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Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008. Pp. xiv, 524. ISBN 978-0-312-16223-8.

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In *1948: The First Arab-Israeli War*, Benny Morris provides a thorough and scholarly account of the conflict appropriately known in Israel as the “War of Independence” and among Palestinians as the *Nakba* or “Catastrophe.” His previous works include *Israel’s Border Wars 1949-1956*¹ and *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*.² One of several so-called revisionist or new Israeli historians, Morris joins Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev, and Simha Flapan³ in using primary documents from Israeli and British archives to document the emergence of the independent state of Israel and its policies toward the Palestinians and Arab states. In the process they have effectively refuted and in some cases demolished long-held Israeli or Zionist nationalist myths, particularly with regard to the relative military strength of the nascent Israeli state vis-à-vis the Palestinians and Arab regimes, as well as Israeli policies toward the Palestinian population prior to 1948 and in the years thereafter. Although a committed Zionist, Morris does not flinch from critical analyses of Israeli objectives, actions, and policies especially as they have impacted the Palestinians. Because the Arab state documents remain closed, Morris has had to rely heavily on Israeli, British, and some U.S. materials; he has also made use of an extensive and impressive array of Arabic, Hebrew, and English newspapers and secondary works.

Morris begins the narrative with the charge that the 1948 war was an “almost inevitable result” (1) of fifty years of friction between the Arab and Jewish populations in Palestine. In the first chapter, “Staking Claims,” Morris provides a concise overview of the British Mandate in Palestine during the 1920s and 1930s. In describing the status of the Palestinian population, Morris’s overstates the divisions between Muslim and Christian Palestinians. Similarly, others have questioned the claim that the Zionist movement’s biggest problem regarding land acquisition was the lack of money not a lack of sellers. Morris goes on (chap. 2) to describe the involvement of the United Nations under UNSCOP (UN Special Commission on Palestine) and the partition resolution of 1947. He correctly notes that the British were, in fact, eager to be rid of the Palestine Mandate; they were also concerned over increased tensions with the United States owing to their differing policies regarding the creation of an independent Jewish state in Palestine (38). Although Morris does not pursue this point, the importance of the United States in influencing British, UN, and Israeli policies and actions is an intriguing sub-text in this work. He also correctly empha-

¹ Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1993; subtitled *Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War*.

² Cambridge: CUP, 2004.

³ See Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1988), Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006; rpt. 2007), Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* (1986; rpt. NY: Holt, 1998), and Flapan, *Zionism and the Palestinians* (London: Croom Helm, 1979) and *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (NY: Pantheon, 1987).

sizes the Zionist realization of the importance of UNSCOP and the failure of the Arabs to recognize this fact. Consequently, the Zionists launched what might well be called—although Morris does not use the phrase—a “charm offensive” to influence UNSCOP decisions in their favor. Morris again notes the importance of the U.S. in formulating both the UN resolution for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and Arab state and the borders for the Jewish state. He also correctly observes that the Arab states reacted to the UN partition plan by threatening war even though they were not ready for war.

In chapters 3 and 4, Morris carefully traces what he terms the “Civil War” between Jews and Palestinians from November 1947 through May 1948 when the conventional war broke out in the immediate aftermath of the British withdrawal and the establishment of the independent state of Israel. Both Arabs and Israelis have claimed that during the last months of the mandate, the British favored the other side, but Morris effectively demonstrates that, although the British were generally impartial, their determination to maintain law and order resulted in interventions favoring the Jews. On the other hand, British troops sometimes favored the Arabs especially after Zionist terror attacks by the IZL (*Irgun Zva’i Leumi* = National Military Organization) and LHI (*Lohamei Herut [Y]israel* = Freedom Fighters of Israel, sometimes referred to as the Stern Gang) on British troops and personnel (80). Morris effectively shows that, in the struggle against the Palestinians for territory, the Yishuv or Jewish population had the advantage of better organization, training, weapons, arms manufacturing, and command (81). In contrast, the Palestinian population and Arab governments were weak and divided. In short, the Palestinians had nothing like to match the Haganah (a Jewish paramilitary organization during the British Mandate, later absorbed into the Israel Defense Forces [IDF]). The disparity of military strength resulted, even before the 1948 war itself, in “the complete destruction of Palestinian Arab military power and the shattering of Palestinian society” (93). Morris then gives a detailed description of the various military confrontations between the two sides with detailed maps of military confrontations. (The close-up maps may be difficult to follow for readers without knowledge of terrain.)

Both sides committed atrocities during the civil war and the Haganah aimed to destroy or permanently occupy villages and towns from which militias operated (125). The real significance of the struggle was demographic. Fear and panic resulted in a massive exodus of Palestinians, who became refugees internally or in neighboring Arab states, where many still remain. Morris details the emptying of major towns such as Haifa and Jaffa. His account adds to the growing body of work on the altered demographics of Palestine;⁴ it effectively refutes allegations that Arab leaders told people to leave and includes instances when they in fact told them to return.

