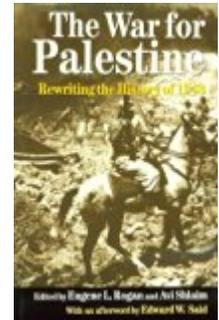


**Eugene L. Rogan, Avi Shlaim, eds..** *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*. New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xv + 234 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-79139-7.



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## Smashing Idols

Every country has its national myths. Americans believe that George Washington chopped down a cherry tree and promptly told his father because he could not tell a lie, that Washington had false teeth, and that he sailed a silver dollar across the Potomac River. Even after myths have been debunked, as in Washington's case, people tend to cling to them not unlike adolescents off to college who pack their favorite baby blankets. While many American national myths are harmless, simple stories, other countries' myths harbor deep-seated feelings of racial, ethnic, and religious superiority, developed in part to elicit sympathy or even provoke the inevitable biblical analysis, such as in the Israeli case.

Israel's national myths have developed within the twin tenets of explanation of its birth and absolution from the wake created by its birth. In the case of the former, many believe that Israel was the quintessential David to the collective Arab Goliath. Poor, unorganized, lacking in numbers, lacking in weapons, and with their backs to the proverbial wall, the humble Jews who lived in

Mandated Palestine fought their way into existence against the better-equipped, better-trained, organized, tenacious, and collective attacks of Arab armies that swept across the Sinai, Judea, and Samaria like a plague of locusts seeking to kill the Jews. The Israeli national myth absolved Israel from devastating the land and establishing the largest refugee problem in the twentieth century.

Arab countries propounded their own myths of the Palestine War. Many blamed the Jewish victory on Arab collusion, inter-Arab back-stabbing, a pro-Zionist agenda of the English government, and back-room negotiations between Arab leaders (primarily the Hashemite rulers of Jordan) and Jewish leaders during the interwar period and immediately following World War II. Many historians even point to the development of these national stories to explain, in part, how the Arab leaders of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq all lost their positions of power within a few years after the Arab defeat in Palestine.

There are more than two sides (that is, the official Israeli and Arab version) to this story. Now, the release of additional evidence has resulted in

a new look at the conflict that brought independence to Israel and national outrage, shame, and expulsion for Arabs throughout the Middle East. Entitled *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, this collection of essays edited by Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim examines the 1948 war, which Israelis refer to as "The War of Independence" and the Arabs refer to as *al Nakba*, "The Disaster." Through the essays from such noted Middle East scholars as Rashid Khalidi, Benny Morris, Laila Parsons, Charles Tripp, Fawaz Gerges, Joshua Landis, and Edward Said, this book examines "the role of all the participants in the Palestine War on the basis of archival sources where they exist, contemporary reports, memoirs, and other primary sources" (p. i).

This collection of essays sets out to challenge many official myths circulated by the Israeli and Arab governments as well as "historians" over the decades. For example, these articles collectively attack the myth that the "Arab Army" was a monolithic entity because the Arabs refused to coordinate their activities. Moreover, many of the Arab leaders went to war, not out of concern for the Palestinians, but because they feared losing the respect of their own people. Through the loss or gain of Palestinian territory, leaders also worried about losing their position in the Arab world relative to other Arab leaders.

Rather than merely analyzing what Jewish leaders and soldiers did or did not do, the authors examine the actions and words of the major Arab players—with the exception of Lebanon. Using newly mined documents as well as established primary sources, reports, and secondary sources, the authors seek to understand how the Palestinians lost so much so quickly. In doing so, they shed light on why Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq entered the war for Palestine.

Two chapters examine the Palestinians. Rashid Khalidi looks at the role of Palestinian leadership in the 1948 war and Benny Morris looks at the Palestinian refugee problem. Khalidi

argues that Palestinians failed politically, economically, and militarily in 1948 because they were unsuccessful in developing organizations in those areas as had their Jewish counterparts. To understand why the Palestinians failed in 1948, Khalidi argues it is necessary to examine the fifteen years preceding the war. During the Mandate period, Palestinians were plagued by internal divisions (p. 17). Unlike the Yishuv, Palestinians had no access to state powers, international backing, or "sanction for their national identity" (p. 18). In addition, when the Palestinians did elect representatives, they were "unrecognized and often ignored by the British" (p. 21). Using the latest information from the Israeli archives, Khalidi mounts formidable arguments that England was more squarely within the Zionist court until World War II, when Whitehall attempted to reverse its course through the White Paper of 1939. By then, however, it was too late, for the Jews had political, economic, and military organizations sanctioned by the mandated power. That the Palestinians did not was due partly to British refusal and partly to internal Palestinian divisions. According to Khalidi, because the Palestinians were not unified as a military or a political force, they failed to develop military leadership and political cohesion that might have secured them independence in May of 1948.

