

Book Reviews

Palestine Betrayed¹

Reviewed by Major Roger E. Mattioli*

*Had the Mufti chosen to lead his people to peace and reconciliation with their Jewish neighbors . . . the Palestinians would have had their independent state over a substantial part of mandatory Palestine by 1948, if not a decade earlier, and would have been spared the traumatic experience of dispersion and exile.*²

I. Introduction

Palestine Betrayed is a scathing attack on the Arab leadership during the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. Using declassified British intelligence reports and interviews with many of the major players in the conflict, the author argues that the Arab leaders of Palestine, Syria, Transjordan, Egypt, and Lebanon betrayed the Palestinian people by deceiving them with anti-Semitic propaganda, rushing them into a war they did not want, and trying to seize portions of Palestine to incorporate into their countries during the invasion. He also claims that after their defeat, these same leaders prevented the Palestinians from engaging in an open dialogue in order to facilitate their return to Israeli-controlled Palestine. In placing the blame for the Arab exodus from Palestine squarely on their leadership, the author rejects what he views as an attempt by modern Palestinian and Israeli scholars to rewrite history in order to unjustly vilify the Israelis. The end result of the author's efforts is a work of political propaganda disguised as history.

II. The New Historians

The author is a professor of Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College London.³ He has written a number of books on Middle Eastern history, but he is most well-known for his vigorous defense of the traditional Israeli view of history, as well as his attacks on the Israeli "new historians." To fully appreciate the book, the reader must understand the major debate that has been raging among Israeli historians for the past twenty years.

Prior to the mid-1980s, Israeli scholars and historians accepted as historical fact several important ideas: that the Jews created Israel out of necessity after their attempts at peaceful negotiation with the Arabs failed; that the Arabs

instigated and initiated the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1948; and that the Arab leadership encouraged the Palestinians to flee to neighboring countries during the conflict, resulting in the Palestinian refugee crisis.⁴ But in the mid-1980s, a group of Israeli scholars and historians began to argue that Israel shoulders much of the blame for the crisis.⁵ These self-anointed "new historians"⁶ challenged the view

that Zionism was a beneficent and well-meaning progressive national movement; that Israel was born pure into an uncharitable, predatory world; that Zionist efforts at compromise and conciliation were rejected by the Arabs; and that Palestine's Arabs, and in their wake the surrounding Arab states, for reasons of innate selfishness, xenophobia, and downright cussedness, refused to accede to the burgeoning Zionist presence and in 1947 to 1949 launched a war to extirpate the foreign plant.⁷

This new line of thinking resulted in a backlash from historians who continued to believe in the traditional view of Israeli history.

The author fired his first salvo at the "new historians" in *Fabricating Israeli History: "The New Historians."*⁸ *Palestine Betrayed* is his newest attack on what he views as a dangerous misrepresentation of history. In the introduction, he describes the "new historians" as "politically engaged academics and journalists who . . . have turned the saga of

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¹ EFRAIM KARSH, *PALESTINE BETRAYED* (2010).

² KARSH, *supra* note 1, at 252.

³ *Id.* at back cover.

⁴ See, e.g., MITCHELL G. BARD, *MYTHS AND FACTS: A GUIDE TO THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT 126-36* (2002); LIEUTENANT COLONEL NETANEL LORCH, *THE EDGE OF THE SWORD* (1968).

⁵ See, e.g., SIMHA FLAPAN, *THE BIRTH OF ISRAEL* (1987); BENNY MORRIS, *THE BIRTH OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE PROBLEM, 1947-1949* (1988); ILAN PAPPE, *BRITAIN AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT, 1948-1951* (1988); AVI SHLAIM, *COLLUSION ACROSS THE JORDAN* (1988).

⁶ Benny Morris, *The New Historiography: Israel Confronts Its Past*, *TIKKUN*, Nov.-Dec. 1988, at 21.

⁷ *Id.* at 20.

⁸ EFRAIM KARSH, *FABRICATING ISRAELI HISTORY: "THE NEW HISTORIANS"* (1997).

