

The Arabs

A History

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*This book is dedicated to
Richard Huia Woods Rogan*

Palestinian Hijackings



15. Leila Khaled was a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who successfully hijacked a TWA airliner in 1969 from Rome to Damascus, where all passengers and staff were released unharmed. Her second operation, against an Israeli airliner, was foiled by El-Al security officers who killed her partner and overwhelmed Khaled before making an emergency landing in London, where Khaled was taken into custody by British police. She was released by the British on October 1, 1970, as part of a prisoner exchange.



16. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine took control of a deserted airstrip named Dawson's Field in the desert east of the Jordanian capital Amman and declared it "Revolution Airport." Between September 6 and 9, 1970, the PFLP hijacked an American TWA airliner, a British BOAC jet, and a Swissair flight to "Revolution Airport." All 310 passengers were evacuated from the planes which were destroyed on September 12. The operation succeeded in bringing the Palestinian cause to international attention but provoked King Hussein to drive the Palestinian movement out of Jordan in the violent

CHAPTER 9

The Palestine Disaster and Its Consequences

In January 1944, Jewish extremists in Palestine declared war on Great Britain. "There is no longer any armistice between the Jewish people and the British Administration in Eretz Israel [i.e., the Land of Israel] which hands our brothers over to Hitler," the underground resistance movement asserted. "Our people is at war with this regime—war to the end."¹

It may seem incredible that Jewish settlers would go to war with the British government, which had turned the Zionist dream of a Jewish national home in Palestine into a reality. However, over the course of the Second World War, Britain had come under increasing attack by the Jewish community of Palestine. The 1939 White Paper, which had imposed strict limits on Jewish immigration and called for Palestinian independence under (Arab) majority rule by 1949, had infuriated the Zionist leadership.

With war looming between Britain and Nazi Germany, David Ben-Gurion had pledged to help the British army fight fascism as if there were no White Paper, while opposing the terms of the White Paper as if there were no war. Most of the Zionists in Palestine fell in line with Ben-Gurion's policy and grudgingly supported the British in their war against the Nazi regime in Germany. But other, more radical Zionist parties saw Britain as the greater threat. They launched an armed insurgency with the stated aim of driving the British out of Palestine.

Two Jewish terrorist organizations, the Irgun and the Stern Gang, were responsible for the worst of the violence. The Irgun (short for Irgun Zvai Leumi, or National Military Organization) had been formed in 1937 to protect Jewish settlements from attack during the 1936–1939 Arab Revolt. After the White Paper was approved by the British Parliament in May 1939, however, Irgun members came to view Britain

as the real enemy. The Irgun launched a series of bomb attacks on British government offices and police stations in Palestine before suspending hostilities in June 1940. With Britain at war with Germany, the Irgun leadership decided to comply with Ben-Gurion's policies of working with the British to fight Nazism.

One faction in the Irgun dissented and continued its attacks on the British. The splinter group, which came to be known in Hebrew by the acronym Lehi (for *Lohamei Herut Yisrael*, or Freedom Fighters of Israel), are better known in the West as the Stern Gang, after the leader of the faction, Abraham Stern. Stern and his followers believed that the Jewish people had an inalienable right to the land of Israel and that it was their duty to redeem the land—by armed force, if necessary. For Stern, the 1939 White Paper cast Britain in the role of an illegitimate occupier. Rather than siding with Britain against Nazi Germany, Stern actively approached the Nazis to make common cause against the British. Like some Arab nationalists, Stern hoped to work with the Germans to liberate Palestine from British rule—Nazi anti-Semitism notwithstanding. In Stern's view, Nazi Germany was but a persecutor of the Jewish people, whereas England was an enemy who would deny the Jews statehood in Palestine.

