

# The Jihad That Wasn't

**1948: A History of the First  
Israeli-Arab War**

*by Benny Morris*

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*523 pages.*

*Reviewed by Yoav Gelber*

The basic facts of the first Arab-Israeli war are well known but worth repeating. On November 30, 1947, the day after the United Nations General Assembly voted to partition British Mandatory Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, local riots broke out among the country's Arab population. Under the shadow of the vanishing British Mandate, they spread like wildfire in the following weeks, ultimately engulfing the entire land in a bloody ethnic war between Jews and Arabs.

From December 1947 until the beginning of April 1948, the fighting took place in mixed towns, isolated settlements, the roads leading to them, and the Negev desert. The "civil war" phase of hostilities

pitted the defense organization of the Jewish *Yishuv*—the *Hagana*—against Palestinian irregulars and volunteers from the Arab states who were organized within the framework of the Arab Liberation Army (ALA), established by the Arab League as an alternative to direct intervention by the Arab states and their regular forces. During this period, fighting was limited to local skirmishes, ambushes, a few Arab attempts to storm Jewish settlements, and retaliatory strikes and preemptive raids by the Hagana on Arab villages and transportation.

The situation changed in April, however, when the final phase of British withdrawal began. With the ruling power gone, the two sides enjoyed much greater freedom of action, and the Hagana exploited the situation to the utmost. Within six weeks, it had defeated and dispersed both the Palestinian combatants and the ALA. In the process, a quarter of a million Palestinians had fled their homes to Arab-held territory or the neighboring Arab states.

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The ALA's disintegration and the collapse of the Palestinians left the Arab governments with no other option but to intervene. Their invasion of Palestine opened a new stage in the war: a full-scale military confrontation between the newborn State of Israel and an alliance of seven Arab countries, which between them mustered four armies—the Egyptian, Transjordanian, Iraqi, and Syrian.

Though it paid a heavy price, the newly formed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) successfully blocked the invasion and retook the initiative. The result was a crushing defeat for the Arabs. Instead of saving the Palestinians, the Arab invasion increased their plight, costing them more territory and creating more refugees. Having entered the war as members of a coalition, the Arab states were forced to end it through separate negotiations in order to avoid the total destruction of their expeditionary forces at the hands of the IDF. These talks produced a series of cease-fire and then armistice agreements between Israel and Egypt, Transjordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The Palestinians, who had started the war, temporarily disappeared from the stage of history. They dispersed as refugees across the entire Middle East and were forgotten by the regional powers and the international community alike.

These are the basic facts regarding the 1947-1948 war, known to Israelis as the “War of Independence” and to Palestinians as the “Nakba”—the catastrophe. About these facts there is almost no dispute. About everything else to do with the war, however, from the smallest details to the grandest strategies, there is nothing but dispute. In this ongoing controversy over the events of 1948, which for both peoples residing in the Land of Israel touches the rawest of nerves, a unique place is reserved for Benny Morris.

**B**enny Morris, a professor of history in the Middle East studies department of Ben-Gurion University, published his first book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, in 1987 and immediately caused a firestorm of controversy. The book's impact shifted the public and academic spotlight from Israel's victory in 1948 to the suffering of the Palestinians during the war and its aftermath. In the years since then, Morris has been attacked by Jewish and Arab historians alike, to say nothing of the vicious criticisms leveled against him by those who have not even read a single one of his works. It is not difficult to understand why: The book profoundly undermined the Israeli narrative of the war, which held that the Arab leadership was responsible for the creation of the refugee problem

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by calling for the Palestinians to flee, assuring them that they would be able to return in the wake of the victorious Arab armies. This being said, Morris *also* repudiated the Arab narrative of 1948, which claimed that Israel intentionally expelled the Palestinians according to a prearranged plan. Regrettably, Morris's Jewish critics ignored this aspect of his work. Arab readers, for their part, did the same, quoting only those select portions of Morris's book that reinforced their version of events.

Although Morris was at first identified with Israel's "new historians"—who take a critical and generally pro-Palestinian view of the Arab-Israeli conflict—he gradually integrated into the mainstream of Israeli historiography. Some post-Zionist historians, from whom he has since distanced himself, claim that Morris has changed his political spots in the wake of the second Intifada. These scholars, captive to the post-modern idea that there is no such thing as objective history, refuse to accept the possibility that a true historian relies on the facts to reach his conclusions and does not impose his own convictions or ideology on the evidence, as they themselves tend to do. Morris has not undergone a sudden conversion. Like any good historian, he has simply been influenced by the accumulated source material.