Israel's birth upside down, with aggressors transformed into hapless victims and vice versa."⁹ He accuses them of being ignorant of Arab "language, culture, history, and politics,"¹⁰ and argues that their "new history" is in fact simply a "recycled . . . standard Palestinian Arab narrative of the conflict."¹¹ He claims to have written *Palestine Betrayed* "to reclaim the historical truth."¹²

III. Analysis

The author sets out immediately to demonstrate that the traditional Israeli historical view is accurate. To prove this, he quotes the individuals involved in the conflict. He portrays the Israelis as a people who, throughout history, "extended [their hands] in peace to [their] neighbors."¹³ But their attempts to secure peace were rebuffed time and again by the Arab leadership, whose irrational hatred of the Jews, greed, and lust for power led them commit a "betrayal of their constituents, who would rather have coexisted with their Jewish neighbors yet instead had to pay the ultimate price of this folly: homelessness and statelessness."¹⁴

The author spends the next several chapters detailing the positive contributions Jews made to Arab society throughout history and introducing the reader to Muhammad Amin Husseini. Beginning in 1921, Amin held Palestine's top religious position, that of "Mufti." He was also the president of the Supreme Muslim Council and Palestine's "foremost Palestinian Arab political figure."¹⁵ The author devotes a great amount of effort to discrediting Amin, referring to his "enthusiasm for Nazism,"¹⁶ and relating Amin's desire to conduct "ethnic cleansing"¹⁷ by removing the Jews from Palestine. Throughout the book the author provides the reader with one inflammatory Amin quote after another.

The author takes the opposite approach with the book's hero, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and minister of defense. He repeatedly refers to Ben-Gurion's attempts to peacefully resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and provides quotes to illustrate Ben-Gurion's desire that Arabs and Jews live together in peace in Israel. Ben-Gurion "look[ed] to peace, peace in the world and peace in that

corner of the world called the Near- or the Middle East,"¹⁸ while Amin claimed "it is impossible to squeeze two peoples into one small country . . . Let [the Jews] go to other parts of the world, where there are wide vacant places."¹⁹ By providing the stark contrast between Amin's rhetoric and Ben-Gurion's, the author attempts to bolster his argument that the Israelis were not to blame for the ensuing conflict.

Only once does the author discuss Ben-Gurion's earlier view that "[the Jews], as a nation, want this country to be ours; the Arabs, as a nation, want this country to be theirs."²⁰ In fact, Ben-Gurion often expressed reservations about incorporating Arabs into a new Jewish state.²¹ However, since these statements do not support the author's argument, he ignores them. This is a mistake. The author might have gained greater credibility with the reader if he had explained how and why Ben-Gurion changed his position. By ignoring the issue, he opens himself up to criticism for practicing exactly the type of selective history for which he condemns the "new historians."

Next, the author examines the Arab exodus from Palestine after war broke out. He attempts to prove what the "new historians" refer to as the third "myth" of Israel: that the Palestinians fled the country because the Arab leadership encouraged them to do so, despite Israeli efforts to discourage them from leaving.²² The author cites British intelligence documents to show that "leading Arab personalities . . . evacuat[ed] their families to neighboring Arab countries,"²³ and that their evacuation, combined with escalating violence, caused a "stream of refugees" to "turn[] into a flood."²⁴ He conveniently omits the fact that the Israelis instigated a great deal of the violence. As Ben-Gurion himself stated shortly after the war,

The strategic objective was to destroy the urban communities This was not done by house-to-house fighting inside the cities and towns, but by the conquest and destruction of the rural areas surrounding most of the towns Deprived of transportation, food, and raw materials, the urban communities underwent a process of

⁹ KARSH, *supra* note 1, at 4.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 5.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 7.

¹³ *Id.* at 1 (quoting YONA COHEN, *JERUSALEM UNDER SIEGE: PAGES FROM A 1948 DIARY* 39 (1982)).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 6-7.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 17.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 30.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 18 (quoting YEHUDA TAGGAR, *THE MUFTI OF JERUSALEM AND PALESTINE ARAB POLITICS, 1930-1937*, at 187 (1986)).

