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# HISTORY

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# JEWES

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The events of 1947–8, which established Israel, also created the Arab–Israeli problem, which endures to this day. It has two main aspects, refugees and frontiers, best considered separately. According to UN figures, 656,000 Arab inhabitants of mandatory Palestine fled from Israeli-held territory: 280,000 to the West Bank of the Jordan, 70,000 to Transjordan, 100,000 to Lebanon, 4,000 to Iraq, 75,000 to Syria, 7,000 to Egypt, and 190,000 to the Gaza Strip (the Israelis put the total figure rather lower, 550,000–600,000). They left for four reasons: to avoid being killed in the fighting, because the administration had broken down, because they were ordered to or misled or panicked by Arab radio broadcasts, and because they were stampeded by an Irgun–Stern Gang massacre at the village of Deir Yassin on 9 April 1948.

The last merits scrutiny because it is relevant to the moral credentials of the Israeli state. From 1920 until this point, the Jews had refrained from terrorist attacks on Arab settlements, though the innumerable Arab ones had sometimes provoked heavy-handed reprisals. When the fighting began in the winter of 1947–8, Deir Yassin, an Arab quarrying village of less than 1,000 people, made a non-aggression pact with the nearby Jerusalem suburb of Givat Shaul. But two Jewish settlements nearby were overrun and destroyed, and the Jewish desire for revenge was strong. The Stern Gang proposed to destroy Deir Yassin to teach the Arabs a lesson. A senior Irgun officer, Yehuda Lapidot, testified: 'The clear aim was to break Arab morale and raise the morale of the Jewish community in Jerusalem, which had been hit hard time after time, especially recently by the desecration of Jewish bodies which fell into Arab hands.'<sup>23</sup> Begin agreed to the operation but said a loudspeaker van must be used to give the villagers a chance to surrender without bloodshed. The local Haganah commander also gave his reluctant approval, but laid down further conditions. There were eighty Irgun and forty Sternists in the raid. The loudspeaker van fell into a ditch and was never used. The Arabs chose to fight and were actually stronger and better armed. The Irgun–Sternists had to send for a regular platoon with a heavy machine-gun and 2-inch mortar, and it was these which ended Arab resistance.

It was at this point that the raiding force moved into the village and went out of control. A Haganah spy who was with them described what followed as 'a disorganized massacre'. The raiders took twenty-three men to the quarry and shot them. An Arab eye-witness said ninety-three others were killed in the village, but other accounts put

the figure of those killed as high as 250. Begin, before he knew the details of the battle, sent out an order of the day in the spirit of the Book of Joshua: 'Accept my congratulations on this splendid act of conquest. . . . As at Deir Yassin, so everywhere, we will attack and smite the enemy. God, God, thou hast chosen us for conquest.'<sup>24</sup> News of this atrocity, in exaggerated form, spread quickly and undoubtedly persuaded many Arabs to flee over the next two months. There is no evidence that it was designed to have this effect. But in conjunction with the other factors it reduced the Arab population of the new state to a mere 160,000. That was very convenient.

On the other hand, there were the Jews encouraged or forced to flee from Arab states where, in some cases, Jewish communities had existed for 2,500 years. In 1945 there were over 500,000 Jews living in the Arab world. Between the outbreak of the war on 15 May 1948 and the end of 1967, the vast majority had to take refuge in Israel: 252,642 from Morocco, 13,118 from Algeria, 46,255 from Tunisia, 34,265 from Libya, 37,867 from Egypt, 4,000 from Lebanon, 4,500 from Syria, 3,912 from Aden, 124,647 from Iraq and 46,447 from the Yemen. With a total of 567,654, Jewish refugees from Arab countries were thus not substantially smaller in number than Arab refugees from Israel.<sup>25</sup> The difference in their reception and treatment was entirely a matter of policy. The Israeli government systematically resettled all its refugees as part of its national-home policy. The Arab governments, with the assistance of the UN, kept the Arab refugees in camps, pending a reconquest of Palestine which never came. Hence, as a result of natural increase, there were more Arab refugees in the late 1980s than there had been forty years before.

This contrasting attitude towards refugees itself sprang from a fundamentally different approach towards negotiations. The Jews had been for two millennia an oppressed minority who had never possessed the option of force. They had therefore been habitually obliged to negotiate, often for bare existence, and nearly always from a position of great weakness. Over the centuries they had developed not merely negotiating skills but a philosophy of negotiation. They would negotiate against impossible odds, and they had learned to accept a negotiated status, however lowly and underprivileged, knowing that it could later be improved by further negotiations and their own efforts. The paramountcy of settlement, as opposed to force, was built into their very bones. That was one reason they found it so difficult, even when the evidence became overwhelming, to take in the magnitude of Hitler's evil: it was hard for them to comprehend a man who wanted no settlement at all with them, just their lives.