Toward the end of 1940, Stern sent a representative to meet with German officials in Beirut to argue for a convergence of interests "between the aims of the 'New Order' in Europe as interpreted by the Germans and the true national aspirations of the Jewish people." Through his envoy, Stern offered to use Jewish forces to drive Britain out of Palestine in return for unrestricted Jewish emigration from Germany to Palestine and German recognition of Jewish statehood. He argued that such an alliance would resolve the Jewish question in Europe and Jewish national aspirations while dealing their common British enemy a crucial defeat in the Eastern Mediterranean.²

Stern never received a response from the Third Reich. He clearly miscalculated the genocidal nature of Nazi anti-Semitism. For his overtures to the Germans, Stern was roundly condemned by both the Irgun and the Jewish Agency, which provided intelligence to the British to assist them in their crackdown on the Lehi. The mandate authorities were in hot pursuit of the Stern Gang for a string of attacks and bank robberies in Palestine. In February 1942, British officers killed Stern in a raid on a Tel Aviv apartment. Its leadership in disarray after Stern's death, the Lehi lapsed into inactivity. A fragile truce prevailed between the Yishuv and the British between 1942 and 1944, while the Second World War raged.

The Irgun began to reorganize itself as a resistance movement against British rule in 1943. The movement was headed by a dynamic new leader named Menachem Begin. Born in Poland, Begin (1913–1992) joined a Zionist youth movement before fleeing the country during the German invasion of Poland in 1939. He later volunteered for a Polish military unit in the Soviet Union. In 1942 his unit was sent to Palestine, where Begin was recruited to the Irgun. He rapidly rose to lead the orga-

nization and made contact with the new leadership of the Lehi, including Yitzhak Shamir. Both men would become prime minister of Israel toward the end of their lives, though they began their political careers in Palestine as terrorists. Continued restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine, combined with growing knowledge of the Nazi death camps and the Holocaust, exacerbated tensions between the radical Zionist movements and the British authorities in Palestine. By 1944, the Irgun and Lehi were no longer willing to be bound by the general truce and resumed attacks on the British in Palestine.

The Irgun and the Lehi used very different tactics in their common conflict against the British. Begin's Irgun carried out attacks against the offices of the British mandate and communications infrastructure in Palestine. Shamir's Lehi, in contrast, conducted targeted assassination attacks against British officials. The organization gained particular notoriety when two of its members assassinated the British minister resident in the Middle East, Lord Moyne, outside his home in Cairo on November 6, 1944. Moyne was the highest ranking British official in the Middle East and had upheld the 1939 White Paper's restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine. His assassins were caught by Egyptian police and subsequently hanged for their crime. The Jewish Agency and its paramilitary wing, the Haganah, distanced themselves from the Lehi and its acts, for fear of British retaliation.

It was only after the end of the Second World War that the Irgun, the Lehi, and the Haganah combined forces to fight against the British in Palestine. The liberation of the Nazi death camps had revealed the monstrous crime of the Holocaust. The leaders of the Yishuv were determined to bring Jewish survivors of the genocide from displaced person camps in Europe to Palestine. They refused to respect the limits on Jewish immigration imposed by the 1939 White Paper and declared a revolt against the British mandate. For a brief period in 1945–1946, the Haganah secretly coordinated operations with the Lehi and Irgun, to force a change in British policy through violence.

For ten months the Haganah cooperated with the Irgun and Lehi in a series of bank robberies, attacks on infrastructure, and kidnappings of British personnel. The Jewish Agency, led by Ben-Gurion, consistently denied any involvement in these operations and kept the Haganah's participation secret. The British authorities, however, suspected the Yishuv as a whole of complicity in the violence and responded with a massive clampdown. Between June 29 and July 1, 1946, over 2,700 members of the Yishuv were arrested, including several Jewish Agency leaders. The British authorities also seized the papers of the Jewish Agency and took them back to the mandate secretariat, then housed in a wing of the King David Hotel.

The British seizure of its documents amounted to more than an administrative problem for the Jewish Agency. Among the papers were items implicating the agency

and the Haganah in attacks on the British.³ Were the mandate authorities to find the evidence of Haganah and Jewish Agency involvement in terror activities, it would only stiffen British resolve to prevent further Jewish immigration to Palestine, and to concede to Palestinian Arab demands. From the moment these incriminating documents were taken into the mandate secretariat, the fate of the King David Hotel was sealed. The Irgun already had detailed plans for an attack on the high-rise hotel in West Jerusalem, headquarters to both the civil and military administrations of Palestine, but the Haganah had previously restrained it, arguing that such an atrocity would "inflame the British excessively." On July 1, immediately after the British seizure of the Jewish Agency's files, the Haganah sent a command to the Irgun ordering it to carry out the operation against the King David Hotel as soon as possible.

