instead divided by their own self-serving aims. Many of these new narratives focus on the relationship between Israel and King Abdullah of Jordan who held "nominal command" over Arab forces in Palestine.[12] King Abdullah was a destabilizing force in the Arab League's plan because he entered the war in order to gain control over the Arab territory within Palestine, not to help create an independent Palestinian state. This opened a Pandora's Box of mistrust and division between the Arab countries. Ineffective political systems, weak militaries, and shaky alliances with Western countries plagued many of the Arab states. Countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon entered the 1948 War not to answer the call of beleaguered Palestinian victims, but to respond to Jordan's quest to control the territory which the victims inhabited.[13] The war became a decentralized effort to check the growth of Jordanian power, with each country carrying out different political agendas and military plans. This disunity proved to be a liability and ultimately led to the Arab defeat against the unified, well-organized, and coordinated Israeli forces.[14] The 1948 War evolved into a land grab wrought with national selfishness and decentralized motives that were unrecognizable from the Zionist accounts of pan-Arab rhetoric calling for an independent Palestine.[15]

Another notable bone of contention between the traditional Zionist/old history narrative and the new history account concerns responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem. The debate centers around the question: did the Palestinians leave or did Israeli forces push them out? Old historians answer that, with the exception of a few deplorable events such as the massacre at Deir Yassin, Palestinians were not forced out but instead left on their own accord. Zionists also attest that many Palestinian refugees fled due to the

---

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 139.
[12] Ibid., 140.
[13] Aly, Monem, Feldman, and Shikaki, *Arabs and Israelis,* 75.
[14] Rashid I Khalidi, 'The Palestinians and 1948: The Underlying causes of failure," *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the history of 1948*, ed. Eugene L Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28.
[15] Shlaim, "The Debate about 1948," 140.

encouragement of local leaders who wanted to clear the way for invading Arab forces.[16] These Zionist accounts reject any attempt to place blame on Israeli shoulders—they believe strongly that the refugee problem could have been avoided if the Arab states had not rejected the UN partition plan. Old historians hold that the Arabs' unwillingness to compromise caused the 1948 War, and this war of aggression the root of the refugee crisis.[17] The Palestinian narrative maintains that the IDF forced 750,000 Arabs from their homes in an Israeli attempt to ethnically cleanse the new Jewish state[18]. The displaced Palestinians insist that the uprooting was deliberate and systematic, and that under UN Resolution, 194 all refugees have the right to return to their homeland or receive reparation.[19]

The complex nature of the 1948 War manifests itself in every conflicting narrative, but the contending accounts of the Palestinian refugee crisis are particularly strong indicators of the importance of both the old and the new history. In his book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, historian Benny Morris investigates the topic in an objective and dispassionate manner unique to most literature covering the crisis. Despite thorough and detailed research, his conclusion is simple: neither the Arabs nor the Israelis were innocent in the birth of the Palestinian refugee crisis. His findings show that the events between 1947 and 1949 were so varied and the situation so volatile that it is impossible to assign a "single-cause explanation" to such a multifaceted issue.[20] Morris asserts that the cause of the refugee problem is not exclusively Arab or Israeli—the crisis was due to a war between two guilty parties.[21] The Palestinian refugee crisis is simply one instance that proves neither narrative is completely correct.

Conclusion

The 1948 War was not a bilateral conflict, but instead a multidimensional event in history. In a situation so fueled by passion and emotion, it is unfeasible to believe that any existing narrative is entirely objective. Both the old history and the new history hold dimensions of truth, but the truth is often hidden between layers of prejudice, propaganda, and nationalism. Considering only one interpretation, given conflicting versions of the same event, is detrimental—it comprimises the overall accuracy of historiography. A one-sided approach excludes the essential information that is only found by comprehensively examining a broad range of accounts. This holds especially true when deciphering old and new historical accounts of the 1948 War, in which it is necessary to recognize both the merits and bias in every narrative.

••

---

[16] Aly, Monem, Feldman, and Shikaki, *Arabs and Israelis,* 60.
[17] Efraim Karsh, "Were the Palestinians expelled?," *Commentary* 110.1 (July 2000), 29.
[18] Dowty, *Israel/Palestine*, 3rd ed., 98.
[19] Walter Z. Laqueur and Barry M. Rubin, eds., *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary history of the Middle East conflict*, 7th revised and updated ed. (New York City: Penguin Books, 2008), 83.
[20] Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian refugee problem revisited*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 599.
[21] Ibid.

Works Cited

- Aly, Said, Abdel Monem, Shai Feldman, and Khalil Shikaki. *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and peacemaking in the Middle East* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 61.

- Dowty, Alan. *Israel/Palestine* 3rd ed. Malden: Polity, 2012.

- Karsh, Efraim. "Were the Palestinians expelled?" *Commentary* 110.1, July 2000.

- Khalidi, Rashid I. "The Palestinians and 1948: The Underlying causes of failure." *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the history of 1948*, ed. Eugene L Rogan and Avi Shlaim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

- Laqueur, Walter Z. and Barry M Rubin, eds., *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary history of the Middle East conflict*, 7th revised and updated ed. New York City: Penguin Books, 2008.

- Morris, Benny. The Birth of the Palestinian refugee problem revisited, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

- Shlaim, Avi. "Israel and the Arab coalition in 1948." The War for Palestine: Rewriting the history of 1948, ed. Eugene L Rogan and Avi Shlaim. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007.

- Shlaim, Avi. "The Debate about 1948," in *Making Israel*, ed. Benny Morris. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007.