Morris re-examines the arguments he published years before regarding Jewish hopes to rid Jewish-controlled Palestine of Arabs. In "Revisiting the Palestinian exodus of 1948," Morris uses newly available documents from the Israeli archives to support his older arguments that "the refugee problem was caused by attacks by Jewish forces on Arab villages and towns and by the inhabitants' fear of such attacks, compounded by expulsions, atrocities, and rumors of atrocities—and by the crucial Israeli Cabinet decision in June 1948 to bar a refugee return" (p. 38). In fact, the newly obtained archival information shows that more Jewish atrocities had taken place than Morris had previously believed, such as those al-Husayniyya and Burayr. This chapter is particu-

larly important because so much of Morris's earlier assessments of Israeli expulsions were viciously attacked and rebuked. The latest documents from the Israeli archives, however, seem to validate Morris's thesis that Jewish military actions were the primary cause of the Palestinian refugee problem up to the Israeli government's decision to disallow their return.

Laila Parsons examines the relationship between the Druze and the Yishuv during the war. Parsons's article is unique in that it is the only one to raise questions about the conclusions of one of her fellow authors. First, she argues that not all Druze were in collusion with the IDF (Morris stated that no Druze villages resisted the IDF in "The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem") and, next, that no Druze were expelled. While Morris argued that the population of 'Amqa were expelled, Parsons argues that they were Muslims and thus not Druze. Parsons also examines myth-making among the Druze to conclude that they have tried to establish national myths that parallel those of the Jews. According to Parsons, Druze "presented the past—including the ancient past—as comprising a series of clear markers leading inexorably toward their mid-twentieth-century alliance" with the Yishuv (pp. 70-71).

A prevailing myth in Israel and the United States is that Arabs joined forces, sending massive waves of holy warriors to destroy everything Jewish. The reality was that there never was a unified, collective, monolithic Arab army. Avi Shlaim points out many of the problems with that myth. Arab nations decided to go to war in Palestine for very different reasons and at very different times. There were actually two Arab blocs, the Hashemite and the non-Hashemite. Although Abdullah, King of Jordan, was considered to be titular head of the Arab army, in reality no Arab commander was willing to allow a commander of a differing nationality to command and control his troops.

Using the springboard fashioned by Shlaim, the essays by Eugene Rogan, Charles Tripp, Fawaz Gerges, and Joshua Landis examine the precise roles and functions of Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria in the 1948 war. Like Morris, Rogan concludes that most new documents coming out of Israel confirm previously established theories concerning the relationship between the Yishuv and the leaders of Jordan. The new evidence also suggests that King Abdullah was more realistic than many Arab nationalists regarding the existence of Israel. According to Rogan, Abdullah and the government "did not seek to defeat the Israelis, and it did not wish to see the creation of an independent Palestinian state" (p. 121). The 1948 war profoundly influenced Jordan, creating a bi-national state with borders extending to both sides of the Jordan river. Moreover, within a few years King Abdullah would be assassinated by a Palestinian nationalist.

Charles Tripp examines Iraq's motivations and role in the 1948 war. He argues that Iraq's actions during the war represented a microcosm of the nation of Iraq rather than mere foreign-policy decisions. For example, while Iraq was an Arab country, it was also a Hashemite country. Its Hashemite leaders were installed as a result of British imperialism and at times wielded power harshly in order to control the non-Hashemite masses. According to Tripp, Iraqi leadership developed both a symbolic and an actual narrative. Symbolically, Iraqi leaders publicly denounced the UN partition plan and called for sanctions (including a boycott on Arab oil) to Great Britain and the United States. When war came, however, Iraq did not take the lead, militarily or economically. Instead, Salih Jabr seemed more interested in renegotiating the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty to "enhance his own political standing" (p. 132). While Iraq sent only half of the troops required to fight in Palestine, the government declared martial law at home and used the majority of the country's military to prop up the British-imposed Hashemite government in Baghdad. Iraq, according to Tripp's

research, was more form than content. "Radical statements were rarely followed by actions as dramatic or as forceful as the language suggested," according to Tripp because the reality for Iraq was that it was still under the colonial thumb of Great Britain (pp. 146, 147).