The Arabs, by contrast, were a conquering race whose sacred writings both inspired and reflected a maximalist position towards other peoples, the despised *dhimmi*. The very concept of negotiation towards a final settlement was to them a betrayal of principle. A truce, an armistice might be necessary and was acceptable because it preserved the option of force for use later. A treaty, on the other hand, appeared to them a kind of surrender. That was why they did not want the refugees resettled because it meant the final disposal of a moral asset. As Cairo Radio put it: 'The refugees are the cornerstone in the Arab struggle against Israel. The refugees are the armaments of the Arabs and Arab nationalism.'<sup>26</sup> Hence they rejected the 1950 UN plan for resettlement without discussion. Over the subsequent quarter century they refused even to receive repeated Israeli proposals for compensation. The result was disastrous for the refugees themselves and their progeny. It was a source of instability for the Arab states also. It came near to destroying Jordan in the 1960s. It did destroy the finely balanced structure of Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s.

The different approach to negotiating played a still more important part in determining Israel's frontiers. For Jews there were three possible ways of looking at their recreated country: as a national home, as the Promised Land and as the Zionist state. The first can be quickly disposed of. If all the Jews wanted was a place where they could be safe, it might be anywhere: Argentina, Uganda, Madagascar, for instance, were all proposed at one time or another. But it quickly became clear that few Jews were interested in such schemes. The only one with the slightest practical appeal was the El Arish proposal, precisely because it was near Palestine.

So we move on to the second notion: the Promised Land. In one way or another, this had a theoretical appeal to all Jews, secular and religious, except to pious Jews who insisted that any return to Zion must be part of a messianic event, and assimilated Jews who had no intention of returning anywhere. But what exactly was this land? As we have already noted, when God gave it to Abraham he did not define it with any precision.<sup>27</sup> Was it then to consist of the territories the Israelites had actually occupied? If so, at what period? There had in fact been two commonwealths as well as two temples, the Davidic and the Hasmonean. Some Zionists saw (and see) the state as the Third Commonwealth. But to which was it the successor-state? David's kingdom (but not Solomon's) had included Syria. The Hasmoneans had also ruled at one time over a vast territory. Both ancient commonwealths had been mini-empires at their greatest extent, and had included subject people who had been only semi-Jewish or not

Jewish at all. They could scarcely serve as models for a Zionist state whose primary purpose was to provide a national home for Jews. On the other hand there was a strong emotional belief in the Jews' right to claim those parts of Palestine where they had been predominant in antiquity. This found expression in the plan put forward by the Zionists to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. It gave the Jews the whole coast from Rafah to Sayda and both banks of the Jordan, the eastern frontier running just west of the Damascus-Amman-Hijaz railway.<sup>28</sup> The plan, as expected, was turned down, but its claims lingered on in the programme of Jabotinsky's Revisionists.

We turn then to the Zionist state as such, the territory which in practice Jews could acquire, settle, develop and defend. This empirical approach was the one the main Zionist bodies adopted and which became in practice the policy of the state itself. It was a sensible approach because it offered the widest possible scope to Jewish negotiating skills. It allowed the Jewish leaders to say that they would settle for any frontiers which included the areas occupied by Jews and which were themselves coherent and defensible. Hence at every stage, during the mandate and after, the Jews were flexible and willing to accept any reasonable partition proposal put to them. In July 1937 the Peel Commission Partition Plan offered them only Galilee from Metulla to Afula, and the coastal strip from a point 20 miles north of Gaza up to Acre, the latter being broken by a corridor to a British-held enclave round Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup> The Jews were reluctant but they accepted it. The Arabs, who would have been given three-quarters of Palestine, turned it down without discussion.

At the time of the next partition proposal, by the UN in 1947, settlement had moved on and the plan reflected it. It did not give the Jews Acre and western Galilee, which were then mainly Arab, but it added to the Jewish portion almost the whole of the Negev and part of the Dead Sea area. Whereas Peel had given the Jews only 20 per cent of Palestine, the UN now gave them 50 per cent. It was not the Promised Land by any definition because it excluded Judaea and Samaria, the whole of the West Bank and, above all, Jerusalem itself. But the Jews, however reluctantly, accepted it. Their empirical philosophy was lucidly explained by the former Oxford academic, Abba Eban, who was for many years to be the Foreign Minister and chief negotiator of the new state. The Jews agreed to lose areas of religious and historical significance to them, he said, because there was 'a partitionist implication inherent in the development of Jewish statehood' from the very moment when it became 'a concrete political prospect' – that is, the League mandate. Zionist settlement policy was 'based on the idea