Preparations for the King David Hotel bombing took three weeks. On July 22 a group of Irgun operatives delivered a number of milk cans filled with 500 pounds of high explosives to the basement of the hotel. The "milkmen" were surprised by two British soldiers, and a fire fight ensued. But the terrorists had already managed to set the timers to detonate the explosives thirty minutes later.

"Each minute seemed like a day," Menachem Begin later wrote. "Twelve-thirty-one, thirty-two. Zero hour drew near. The half-hour was almost up. Twelve-thirty-seven. . . . Suddenly, the whole town seemed to shudder."⁴

The British authorities claimed that they had received no advance warning of the attack. The Irgun insisted it had given telephone warnings to both the hotel and other institutions. Whatever the truth of the claims on either side, no attempt had been made to evacuate the King David Hotel. The explosives, detonated beneath a public café at the height of the lunch hour, sheared an entire wing from the hotel and collapsed all six stories into the basement. Ninety-one people were killed and over one hundred wounded in the explosion—Britons, Arabs, and Jews alike.

The atrocity shocked the world and was denounced by the Jewish Agency as a "dastardly crime perpetrated by a group of desperadoes." Yet the British government knew full well that the Haganah was implicated in the terror campaign, and it made the point in a White Paper on terrorism in Palestine published only two days after the King David bombing.

The British recognized they were fighting more than just a radical fringe. The Jewish Agency and the Haganah might differ with the Irgun and Lehi on tactics and methods, but they were united in purpose: the expulsion of the British to achieve Jewish statehood in Palestine.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Britain had neither the resources nor the resolve to remain in Palestine. The differences between Jews and Arabs in Palestine were irreconcilable. If the British made concessions to the Jews, they feared the Arabs

would start a revolt like that of 1936–1939. If they made concessions to the Arabs, it was now clear what the Jews would be capable of. British efforts to convene a meeting of Arab and Jewish leaders in London in September 1946 failed when both sides refused to attend. Subsequent bilateral meetings in London in February 1947 collapsed under the weight of contradictory Arab and Jewish demands for statehood.

The British had reached an impasse, and the fallacy of the Balfour Declaration was now clear: Britain could not deliver a "national home for the Jewish people" without prejudice to "rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." The British government was out of solutions and had no more leverage over the disputing parties in Palestine. And so, on February 25, 1947, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin referred the Palestine question to the newly created United Nations in the hope that the international community might have more success in solving the problem.

The United Nations assembled an eleven-nation Special Committee on Palestine, known by the acronym UNSCOP. Aside from Iran, none of the UNSCOP members had any particular interest in Middle Eastern affairs: Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, India, Iran, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru, and Yugoslavia. Delegates spent five weeks in Palestine in June and July 1947. Arab political leaders refused to meet with the UNSCOP delegates, whereas the Jewish Agency took the opportunity to put the most persuasive case forward to the international community in support of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

While the UNSCOP delegates were in Palestine, waves of illegal Jewish immigrants were flooding from Europe into Palestine, with Jewish Agency assistance, in derelict steamers. The British authorities made every effort to bar entry to these refugees, most of whom were Holocaust survivors. The most famous of these ships was the *Exodus*, whose 4,500 passengers reached the port of Haifa on July 18. The ship's passengers were denied entry to Palestine and shipped back to France the very next day for subsequent internment in German camps. Britain faced widespread international condemnation for its handling of the Jewish refugee crisis, and for the *Exodus* affair in particular.

Violence between Britain and the Jewish community escalated while the UNSCOP delegates conducted their investigation. The British had condemned three Irgun men to death for terror crimes in July 1947. On July 12 the Irgun seized two British sergeants, Cliff Martin and Marvyn Paice, and held them hostage to prevent the British from hanging the Irgun men. When the British carried out the executions, the Irgun hanged Martin and Paice in retaliation, on July 29. The killers pinned a list of charges to the dead men's bodies in a macabre parody of British legal jargon. Martin and Paice were "British spies" condemned for "criminal anti-Hebrew activities" such as "illegal entry into the Hebrew homeland" and "membership of a British criminal terrorist organisation known as the Army of Occupation."⁵

Worse, the men's bodies were booby-trapped to explode when cut down. The act was designed to provoke maximum outrage and undermine Britain's will to continue the fight in Palestine.