Although Morris denies that there was a master plan for the expulsion of Arabs (120), the impact of Israeli military actions was precisely that, even if a policy of ethnic cleansing was not explicitly enunciated. He does not deny that mainstream Zionist leaders did consider—even before the victories in the 1948 war—expanding the Jewish state beyond the UN partition lines (101). He also notes that the Golani Brigade’s official history concludes that,

⁴ See Adam LeBor, *City of Oranges: An Intimate History of Arabs and Jews in Jaffa* (NY: Norton, 2007), Sandy Tolani, *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2006), and May Seikaly, *Haifa: Transformation of a Palestinian Arab Society, 1918-1939* (London/NY: Tauris, 1995).

as a result of its actions in the north, “the valley was almost completely cleansed of its Arab inhabitants” (161). The Israeli revisionist historian Ilan Pappé has gone further in arguing strongly and controversially that there was in fact a concerted effort to remove the Palestinian population.⁵ However, none of these historians denies that armed conflict between the announcement of the UN partition plan in November 1947 and the British withdrawal in May 1948 ensured eventual Israeli victory before the actual onset of conventional war in 1948.

The account of the actual war (chaps. 5-9) is straightforward and easily followed, even by those unfamiliar with military history. Morris notes the lack of coordination or planning on the part of the Arab states. He also mentions but does not expand on the negotiations between Israeli leaders and King Abdullah of Jordan whereby Abdullah agreed to deploy the Arab Legion, arguably the best Arab force, only in territories allotted to the Arab state under the UN partition plan. Crucially, Jerusalem was not part of this top secret agreement. Avi Shlaim and Joseph Nevo have both expanded on this vital aspect of the 1948 war.⁶ Abdullah’s territorial ambitions and dynastic rivalries with other Arab rulers were certainly contributory factors—albeit not the only ones—behind the generally poor performance of Arab militaries. Thus, contrary to media accounts, the Arab governments, especially Jordan, aimed not necessarily to eliminate the Jewish state but to expand their own territories or improve their relative powers within the Arab world (195).

As Morris explains the two UN implemented truces, though violated by both sides, enabled Israel to secure additional arms by both air and sea, whereas the Arabs were impeded by the Western arms embargo, especially as enforced by Great Britain. As a result, Israel consolidated and expanded its land holdings by almost a third more than granted under the UN partition plan. This territory almost immediately became non-negotiable as far as Israel was concerned. Nor were the Palestinian refugees who had left these territories—either out of fear or under force—allowed to return. David Ben-Gurion, the first Israeli Prime Minister, was especially opposed to both announcing the final borders for the Israeli state or permitting the return of the Palestinians (177, 299). Israeli forces therefore implemented a “near-systematic destruction of villages after conquest and depopulation” (303).

Again, Morris remarks on but does not expand on U.S. support for Israel throughout the war. Ben-Gurion and the Israeli leadership were well aware that, although the UN might object to their attacks against Egyptian forces in the south and the Negev in October, they could rely on U.S. support to gain more time. Through a series of ruses (323-5, chap. 8), Israel was able to brand Egypt as the aggressor and to launch successful attacks in Operation Yoav. The maps in this section are particularly helpful. In Operation Hiram, Israel for the first time crossed a recognized international border to invade south Lebanon (344). The fact that Israel, a state barely five months old, already had the confidence and military strength to attack a neighboring nation contradicts conventional belief, especially by the U.S. public, that it was militarily weaker and more eager for peace than the Arabs.

⁵ See note 3 supra.

⁶ See Shlaim, note 3 supra, and Nevo, *King Abdallah [sic] and Palestine: A Territorial Ambition* (NY: St. Martin's, 1996).

Similarly Israel launched raids into Egyptian territory in the Sinai (chap. 9) where some Israeli cabinet members wanted to expand their land holdings.

Chapter 10, on the various armistice agreements, comes almost as an anti-climax to the narrative on the war itself. Israel had the clear advantage, and the bellicose rhetoric of Arab leaders belied their weakness. Arab verbal aggression also enabled the Israeli government successfully to portray itself as the victim and weaker party, even though the facts on the ground clearly indicated the opposite. Ben-Gurion viewed the armistice agreements with the surrounding Arab states as de facto peace accords and therefore saw no need to pursue “full peace” (391); indeed, there has yet to be a comprehensive peace settlement between Israel and a number of Arab states, let alone the Palestinians.

Morris not only provides an exhaustive account of the military aspects of the 1948 war, he places it firmly within its all-important political context. His blunt assessments of the weaknesses, brutality, and atrocities of both sides will not find favor with either hard-line Zionists or some supporters of the Palestinians. Both are certain to allege that he favors one side over the other and discounts or downplays the terror inflicted by their opponents.

Morris’s personal bias only becomes apparent in the conclusion,⁷ where he asserts that the conflict has been and remains part of a global struggle between “the Islamic East and the West.” Although in the preceding ten chapters of his book, Morris occasionally cites Islamic support for the Palestinian cause, as, for example, when Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood volunteered to fight in the 1948 war, his narrative fails to show that the conflict is primarily rooted in religion. Indeed, the main Palestinian nationalist organizations, especially the PLO, were steadfastly secular for decades. Islamist movements, such as Hamas, only emerged as the dominant forces in the 1990s, owing to the internal failures and corruption of the PLO and its inability to secure a meaningful independent Palestinian state. Others may also attempt to refute Morris’s judgment that even if Israel had been more forthcoming with Arab states after the 1948 war, things would not have been different (417). These debatable points in the concluding chapter do not in any way lessen the importance of Morris’s work as an objective history of the first order. Military historians as well as a wide array of experts and general readers will find this to be perhaps the single best work on the 1948 war. It should stand as the definitive work for some time to come.

⁷ David Remnick provides a thoughtful exposition of Morris’s own political stances in “Blood and Sand: A Revisionist Israeli Historian Revisits His Country’s Origins,” *New Yorker* (5 May 2008) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0812.htm>.