In his most recent book, *1948*, Benny Morris returns to the War of Independence and examines it from a comprehensive perspective. The book lays out the political and diplomatic background of the war, analyzes the aims and strategy of the belligerents, and describes the development of the refugee problem. Most prominently, it deals with the military aspects of the confrontation: the balance of forces between the rival armies; their organization, training, and strategy; and, above all, the story of the war itself—the actions and operations of the forces in the field. Morris's aim in *1948* appears to have been to write the definitive account of the War of Independence. And indeed, he almost succeeds in doing so—with emphasis on the word "almost."

So many books have already been written about the 1948 war that it is difficult for any historian to come up with a completely original perspective on the subject. From time to time, laborious archival research leads to new discoveries, but most historians work along lines of investigation that have already been laid out for some time. Although *1948* is, primarily, a synthesis, Morris does propose two important innovations that will likely arouse considerable discussion.

The first concerns the political struggle that took place behind the

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scenes at the UN before and during the November 29, 1947, vote on partition. Morris deftly explicates the remarkable diplomatic developments that took place between Britain's decision to submit the question of Palestine to the UN in February 1947 and the vote on partition nine months later: the establishment of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP); the *Exodus* affair, which took place while the UNSCOP commissioners were visiting Palestine; the kidnapping and execution of two British sergeants by the *Irgun*, etc. The most fascinating part of this chapter deals with the Jewish Agency's efforts to mobilize international support for the UNSCOP recommendations in order to secure the required two-thirds majority in the General Assembly. Morris also provides a sharp analysis of the rivalries—both overt and covert—between the various Arab states, and the mutual suspicions that obstructed their military preparations and ensured the failure of any potentially advantageous political coalition between them.

The second innovation offered by Morris is a pioneering attempt to put the war of 1948 in the context of the “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West. In order to prove this, Morris quotes from the public statements of Arab leaders, such as the

Saudi king Ibn Saud; representatives of the religious establishment, such as the *ulamah* (a council of religious scholars) of al-Azhar University; and spokesmen for popular Islamic movements, the Muslim Brotherhood foremost among them. During 1948 and even before, all of these figures made explicit references to the prevailing hostility between Muslims and Jews that has marked their relationship since the seventh century. They emphasized the holiness of Palestine and exalted the righteousness of the “martyrs” who volunteered to die for it. To strengthen his claim, Morris also quotes comments by Western diplomats like Alec Kirkbride, the British envoy to Transjordan, who reported on the eve of the Arab invasion that “no Muslim can contemplate the holy places falling into Jewish hands.”

On the basis of this evidence, Morris argues that the 1948 war was not a struggle between competing nationalisms, but, in fact, a Muslim holy war against the hated agents of the West. Many in the Arab world, he claims, saw the assault on the Yishuv as a jihad intended to save the holy places of Jerusalem from the infidels. According to Morris, most historians tend to ignore this aspect of the war and the religious rhetoric that accompanied it. They prefer, he claims, to present it as a solely national struggle—which it was not.

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Undoubtedly, this is a daring and provocative idea. There may be something in it, but Morris raises it only in the concluding chapter of *1948*, and, as a result, his analysis of the supposedly jihadist nature of the war is decidedly limited. Put bluntly, the evidence he presents to support his thesis is simply insufficient.

Emblematic of the problem is Morris's reliance on statements made by Ibn Saud regarding the Jews and Zionism. While it is true that Wahhabi Saudi Arabia has long been known as the most extreme of the Arab states in its relationship to Zionism, it is important to note that the Saudis did not take part in any of the Arab-Israeli wars. It appears, therefore, that despite his rhetoric, religion played at best a secondary role in Ibn Saud's foreign policy. His interest in Palestine stemmed more from his desire to constrain his rivals, the Hashemites, than from his opposition to the Jewish Yishuv. It is therefore difficult to see a letter he sent in 1943 to President Roosevelt as convincing proof of the essentially religious character of a war which broke out five years after it was written.

The other statements Morris quotes also fail to tip the scales in his favor. A single comment on the issue by Transjordanian politician Samir al-Rifa'i to the effect that "the Jews are a people to be feared.... Give them

another twenty-five years and they will be all over the Middle East" is particularly slight evidence considering al-Rifa'i's involvement in the negotiations between the Jewish Agency and King Abdullah of Transjordan both before and after the war. Nor was al-Rifa'i in any way opposed to the West. Moreover, King Abdullah's two proclamations about liberating the holy places—issued in February and April 1948 and reported by Kirkbride—can be easily explained by motivations other than religious zeal. The second declaration, for instance, was directed at his Arab allies no less—and perhaps more—than the Jews.