The hanging of the two sergeants made front-page news across Britain. Tabloids stirred anti-Jewish hostility with banner headlines screaming "Hanged Britons: Picture That Will Shock the World." Instantly, a wave of anti-Jewish demonstrations gave way to riots that spread across England and Scotland and raged through the first week of August. The worst of the violence took place in the port city of Liverpool, where in the course of five days more than 300 Jewish properties were attacked and some eighty-eight townspeople arrested by the police. The *Jewish Chronicle* reported attacks on synagogues in London, Glasgow, and Plymouth, and threats to temples in other towns. Only two years after the liberation of the Nazi death camps, swastikas and slogans such as "Hang All Jews" and "Hitler Was Right" stained British cities.⁶

The UNSCOP delegates were thus all too aware of the complexity of the situation in Palestine by the time they drew up their findings for the United Nations in August 1947. The delegates were unanimous in calling for the end of the British mandate, and they recommended the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states by a strong majority of eight to three. Only India, Iran, and Yugoslavia opposed partition, preferring a unified federal state of Palestine.

The British did not even wait for the United Nations to debate the recommendations of the UNSCOP proposals. The *Exodus* scandal, the hanging of the British sergeants, the anti-Semitic riots that followed, and the UNSCOP report, all in quick succession, completely undermined Britain's resolve to remain in Palestine. On September 26, 1947, the British government announced its intention to withdraw unilaterally from Palestine and entrust its mandatory responsibilities to the United Nations. The date for the British withdrawal was set for May 14, 1948.

The terrorists had achieved their first objective: they had forced the British to withdraw from Palestine. Though their methods were publicly denounced by the leaders of the Jewish Agency, the Irgun and Lehi had played a key role in removing a major impediment to Jewish statehood. By using terror tactics to achieve political objectives, they also set a dangerous precedent in Middle Eastern history—one that plagues the region down to the present day.

The UNSCOP report was presented to the General Assembly for debate in November 1947. The terms of debate were shaped by the majority recommendation for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. The Partition Resolution divided Palestine into a checkerboard of six parts, three Arab and three Jewish, with Jerusalem under international trusteeship. The plan allotted some 55 percent of the

area of Palestine to the Jewish state, including all of the Galilee panhandle to the northeast of the country, as well as the strategic Mediterranean coastline from Haifa through Jaffa, and the Araba Desert down to the Gulf of Aqaba.

Zionist activists lobbied UN members assiduously to secure the two-thirds majority required to carry the Partition Resolution and the promise of Jewish statehood. American Zionists played a major role in securing the Truman administration's support for the resolution. In his memoirs, Harry Truman later recalled that he never "had as much pressure and propaganda aimed at the White House as I had in this instance."⁷ In the eleventh hour, the United States reversed its position of nonintervention and actively pressured other members to lend their support to partition. On November 29, 1947, the Partition Resolution passed by a vote of 33 to 13, with 10 abstentions.

Having secured international authorization for the creation of a Jewish state in at least part of Palestine, the Zionists had taken another major step toward achieving their goal of statehood. However, the Arab world generally, and the Palestinian Arabs in particular, remained implacably opposed to both partition and to Jewish statehood in Palestine.

It is not hard to understand the Palestinian Arab position. By 1947 the Arabs of Palestine constituted a two-thirds majority with over 1.2 million people, compared to 600,000 Jews in Palestine. Many of the Palestinian cities designated as part of the Jewish state by the Partition Resolution, such as Haifa and Jaffa, contained large Arab majorities. Moreover, Arabs owned 94 percent of the total land area of Palestine and some 80 percent of the arable farmland of the country.⁸ Based on these facts, Palestinian Arabs refused to confer on the United Nations the authority to split their country and give half away.

Jamal al-Husayni, a notable of Jerusalem, captured Palestinian frustrations in his response to the UNSCOP proposals in September 1947. "The case of the Arabs of Palestine was based on the principles of international justice; it was that of a people which desired to live in undisturbed possession of the country where Providence and history had placed it. The Arabs of Palestine could not understand why their right to live in freedom and peace, and to develop their country in accordance with their traditions, should be questioned and constantly submitted to investigation." Al-Husayni, addressing his comments to the UN committee on the Palestinian question, continued: "One thing is clear, it was the sacred duty of the Arabs of Palestine to defend their country against all aggression."⁹

No one had any illusions that partition would go unchallenged. The Jews in Palestine would have to fight for the lands allotted them by the UN's Partition Resolution, not to mention any other territories designated for the Arab state to which they might aspire. The Arabs, for their part, would have to defeat the Jews if they hoped to prevent them from taking any part of Palestine.