Egypt similarly sent far fewer troops needed to fight the better-armed, better-equipped Jewish forces. According to Fawaz Gerges, Egypt's actions during the war were different from its Arab counterparts because the Egyptian government "did not take the war in Palestine seriously and did not plan, prepare, or put Egyptian society on a war footing, either before or during the course of hostilities" (p. 151). Similar to the Iraqi case, however, Egypt could not send its troops in earnest into Palestine because they were needed at home to put down civil unrest. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and secular organizations had been protesting and even attacking government employees and leaders for not doing enough to help the Palestinians. Egyptian leadership, according to Gerges, was more interested in securing parts of Palestine for itself to prevent the Hashemite bloc from gaining territory and thus growing in size and strength. Egypt's leaders feared that Jordan planned to seize the West Bank and allow the Jews to take the rest of Palestine. Thus, Egypt did not enter so as not to bolster Syria which also fought in Palestine to prevent the Hashemite bloc from becoming hegemonic in the Arab Middle East. President Shukri al-Quwwatli and other leaders in Damascus were concerned that the war might propel the Hashemite leaders to "unite the central Arab lands of Greater Syria, which included Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan" under the rule of King Abdullah. In other words, Syria entered the war out of fear of the Hashemite leader of Jordan rather than the Yishuv (p. 179). Joshua Landis's research shows that several Syrian military leaders were in negotiations with King Abdullah. According to Landis, "Quwwatli believed that a peaceful partition of Palestine between Israel and Jordan would bolster King Ab-

dullah's power and assist his plan to build Greater Syria.... This explains why Syria was first into the war and last out" (pp. 200-201).

There are two problems with this book. First, the anthology lacks any examination of the policies and practices of the Lebanese government and the Lebanese army during the 1948 war. Of course, as the editors note, that was out of their hands. Unlike the other countries discussed in this book, the Lebanese government continues to refuse to allow examination of its records. The second, and only glaring, problem is the "Afterword," written by Edward Said. First, it was written two years before the book was published. Why? Second, the "Afterword" represents a sticking point. The anthology, up to this point, is a critical re-examination of the history of the birth of both Israel and the Palestinian refugee problem with an examination of the actions and motives of the major Arab players in 1948. Said's piece reads more like an editorial, relying on older, well-worn material which adopt an approach similar to "Blaming the Victim" or "The Politics of Dispossession." It does not fit the scope, spirit, or theses of this project and left this reader with a sour taste in his mouth.

*The War for Palestine* is an important book that critically examines and re-examines one of the most important events in the twentieth-century Middle East. Including a revised "Afterword," that fit much more neatly and squarely with the themes of this anthology, would be my only suggestion. This book would be of great service to anyone--from the novice to the expert on the subject matter--who not only wants to understand the beginning of the Arab-Israeli wars, but who also wants to better understand why the Middle East is the way it is today.

Overall, this anthology challenges Israel's "David" national myth by arguing that Israel's birth was purposeful and, in large part, due to the sheer incompetence, disorganization, and ulterior motives of the various Arab leaders who sent to-

ken armies to Palestine. It also examines the roles played by nearly all leading Arab politicians or rulers, the various Arab "armies" in Palestine, as well as Arab military leaders in the field. In addition, the book raises some outstanding points, providing more questions than one book can answer. As Rogan and Shlaim state, "The arguments put forward by the new Israeli historians have provoked tremendous debate in Israel, spilling out of academic forums into the press and public consciousness" (p. 7).

This book will not settle once and for all the vexed question of the importance of 1948 as well as the finger-pointing over who is truly to blame for the Palestinian refugee problem and the increased instability of the Arab world. Nonetheless, this book is important because it bridges the gap between the official Israeli and Arab versions of what the editors call "a defining moment for the region as a whole" (p. 1). It is also important because it shows that there was more to the 1948 war than battles, Palestinian exile, and the birth of Israel.

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