¹⁹ *Id.* (quoting Notes from an Interview Accorded to Members of the Arab Higher Committee by His Excellency the High Commissioner 15-16 (Nov. 7, 1936) (Central Zionist Archives, S25/22704)).

²⁰ *Id.* at 27 (quoting David Ben-Gurion, Address to the Vaad Leumi (June 10, 1919) (citation omitted)).

²¹ Morris, *supra* note 6, at 98.

²² FLAPAN, *supra* note 5, at 81.

²³ KARSH, *supra* note 1, at 124-25 (quoting Sixth Airborne Division, Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 61, Based on Information Received up to 23 Oct. 1947, British War Office 275/120, at 3).

²⁴ *Id.* at 125.

disintegration, chaos, and hunger, which forced them into surrender.²⁵

One of the book's more interesting chapters is "Shattered Dreams." It involves the author's attempt to defend the Israeli leadership's decision to drive the Arab population out of the towns of Lydda and Ramle. He claims that this action was "the only . . . instance in the war where a substantial urban population was driven out by Jewish or Israeli forces."²⁶ The "new historians" have pointed to the incident as an example of Israeli culpability in expelling the Palestinians.²⁷ Yitzhak Rabin, future prime minister of Israel and a brigade commander at the time of the attack, admitted that "[t]he population of Lydda did not leave willingly. There was no way of avoiding the use of force and warning shots in order to make the inhabitants march the ten or fifteen miles to the point where they met up with the Arab Legion."²⁸ Rabin also admitted that Ben-Gurion and his staff made the decision to force the population out of the towns.²⁹

But according to the author, the Israeli decision was the result of an Arab "uprising" that broke a temporary ceasefire and "sealed the city's fate."³⁰ After recounting a firefight in which around 250 Arabs were killed,³¹ he boldly claims "[had] the surrender been implemented in an orderly fashion, no exodus would have ensued."³² Next, he minimizes the importance of Ben-Gurion's order to drive the Arab population out of Lydda, stressing that "the Lydda populace needed little encouragement to leave."³³ He also claims, without any supporting authority, that the thousands of Arab detainees the Israelis forced to leave were relieved to escape the war zone.³⁴ Finally, to show how difficult this episode was on the Israelis, the author emphasizes the emotional damage Israeli Soldiers suffered as a result.³⁵

The author's defense of the Lydda-Ramle affair is passionate but unconvincing. Despite his initial claim that newly declassified British documents demonstrate the falsity of the "new historians'" assertions, the author relies almost exclusively on the Israeli Defense Forces Archive to support

his argument.³⁶ Also, the claim that a rebellion by the local populace forced the Israeli troops to counterattack and convinced Israeli leadership to make their fateful decision is not novel. "New historians" like Benny Morris responded to that same argument in the mid-1980s.³⁷ The author contributes little to the historical debate by recycling old material.

The final chapter of the book is nothing more than a restatement of the author's thesis and summary of the preceding eleven chapters. He once again places the blame for the Arab defeat and exodus squarely on the shoulders of Amin and the Arab leaders of Syria, Transjordan, Egypt, and Lebanon. After an entire book filled with these repeated attacks, the author's need to revisit them seems excessive. The entire chapter is superfluous. Similarly, the epilogue is nothing more than an attack on ex-PLO³⁸ chairman Yasir Arafat. The author compares Arafat to Amin, arguing that Arafat's actions as chairman were as destructive to the Palestinian cause as Amin's.³⁹ Since the entire book focused on the 1948 conflict, the epilogue seems forced and out of place.