One cannot escape the feeling that, in general, Morris grants far too much importance to the militant Islamic rhetoric of the period in question. If, as the Muslim Brotherhood declared in 1938, the fight for Palestine was the inescapable duty of every Muslim—an obligation which the mufti of Cairo reiterated ten years later—there is no way to avoid the conclusion that the Muslims of the time were not particularly zealous. There appears to have been a wide discrepancy between the fiery rhetoric of Muslim religious leaders—particularly in Egypt—and the practical response of the faithful. Indeed, one suspects that Morris's interpretation of this particular aspect of the war is somewhat anachronistic

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and is perhaps unduly influenced by current trends in the Muslim world—specifically the rise of Al-Qaida, Hamas, Hezbollah, and other radical Islamic organizations.

The lion's share of 1948, however, is dedicated to the military aspects of the war. This section is decidedly impressive, though it is not without its shortcomings—some of them significant. The devil in such analyses is always in the details, and Morris's presentation of them is sometimes erroneous. There are several points, moreover, at which he simply misinterprets the actions and intentions of the Arab armies in the field. This problem tends to arise when Morris does not base himself on primary sources but relies on previous studies that have proved to be problematic, such as *Carta's Atlas*, Amitzur Ilan's book *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race: Arms Embargo, Military Power, and Decision in the 1948 Palestine War* (1996), the work of Ilan Pappé, and even David Ben-Gurion's *The Renewed State of Israel* (1969).

These problems are particularly apparent in Morris's discussion of the balance of power between the Arab and Israeli sides. For instance, Morris compares the manpower capacity of the Hagana to that of the Palestinians during the early stages of the war, and afterward makes a similar comparison

between the IDF and the Arab armies after the invasion. The picture that results is essentially correct, though somewhat exaggerated. Morris gives the size of the Israeli military as 117,500 men for the entire war, but the maximum number of those who were actually in active service at the same time never rose above 90,000. In addition, Morris's figures take into account every Israeli soldier down to the last clerk on the general staff, as well as those recruited for part-time service in order to hold the cease-fire lines during the truces. This is somewhat misleading as a figure for comparison, because the Arab armies were expeditionary forces, and their manpower statistics include combatants and combat support troops only. Their training camps, logistical infrastructure, general staffs, corps HQs, second echelon, and main air and naval bases remained behind in the home countries.

In order to make a fair comparison between forces, therefore, one should consider only the numbers of combat and combat-support troops. If we include the few thousand Palestinians who aided in the fighting—whose numbers fluctuated according to the availability of funds to pay their salaries and other factors such as disease, desertion, and similar problems—we find that the Israeli and Arab forces were roughly equal in size, with

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perhaps a small numerical advantage to the latter.

Chronology must also be taken into account on this point. As Morris correctly emphasizes, during the most critical month of the war—from the start of the invasion on May 15 to the first truce on June 11—the Arab armies enjoyed superiority in both manpower and heavy weapons. In addition to this quantitative advantage, the Arab troops were all fresh and their stocks of ammunition were full, although some of them had no spares or ammunition in reserve. The Jewish forces, in contrast, were exhausted after six months of combat and the six weeks of intense fighting against the Palestinians and the ALA occasioned by the British withdrawal. All of its units suffered losses and lack of equipment. During the truce and afterward, the IDF was successful in reconstituting itself and eventually turned the balance of power in its favor, but this shift began to take full effect only in the fall of 1948, during the final stages of the war.

Another point on which Morris arrives at wrong conclusions concerns the Arabs' intentions and plans for their invasion. He relates to a plan that was drafted in January 1948 for the ALA as a blueprint for the Arab invasion the following May—a mistake also made by Hagana intelligence at the time. Morris claims that

the plan was approved by the Arab chiefs of staff and endorsed by the Arab League's political committee in Damascus. This is inaccurate. There were, in fact, two separate plans, and the one Morris cites as approved by the chiefs of staff was no more than a Syrian pipe dream. In my view, the testimony of British officer and commander of the Arab Legion John Bagot Glubb (also known as Glubb Pasha) that there was no mutual planning or strategy behind the Arab invasion is far more reliable.

The paucity of available source material from the Arab side leaves the historian of the 1948 war with very few options. In the absence of contemporary and authentic Arab documentation on the invasion, and in light of the ulterior motives behind the memoirs written by those who took part in the events, as well as the meaningless public statements made by Arab politicians and generals—mainly intended to justify their decision to invade Palestine against their own better judgment—the only way to reconstruct the aims of the invasion is to examine the actions that the Arab armies took in the field.