of avoiding any conflict with existing demographic realities. The idea was to settle Jews where Arabs were *not* in firm possession.' Since Arab settlements followed ancient Israelite ones, the modern Jews went to the old coastal plain of the Philistines and the valley of Jezreel, which the Arabs had avoided because of malaria. 'The principle of Jewish settlement', said Eban, 'was always empirical and contemporary, never religious and historical.' Hence in the UN negotiations,

we relied on the general premise of a historical connection, but made no claims whatever for the inclusion of particular areas on our side of the Partition boundary on the grounds of ancient connections. Since Hebron was full of Arabs, we did not ask for it. Since Beersheba was virtually empty, we put in a successful claim. The central Zionist thesis was that there existed sufficient room within Eretz Israel for a densely populated Jewish society to be established without displacing Arab populations, and even without intruding upon their deep-rooted social cohesion.<sup>30</sup>

This philosophy led the Jews to accept the UN partition plan even though the state thereby delimited would have been extremely awkward to run and defend. But the Arabs again rejected the plan, which would have given them a Palestinian state, without any discussion at all and immediately sought the arbitration of force. As a result of the war that followed, and the Israeli conquests between June and November 1948, the Israeli state ended with 80 per cent of Palestine and frontiers which, though still awkward, made a state which was workable and could be defended. The Palestinian Arabs ended with no state at all: just the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank run by Jordan.

Despite their earlier experience of Arab unwillingness to negotiate, the Israelis attempted, on the basis of the 1949 armistice lines, to get agreement on permanent frontiers. This would have meant surrendering some territory. That would have been acceptable if, in return, Israel could have secured a final settlement. But such a bargain was never on offer. The Arabs refused direct talks with the Israelis. Various talks conducted through the UN Palestine Conciliation Commission made it clear that the Arabs insisted that Israel retire behind the 1947 UN partition lines (which they had never accepted or recognized) without even, in return, granting the new state recognition. Whereas Israel saw the armistice as a prelude to peace, the Arabs saw it as no more than a truce, and a prelude to war when it should become convenient to them. Moreover, the Arab states were unwilling to keep to the terms of the various armistice agreements. They were used as a protective screen behind which *fedayeen* raids and terrorism could

be launched against Israel's citizens, and boycotts and blockades organized against her economy. For the Arabs, armistice was the continuation of war by other means. Hence in a real sense Israel has been at war with most of her Arab neighbours from November 1947 until this day.

This brought about a fundamental reappraisal of the nature of the Zionist state. The secular pioneers had seen it as a pacifist, collectivist Utopia. The religious pioneers had seen it as a holy theocracy. Now both were alike obliged to invest their energies in a maximum-security state. In a sense the development was natural. The modern settlers had always been obliged to put up perimeter fences guarded against Arab marauders. In the inter-war period these had gradually become more elaborate and professional. But what had to be accepted from 1949 onwards, albeit slowly and reluctantly, was that security must become the overriding and permanent priority of the entire state. Not only had the Israelis to devise increasingly elaborate internal security measures to meet the growing sophistication of Arab terrorism, but they also had to adopt a multi-power standard of external defence: their armed forces had to be capable of meeting an assault from all the Arab states at once. These considerations determined the new state's budget; they dominated its external relations.

Indeed, for the first thirty years of its existence, 1948–78, Israel had a constant and sometimes vertiginous struggle for her existence. The armistice proved worthless. In its first seven years, over 1,300 Israelis were murdered during Arab raids and Israel's retaliatory attacks against terrorist bases became increasingly severe. On 20 July 1951 the last of the Arab moderates, King Abdullah of Jordan, was assassinated. On 23 July 1952 a military junta ousted the Egyptian monarchy, leading in turn (25 February 1954) to the populist dictatorship of Gamal Abdul Nasser, dedicated to Israel's destruction. Stalin had broken off relations with Israel in February 1953, a month before he died. From September 1955 onwards, with the signature of the Egyptian–Czech arms agreement, the Soviet bloc began to supply a growing quantity of modern weapons to the Arab forces. With the security this new ally gave him, President Nasser put into motion a plan for the strangulation and extinction of Israel. Though the practice was condemned by the UN Security Council in September 1951, Egypt had always refused Israeli ships the right to use the Suez Canal. From 1956 Nasser denied them access to the Gulf of Aqaba too. In April he signed a military pact with Saudi Arabia and Yemen, in July he seized the Suez Canal and on 25 October he formed a unified military command with Jordan and Syria. Feeling the noose tightening round

its neck, Israel launched a pre-emptive strike on 29 October, dropping paratroops to seize the Mitla Pass in Sinai. During the brief war that followed, and in conjunction with Anglo-French forces landed in the Canal Zone, Israel conquered the whole of Sinai, took Gaza, ended the *fedayeen* activities and opened up the sea route to Aqaba.<sup>31</sup>