The morning after the Partition Resolution was announced, Arabs and Jews began to prepare for an inevitable war—a civil war between the rival claimants to Palestine.

For six months Arabs and Jews fought for their rival claims over Palestine. The Jewish community of Palestine was well prepared for battle. The Haganah had gained extensive training and combat experience during the Second World War. They had also stockpiled extensive arms and ammunition. The Palestine Arabs had made no such preparations and placed their trust in the justice of their cause and the support of neighboring Arab states.

The controversial leader of the Palestinian Arab community was Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the exiled grand mufti of Jerusalem. Hajj Amin was a very divisive figure who provoked opposition both in Palestine and abroad. He was reviled by the British and other Western powers for his defection to Nazi Germany during World War II, and he was mistrusted to varying degrees by Arab heads of state. Hajj Amin's leadership was contested by a number of Palestinian notables, dividing the Arab community just as it faced its greatest challenge. As he tried to lead the Palestinian movement from his exile in Egypt, Hajj Amin undermined the prospects for meaningful common action between the Palestinian Arabs themselves, and between the Palestinians and the other Arab states.

The Arab states, many of which had only just gained independence from European colonial rule, were similarly divided and demoralized. They had just suffered their first diplomatic defeat with the passing of the UN Partition Resolution over their impassioned opposition. Faced with the decision to divide Palestine, inter-Arab rivalries rose to the surface.

The only Arab country to support the idea of partition, since it was first mooted in 1937, was Transjordan. King Abdullah (the former amir had been crowned king in May 1946) welcomed the opportunity to append the Arab territories of Palestine to his own nearly landlocked kingdom. Abdullah's support for partition provoked deep resentment from Palestinian political elites and the active hatred of the mufti, Hajj Amin. Abdullah's isolation in the Arab world was almost complete. He could only count on a modicum of support from his Hashemite cousins in Iraq. He suffered the active mistrust of the Syrian government, who feared Abdullah's ambitions in their own lands dating back to the early 1920s; the long-standing hostility of the Hashemites' rivals in Arabia, the House of Saud; and the suspicions of the Egyptian monarchy, who feared any challenge to Egypt's self-declared primacy in Arab affairs.

Rather than coordinate their actions and commit their national armies, the neighboring Arab states preferred to call on irregular volunteers—Arab nationalists and Muslim Brothers determined to save Arab Palestine. Much as Americans and Euro-

peans responded to the call to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War, these Arab "Lincoln Brigades" came to defeat Zionism. They were called the Arab Liberation Army (ALA), and their most famous commander was Fawzi al-Qawuqji.

Fawzi al-Qawuqji had never missed the opportunity to fight against European imperialism in the Arab world. His every battle had proved a glorious defeat. He was among the forces who retreated from Maysalun on the day the French defeated King Faysal's Arab Kingdom in 1920. He led the revolt against the French in the Syrian town of Hama and played a key role in the Syrian revolt of 1925–1927. He was also a veteran of the Palestinian Arab Revolt of 1936–1939. He sided with the Iraqi military against the British in the Rashid Ali coup of 1941 and, when that movement was crushed, defected to Nazi Germany, where he married his German wife and waited out the rest of the war years.

Al-Qawuqji was impatient to return from Europe to Arab politics. After Germany's defeat, he fled to France, where he and his wife boarded a plane to Cairo under assumed identities with forged passports, in February 1947. That November he made his way to Damascus, where he was hosted by the Syrian government and paid a monthly allowance.

For the Syrian government, al-Qawuqji was a godsend. Unwilling to commit their own small army to war in Palestine, the Syrians threw their full support behind the Arab Liberation Army, for which al-Qawuqji was the ideal commander. He enjoyed a hero's reputation across the Arab world and possessed vast experience in commando warfare. Now aged fifty-seven, the grizzled commander set up camp in Damascus and busily recruited his irregular army.

