

## Debating the origins of the first Arab – Israeli War

The 1948 Arab – Israeli War, known by Israelis as the War of Independence and by Palestinians as *al-naqba* (the disaster), has become the subject of a heated historiographical debate. This war has been described in conventional Israeli historiography as the heroic struggle of a weak and embattled infant nation rising from the ashes of the Holocaust to fight against the overwhelming odds of Arab numeric superiority, British collusion with the Arabs, lack of international support, an unjustly imposed arms embargo and the blockade of Palestine. Like the biblical victory of David over Goliath, Israel's victory has been portrayed as a miracle, becoming part and parcel of Israel's national discourse. Since the opening of new archives in the late 1980s, this account of the 1948 war has been challenged by the so-called 'new historians' such as Avi Shlaim (1988), Benny Morris (1987), Ilan Pappé (1994 and 1999) and Simha Flapan (1987) with respect to six specific areas:

- 1 *The role of the United Kingdom.* Traditional historians have argued that the British were anti-Zionist and pro-Arab as evidenced by their handover of many of their military installations in Palestine to the Arab Legion. Revisionist historians assert that British policy was neither anti-Zionist nor pro-Palestinian but determined by their support for the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan.
- 2 *Israel's victory.* According to the new historians it was not a miracle but the result of a favourable military balance. With the exception of the first phase of the war, Israel's forces were better trained, better equipped, better motivated, better organized and better armed.
- 3 *The Palestinian refugee problem.* Israeli traditionalists claim that the Palestinians left of their own accord and thus Israel bears no responsibility for the refugee problem, while Arab historians have traditionally asserted that the Palestinians were expelled and consequently have the right to return. Israeli revisionists have added a further dimension to this politically charged debate, stating that there is no evidence of Arab broadcasts that encouraged the Palestinians to leave or of blanket expulsion orders. Instead, the refugee problem was the result of the war, of the protracted bitter fighting and fear.
- 4 *Israeli – Jordanian relations.* These became the subject of controversy when 'new' historians maintained that the Zionists had colluded with King Abdullah between 1947 and 1949 by agreeing to divide Palestine between Israel and Jordan, thus depriving the Palestinians of a state. Such collusion, of course, challenges the image of Israel as a nation without allies and with only hostile Arab neighbours. It also shows that Abdullah had few qualms about betraying his fellow Arabs, in general, and the Palestinians, in particular, when he could expand Jordanian territory and influence.

- 5 *Arab war aims.* The traditional account of the Arab fighting against Israel has focused on the claim that the goal was to destroy the fledgling Jewish state totally. While this is supported by the rhetoric coming from the Arab camp, new research has shown that the Arabs were far less united than has been assumed. In fact, each of the Arab states was far more concerned with increasing its own influence and gaining control over the territory allotted to the Palestinians under the partition plan, so much so that the result was a general 'land grab' rather than the liberation of Palestine.
- 6 *The search for peace.* It has often been asserted that the lack of peace following the 1948 war was the result of Arab intransigence. Revisionists, however, have shown that Israel was equally intransigent when it came to making the compromises necessary for peace.