The Sinai War demonstrated the ability of Israel to preserve its security even against the new Soviet weapons, though its military significance was obscured by Anglo-French involvement. The agreement which followed the end of the fighting was again inconclusive. Israel undertook to withdraw from Sinai provided Egypt did not remilitarize it and UN forces formed a protective *cordon sanitaire*. This arrangement, however unsatisfactory, lasted a decade. But raids and terrorism continued. Syria too was armed by the Soviet bloc. In 1967 Nasser, his forces reorganized and re-equipped, decided to make another attempt. On 15 May he remilitarized Sinai, moving in 100,000 men and armour and ordering out the UN force (which complied). On 22 May he again blockaded Aqaba by closing the Tiran Straits to Israeli shipping. Eight days later, the noose was tightened when King Hussain of Jordan signed a military agreement in Cairo. The same day Iraqi forces took up positions in Jordan. Hence on 5 June the Israelis again felt compelled to launch a pre-emptive strike. That morning they destroyed virtually the entire Egyptian air force on the ground. Jordan and Syria were misled about Israel's success and duly entered the war on Egypt's side. In reply, Israel felt at liberty to remove the (to her) worst anomalies left by the War of Independence. On 7 June she took the Old City, thus securing the whole of Jerusalem as her capital. By the end of the next day she had occupied the entire Left Bank. During the next two days she stormed the Golan Heights in Syria and established positions only 30 miles from Damascus. At the same time she reoccupied all Sinai. As a result of the Six Day War, Israel had obtained defensible frontiers for the first time, as well as the capital and a famous portion of her historic heritage.<sup>32</sup>

Yet this celebrated victory did not bring security. Quite the contrary. It induced a mood of illusory confidence and a false dependence on fixed-line defences such as the so-called Bar Lev Line east of the Suez Canal. Nasser, who had won every public-relations battle and lost every military one, died and was succeeded by a more formidable colleague, Anwar Sadat. To increase his freedom of action Sadat threw out Egypt's Soviet military advisers in July 1972, though this in no way cut Egypt off from Soviet equipment. He dispensed with Nasser's spectacular politico-military alliances with other Arab powers, contenting himself with secret co-ordinations of plans.

Hitherto, Israeli forces had been theoretically inferior. Israel had therefore felt herself obliged, in April 1948, in October 1956 and in June 1967, to attack pre-emptively, with all the tactical advantage of surprise. Now she believed herself superior, and it was Sadat, in concert with the Syrians, who struck without warning on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur (6 October) 1973, achieving complete surprise in turn.

Both the Egyptians and the Syrians broke through the Israeli lines. An element of technological surprise in the effectiveness of Arab anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles enabled them to inflict disturbing losses on Israeli planes and armour. For the first time in the quarter-century of the state's existence, Israel faced the possibility of a major defeat and even of a second holocaust. But the Syrian advance had been stemmed on 9 October; the next day, in response to desperate Israeli pleas, the American President, Richard Nixon, began an emergency airlift of advanced weapons. Two days afterwards the Israeli forces began an audacious counter-attack on Egypt, crossing on to the West Bank of the Canal, and threatening to cut off all the advancing Egyptian forces in Sinai. This was the turning-point and Israel moved swiftly towards a victory as decisive as that of 1967, when a cease-fire came into force on 24 October.<sup>33</sup>

Israel's willingness to accept a cease-fire was dictated more by political and psychological than by military factors. In each of the four wars there was a complete lack of symmetry. The Arab countries could afford to lose many wars. Israel could not afford to lose one. An Israeli victory could not win peace. But an Israeli defeat meant catastrophe. Israel had always regarded Egypt as her most dangerous enemy, the one most likely to deliver the knock-out blow. But Egypt was also the most synthetic of Israel's opponents. Her people were not true Arabs. She was in the struggle to make good her claims to Middle Eastern leadership and to secure prestige rather than from any deep emotional commitment. The Egyptian territory Israel held, however useful (a substantial oilfield was developed there 1967-73), was not part of the historic heritage of the Jews. For all these reasons a peace with Egypt was possible. What prevented it was Egypt's bruised sense of military honour. But this was healed by her initial success in 1973, which time and propaganda could make seem more substantial than it was.