In February 1948, a Lebanese journalist named Samir Souqi published an interview with al-Qawuqji that captured the atmosphere in his Damascus headquarters during the lead up to war:

This Arab leader, motivated by utmost resolve, has made of his home a military headquarters guarded by irregulars in American military uniform. Not an hour of the day passes without Bedouins, peasants and young men in modern clothes turning up on his doorstep, demanding to enlist as volunteers in the Arab Liberation Army. He also has headquarters in Qaranah, where volunteers are undergoing military training, waiting to be sent to Palestine.¹⁰

Working together in a new regional organization known as the Arab League, the Arab states hoped to rely on the ALA to defeat the Jewish forces in Palestine without having to send in their regular armies. They appointed the Iraqi general Ismail Safwat as commander in chief of the ALA and charged him with implementing a coordinated war plan for the volunteer irregular army. Safwat divided Palestine into three

main fronts to coordinate operations according to a master plan. He placed al-Qawuqji in charge of the northern front and the Mediterranean coastline; the southern front would fall under Egyptian command. The central front—called the Jerusalem Front—was to be under Hajj Amin's authority, who named the charismatic Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni to lead his forces.

Though a member of the mufti's Husayni family, Abd al-Qadir transcended the factional fighting and was held in respect by Palestinians from all walks of life. Educated in the American University in Cairo, he was a veteran of the Palestinian Arab Revolt, where he earned a reputation for bravery and leadership, and was twice wounded. Like al-Qawuqji, he later fought the British in Iraq in 1941.

The greatest problem facing Arab commanders both in Palestine and the neighboring Arab states was the shortage of arms and ammunitions. Unlike the Jewish soldiers in the Haganah, who had enjoyed British training for over a decade and had gained combat experience fighting with the British in World War II, the Palestinian Arabs had not had the opportunity to build up an indigenous militia. Also, whereas the Jewish Agency had been smuggling arms and ammunition into Palestine, the Palestinian Arabs had no independent access to arms. With no source of resupply, it would not take long for Palestinian fighters to run out of the limited ammunition they held.

The logistical shortcomings did not constrain the Palestinian fighters, however. Sporadic attacks against Jewish settlements began on November 30, 1947, and spread from the cities to the countryside. Arab forces tried to cut roads leading to settlements and to isolate Jewish villages. For most of the winter months of 1948, the Haganah dug in and fortified its positions, working to secure the territory allotted to the Jewish state by the Partition Resolution in advance of the British withdrawal scheduled for mid-May.

In late March 1948, Jewish forces went on the offensive. Their first target was the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem road. The Jewish quarter of Jerusalem was encircled and besieged by Arab forces. The Haganah was determined to open a supply line and relieve Jewish positions in Jerusalem.

The Arab situation in Jerusalem was far weaker than the Jewish commanders realized. Palestinian fighters, commanded by Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, did not have the weaponry to retain their positions. The Arabs held the strategic town of al-Qastal, which commanded the high ground on the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem road. As Jewish forces advanced toward al-Qastal, al-Husayni made an emergency visit to Damascus in early April to secure the arms his men needed to hold their ground.

Inter-Arab disputes undermined al-Husayni's mission from the outset. The Syrian government was hostile to the mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, and refused all support

to Abd al-Qadir, who was the mufti's cousin. A bitter rivalry had developed between the Syrian-backed ALA and the local Palestinian forces headed by Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni that served to further divide Arab ranks. Al-Husayni found himself caught up in these inter-Arab politics as he met with Syrian and Arab League leaders in Damascus.

While Arab leaders and commanders squabbled in Damascus, al-Qastal fell to the elite Palmach units of the Haganah on April 3. Arab attempts to retake the town had failed, and the Jewish forces were consolidating their defenses. Al-Qastal was the first Arab town to be captured by Jewish forces, and the news came as a shock to all those meeting in Damascus. From this strategic position, Haganah forces posed a real threat to Jerusalem. Yet the Arab League commanders remained incapable of meaningful action, seemingly confined to a fantasy world.

General Ismail Safwat, the Iraqi commander in chief of the Arab Liberation Army, turned to Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni and said, "So al-Qastal has fallen. It is your job to get it back, Abd al-Qadir. And if you aren't able to get it back, tell us so that we can entrust the job to [Fawzi] al-Qawuqji."