IV. Conclusion

Palestine Betrayed may be a useful propaganda tool for fierce defenders of Zionism, but as an historical work, it is plodding and tedious. The author's desire to respond to each argument set forth by the "new historians" results in a repetitive, emotional work that feels more like a political rant than an historical study. Readers who are unfamiliar with the history of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict may gain a basic understanding of the events surrounding partition and Israeli statehood, but they would be better served by reading a less biased version of events.⁴⁰

Also, by so vigorously attacking those who see history differently than he does, the author may lose credibility with readers who are not predisposed to support either side of the debate. While readers may not agree with, or indeed be aware of, the views of the Israeli "new historians," it is immediately apparent that the author has an agenda. Although the author is careful to back up most of his assertions with footnotes to source documents, he goes to such extremes to find examples that support his conclusions that he appears to pick and choose only those sources that bolster his position. It is ironic that the author accuses the

²⁵ FLAPAN, *supra* note 5, at 92–93 (quoting DAVID BEN-GURION, WAR DIARIES 156 (1948)).

²⁶ KARSH, *supra* note 1, at 216.

²⁷ Morris, *supra* note 6, at 19.

²⁸ FLAPAN, *supra* note 5, at 81 (citation omitted).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ KARSH, *supra* note 1, at 216–17.

³¹ *Id.* at 217.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.* at 218.

³⁴ *Id.* at 219.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *See id.* at 216–19 nn.20–30.

³⁷ *See, e.g.,* Morris, *supra* note 6.

³⁸ Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

³⁹ KARSH, *supra* note 1, at 252.

⁴⁰ *See, e.g.,* CHRISTOPHER SYKES, CROSSROADS TO ISRAEL, 1917–1948, at 73 (1965).

“new historians” of ignoring crucial facts in arriving at their conclusions, then does exactly that throughout the book.

Military leaders and judge advocates will find little use for this book. Some military lessons may be gleaned from the work, but the author gives short shrift to military matters. For example, he devotes only one paragraph to the fundamental transformation of the Israeli armed forces from a small force composed primarily of “semi-mobilized units” into a large conscripted force.⁴¹ This transformation was followed by a total reorganization of the force, which was one of the keys to the stunning Israeli military successes of the conflict.⁴²

The Arabs’ total failure to incorporate joint warfare concepts into their strategy was also a major reason for their defeat,⁴³ yet, once again, the author barely touches on this point. While he mentions that the initial Arab invasion of Israel “was to be directed by a unified command . . . under the headship of the Iraqi general Nureddin Mahmud,”⁴⁴ he

never examines how and why this unified command disintegrated once the Arabs invaded, except to say that the Arab countries involved were more interested in seizing a piece of Palestine for themselves than in “attempt[ing] to secure Palestinian national rights.”⁴⁵

The text provides a few lessons on leadership, but most are dull and uninspired. For example, the author repeatedly references the flight of Arab officers prior to and during the conflict,⁴⁶ but modern military officers hardly need to be told of the importance of physical presence on the battlefield. At best, *Palestine Betrayed* offers military leaders a study in what not to do. According to the author, Arab infighting, cowardice, self-interest, and zealotry resulted in their defeat. On the other hand, “the Jews had no alternative but to triumph or die.”⁴⁷ The difficulty in fighting an enemy in their homeland when they have nowhere to flee and nothing to lose is the most important lesson today’s military officer can take away from *Palestine Betrayed*.

⁴¹ KARSH, *supra* note 1, at 108

⁴² Morris, *supra* note 6, at 22–23.

⁴³ See SYKES, *supra* note 40, at 338–39, 349–50.

⁴⁴ KARSH, *supra* note 1, at 201.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 232.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., *id.* at 134 (“[W]hen the moment of truth arrived, the commander of Arab Haifa . . . sailed out of Haifa He was quickly followed by one of his deputies . . . while a second deputy . . . left hurriedly the next day.”); 156 (“Najim al-Din . . . left [Jaffa] on May 1 at the head of a few hundred Iraqi and Bosnian fighters, carrying off some £8,000 . . . sent for military operations, as well as a substantial quantity of weapons. His successor . . . had an even briefer term in office [H]e reported . . . on May 2 that his troops had been ‘infected by panic flight.’ Shortly thereafter he fled the city himself with a few members of the NC, followed by 350-400 Yemeni and Egyptian fighters.”).

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 238 (quoting ABDEL KARIM UMAR, MUDHAKKIRAT AL-HAJJ MUHAMMAD AMIN AL-HUSSEINI 394 (1993)).