There was another obstacle. Israel had been ruled since its inception by a Labour-dominated coalition whose flexibility on frontiers was expressed by the pragmatic philosophy already summarized in Abba Eban's words. But the Opposition maintained the Jabotinsky maximalist tradition on frontiers. Peace with Egypt would involve

heavy Israeli territorial sacrifices, actual and potential. That in turn would require a national consensus. The Opposition would deny it. Hence, when Labour's coalition lost the May 1977 elections and handed over power for the first time to the Revisionists in the shape of Begin's Likud, the change, by a paradox familiar to democratic societies, made peace more likely. Begin, precisely because of his maximalist commitment, was in a position to trade land for security in a manner which no Labour leader since Ben Gurion would have dared.

Sadat, the first Arab realist since Abdullah, recognized this key point. Less than six months after Likud's victory, on 9 November 1977, he offered to negotiate peace terms. The peace process was long, complex and hard. It was stage-managed by President Jimmy Carter and underwritten financially by the generosity of the American taxpayer, an indispensable element. It culminated in a marathon thirteen-day session, beginning on 5 September 1978, at the presidential summer home, Camp David – what Begin characteristically called 'a concentration camp de luxe'. It required a further six months to embody the agreement reached there in a detailed treaty.

The compromise reached was a genuine one; hence it endured. Egypt recognized Israel's right to exist, provided cast-iron guarantees for Israel's southern border, in effect withdrew from the military equation and thus for the first time gave Israel some measure of genuine security. In return Israel handed over Sinai, including its oilfields, air-bases and settlements, all of profound emotional significance to her. She also undertook to negotiate away much of the West Bank and even to make concessions over Jerusalem, in return for a complementary treaty with the Palestinians and the other Arab states. But these last sacrifices were not, in the event, exacted. Camp David offered the Palestinian Arabs their best chance since the UN partition plan of 1947. Once more they threw it away without even attempting to negotiate. That left Israel with Judaea and Samaria, albeit as 'occupied territories' still, rather than internationally recognized freeholds. The treaty, as such historic compromises will, demanded heavy sacrifices from its signatories too. It cost Begin some of his oldest political friends. It cost Sadat, most dangerous-treacherous and courageous-generous of Israel's enemies, his life.<sup>34</sup>

In a historical context, the Israeli–Egyptian peace treaty was of incalculable importance not only in itself but in its timing. From the 1920s, the source of Arab power, both economic and diplomatic, had always been the oilfields of the Persian Gulf and upper Iraq. In the second half of the 1970s this oil power increased dramatically. Demand for oil had been rising faster than supply in the 1960s. In

1973 this trend was radically reinforced by political actions of the Middle Eastern oil states in response to the Yom Kippur War. Oil prices tripled, from \$3 a barrel to \$10. By the end of 1977 the price had risen to \$12.68; in 1979–80 it tripled again, reaching a price of \$38.63 a barrel at the end of 1980. By raising Arab oil revenues more than tenfold, the oil-price revolution made available huge sums for Arab arms-purchases and for financing anti-Israeli terrorism. It also increased Arab diplomatic leverage with both Western and Third World nations. France, for instance, built Iraq an advanced nuclear reactor, whose rapidly developing war-potential obliged Israel to destroy it by a bombing raid on 7 June 1981. Some Third World states, in response to Arab pressure, broke off diplomatic relations with Israel. At the UN there was an extraordinary growth in Arab influence. As a result, in 1975 the General Assembly passed a resolution equating Zionism with racialism. The mufti's successor, Yasser Arafat, leader of the main Arab terror group, the Palestine Liberation Organization, was accorded head-of-government status by the UN and by numerous states hitherto friendly to Israel. There was a real danger of Israel being driven into an international ghetto occupied solely by South Africa.

Against this background, the Egyptian peace-treaty and the fact that it was fully implemented on both sides was the great sustaining force of Israel's position on the world scene. Had the Palestinians negotiated seriously at this time, there can be little doubt that Israel would have been obliged to yield most of the West Bank. But the chance was missed in favour of fruitless terrorism and the window of opportunity closed. From 1981 to 1985 the oil price drifted slowly downwards as supply came into balance with demand. By January 1986 it was \$25 a barrel and in April that year it went below the \$10 mark, less – allowing for inflation – than it had been before the Yom Kippur War. The balance of economic and diplomatic power once more began to shift back in Israel's favour. By this stage, in the late 1980s, Israel had been in possession of the West Bank for twenty years and her frontiers, though 'temporary' in places, had begun to acquire an air of permanence.