These actions imply that the aims of the Arab invasion were decidedly limited and focused mainly on saving Arab Palestine from total Jewish domination. On the eve of the

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invasion, the Syrian strategy was to break through to the Galilee by way of southern Lebanon at Malikiyya in order to save the town of Safed (which fell to the Hagana on May 10). The Syrians were afraid of leaving both their flanks exposed, and thus were shocked when they learned that the Lebanese army would not take part in the war. To compensate, they changed plans at the last moment. They headed through al-Hamma, southeast of the Sea of Galilee—the worst route leading from Syria to Palestine—and invaded the Jordan Valley, apparently with the goal of occupying Tiberias. After their defeat at Kibbutz Degania, the Syrians took a bold step: They retreated to the Golan Heights, replaced their minister of defense and chief of staff, reorganized their defeated army, and launched a series of small-scale attacks, probing for the most vulnerable point in the Israeli line. Discovering a weak spot at Mishmar Hayarden, they instigated a second attack, this time achieving partial success.

The Iraqi expeditionary force tried to cross the Jordan at the Naharaim bridge near Kibbutz Gesher. The attempt failed, and Iraqi soldiers who had crossed the river south of the bridge were repelled at Kaukab al-Hawa. Because the Iraqis were repulsed at such an early stage, it is impossible to know what their true

objectives were. The logical targets were Tiberias or Bisan (now Beit She'an). Afula is unlikely.

The objective of Transjordan's Arab Legion was the hilly, Arab-populated part of the country—Judea and Samaria—and its outposts at Lydda and Ramle (now Lod and Ramla). This strategy was not, as Morris implies, a last-minute caprice on the part of Abdullah. It had been the king's objective since the outbreak of the war. From the beginning, Transjordan had no intention of occupying Jerusalem, because it was assumed that the city would be under some form of international control. The route the Legion chose for its invasion appears to lend support to this conclusion. Inevitably, however, the Legion became involved in the battle for Jerusalem on May 19, forcing Abdullah to hand Samaria and Judea over to Iraqi and Egyptian control, respectively. As a result, the king's direct rule was effectively restricted to the Jerusalem-Ramallah-Latron triangle.

For its part, the Egyptian army advanced from the south to Majdal (now Ashkelon), while the "light forces" and Muslim Brotherhood volunteers incorporated into the expeditionary force advanced from Auja to Beersheva, Hebron, Bethlehem, and southern Jerusalem, where they stormed Kibbutz Ramat Rahel. This advance was intended to obstruct

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Abdullah—not the Jews—and deny him control of Mount Hebron. From Majdal, the Egyptian army did not intend to turn north toward Tel Aviv, as Morris claims, but east, in order to link up with its forces at Hebron. Kibbutz Negba threatened this advance eastward and thus became a target of relentless Egyptian attacks.

As for the ALA, Morris maintains that it was withdrawn from the country because Abdullah did not want it there. This is mistaken. The real reason for the retreat was the concerns of Syrian president Shukri al-Quwatli, the ALA's patron, who feared that the Arab Legion would take control of it. The ALA was exhausted after six weeks of intensive fighting in April-May and needed reorganization and rest. It did not have much time, because the Lebanese army did not join the military coalition and the Syrians were forced to change their plan of invasion. Since Arab Galilee remained exposed to attack, the Arab League's military committee decided early in June to dispatch the ALA through Lebanon to the Galilee in order to fill the vacuum.

Morris speculates that "had his army been larger and Zionist resistance weaker," Abdullah would have ordered the Arab legion to attack Tel Aviv and Haifa. Hypothetically, this is possible, but there is no factual basis for such a claim. The same is

true for Morris's speculation about Egyptian war aims, which, as stated above, is contradicted by events on the ground. History, unfortunately, deals with what happened—not with what could, might, or should have happened.

All of this makes it difficult to accept Morris's categorical statement that Arab war aims were "at a minimum, to abort the emergence of a Jewish state or to destroy it at inception." It is true that, from a political perspective, this was the Arabs' hope. From a military perspective, however, the Arab expeditionary forces were simply incapable of accomplishing such an ambitious task. Nor do their actions in the field lend any credence to Morris's claim. Despite the militant rhetoric they employed in radio broadcasts and newspaper interviews, Arab military leaders and their political masters were well aware of their own weakness and did not truly believe that they could destroy the Zionist entity.

The reservations I have raised here are substantial, and yet I warmly recommend Morris's book. Some of the claims he makes are perhaps lacking in substantiation, and others rely on flawed or problematic data. In general, however, *1948* is a praiseworthy achievement of research and analysis, the work of a historian

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unwilling to rest on his already considerable laurels. Like Morris's other books on the War of Independence and its consequences, it will no doubt arouse an energetic debate both inside and outside of academia—which can only be to the good. Not long ago, the State of Israel celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, but the echoes of the war which gave birth to it continue

to resonate to this day. The 1948 war remains the most formative event in the history of our young country. Anyone who wants to learn more about it would do well to add *1948* to his bookshelf.

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