Al-Husayni was incensed. "Give us the weapons I have requested and we will recover the town. Now the situation has deteriorated, and the Jews have artillery and aircraft and men. I cannot occupy al-Qastal without artillery. Give me what I ask for and I guarantee you victory."

"What is this, Abd al-Qadir, you have no cannons?" Ismail Safwat retorted. He grudgingly promised the Palestinian commander whatever leftover guns and ammunition they had available in Damascus—105 outdated rifles, 21 machine guns, insufficient ammunition, and some mines—for later delivery. In essence, they sent al-Husayni home empty-handed.

Al-Husayni exploded in anger and stormed out of the hall: "You are traitors. You are criminals. History will record that you lost Palestine. I will occupy al-Qastal, and I will die along with my brothers, the *mujahidin*."¹¹

Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni left Damascus that very night, on April 6, and reached Jerusalem at dawn the following morning, accompanied by fifty ALA volunteers. After a short rest, he set off for al-Qastal at the head of a force of some three hundred Palestinians and four British soldiers, who had crossed ranks to fight with the Arabs.¹²

The Arab counterattack on al-Qastal began at 11 P.M. on April 7. The Arab forces broke into detachments and approached the village in a three-pronged assault. One of the Arab detachments suffered heavy casualties and nearly ran out of ammunition. As their wounded leader retreated, al-Husayni led a small detachment to take their place and attempted to lay charges under the defenses erected by the Jewish forces. But al-Husayni and his men were pinned down by heavy fire from the Jewish

defenders and soon found themselves surrounded by Jewish reinforcements from nearby settlements.

As dawn broke on the morning of April 8, word spread like wildfire among the Arab fighters that al-Husayni and his men were surrounded by the enemy; the battle of al-Qastal looked certain to end in defeat. However, Arab reinforcements rallied to the call, and some five hundred men joined the besieged troops at al-Qastal. They fought through the day and managed to retake the town by the late afternoon. Their joy in recovering al-Qastal was shattered when the Arab fighters found the body of Abd al-Qadir al-Husayn on the eastern periphery of the town. The Palestinian fighters vented their rage by killing their fifty Jewish prisoners. On both sides, the civil war would prove a war of atrocity.

Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni was buried the following day. Ten thousand mourners attended his funeral at the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. "The people wept for him," recalled Arif al-Arif, a native of Jerusalem and historian of 1948. "They called him the hero of al-Qastal."¹³ The Palestinians never fully recovered from the loss of Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni. No other local leader rose to command a national resistance to the Jewish forces in Palestine, and his death was a tremendous blow to public morale. Worse yet, his death proved entirely in vain. The demoralized Arab defenders left only forty men to hold al-Qastal. Within forty-eight hours, Jewish forces retook the town—this time for good.

The death of Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni and the loss of al-Qastal were overshadowed by the massacre of the Palestinian villagers of Dayr Yasin on April 9. The massacre, which took place on the same day as al-Husayni's funeral, sent shock waves of fear across Palestine. From that day forward, the Palestinians had lost the will to fight.

Dayr Yasin was a peaceful Arab village of some 750 residents located to the west of Jerusalem. It was a mixed village of farmers, masons, and merchants. There were two mosques and two schools, one for boys and one for girls, and a sporting club. It was the last village in Palestine to expect a Jewish attack, for the residents had concluded a nonaggression pact with the Jewish commanders in Jerusalem. The Irgun and Lehi gave no reason for their unprovoked attack on Dayr Yasin. Palestinian historian Arif al-Arif believed the Jewish terror organizations targeted the village "to give their own people hope and to fill the hearts of the Arabs with terror."¹⁴

The attack on Dayr Yasin began in the predawn hours of April 9, 1948. With only eighty-five armed men facing a superior Jewish force supported by armored cars and aircraft, panic spread among the villagers. One peasant woman was breastfeeding her baby when the fighting erupted. "I heard the tanks and rifles, and smelled the smoke. I saw them coming. Everybody was yelling to their neighbours, 'If you know how to leave, leave!' Whoever had an uncle tried to get the uncle. Whoever had a wife tried

to get the wife." She ran for her life with her baby son in her arms, to the neighboring village of 'Ayn Karam.¹⁵

Though there were Arab Liberation Army units in Ayn Karam, and British police nearby, no one came to the villagers' rescue. Eyewitnesses reported that the Jewish attackers gathered all of the armed Arab defenders and shot them. Arif al-Arif, the Palestinian chronicler, interviewed a number of survivors of Dayr Yasin soon after these events and catalogued the horrors of the day, naming names and detailing deaths. "Among the atrocities," he recounted,

they killed al-Haj Jabir Mustafa, a ninety-year-old man, and threw his body from the balcony of his home into the street. They did the same to al-Haj Isma'il 'Atiyya, an old man aged ninety-five, and killed his eighty-year-old wife and their grandchild. They murdered a blind youth named Muhammad Ali Khalil Mustafa and his wife, who tried to protect him, and her eighteen-month-old child. They murdered a school teacher who was tending to the wounded.¹⁶

In all, some 250 villagers were killed in Dayr Yasin.

According to al-Arif's sources, the killing would have continued in Dayr Yasin had an older Jewish commander not given the order to stop. However, survivors were forced to march to the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem, where they were "publicly reviled before the Jewish people, as if they were criminals," before they were finally released near the Italian hospital near Hayy al-Mismara.¹⁷ Between the massacre of innocent villagers and the brutal humiliation of survivors, Dayr Yasin provoked universal condemnation. The Jewish Agency denounced the atrocity and distanced its Haganah forces from the extremists of the Irgun and Lehi.

The massacre at Dayr Yasin provoked a mass exodus of Palestinian Arabs that continued right up to the British withdrawal on May 15. As word of the killing spread, al-Arif explained, people across Palestine "began to flee their homes, carrying with them different accounts of Jewish atrocities which left people shuddering in horror." The political leadership only exacerbated fears by publishing accounts of Dayr Yasin and other atrocities in the Arab press. Although the Palestinian leaders hoped to force the Arab states to intervene by playing on the humanitarian crisis, their reports only served to reinforce the fear and encourage villagers to abandon their homes.¹⁸ Time and again, contemporary accounts make reference to townspeople and villagers across Palestine taking their loved ones and abandoning their homes and possessions out of fear of another Dayr Yasin.

Palestinians had already begun fleeing the territory earlier in the spring. Between February and March 1948, some 75,000 Arabs had left their homes in the towns that were the center of fighting, such as Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa, for the relative

safety of the West Bank or neighboring Arab states.¹⁹ That April, after Dayr Yasin, the stream of refugees became a flood.

Some Palestinians chose to fight horror with horror. Four days after the massacre at Dayr Yasin, on April 13, Palestinian fighters ambushed a Jewish medical convoy heading to Mount Scopus on the edge of Jerusalem. The two ambulances were clearly marked with medical insignia, and the passengers were in fact doctors and nurses of the Hadassah Hospital and employees of the Hebrew University. There were 112 passengers in the convoy. Only 36 survived.

The brutality of the ambush was captured in a series of grisly photographs in which the attackers posed in triumph next to the bodies of their victims. These barbaric photographs were sold commercially in Jerusalem, as if to demonstrate to the Arabs of Palestine that they could destroy the Jewish threat. Yet photographs of atrocity could not dispel the air of defeat that permeated the towns and countryside of Palestine in April 1948.

Palestinian morale had been shattered, and the massacre of Jewish civilians at Mount Scopus only heightened fears of further atrocity and Jewish retribution. Sensing the collapse in public morale, the Haganah stepped up its operations in line with a military plan known as Plan D for the depopulation and destruction of Palestinian towns and villages deemed necessary to establish a viable Jewish state.

Haifa fell to Jewish forces on April 21–23, sending another shock wave through Palestine. Haifa was the economic heart of Palestine, thanks to its port and oil refinery. The total Arab population came to more than 70,000. It was also the administrative center of Northern Palestine.

Because Haifa had been allocated to the Jewish state by the UN Partition Resolution, Jewish forces had been planning to take the city for months. Haifa had first come under attack by Jewish forces in mid-December 1947. "The attacks set off a fearsome emigration from the city," wrote Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim, a municipal leader in Haifa. "A large part of the population saw the danger that threatened them, as Jewish preparedness revealed how much the Arabs lacked to defend themselves, which drove them to flee their homes."²⁰ Hajj Ibrahim, chairman of the Haifa National Committee, worked with his colleagues in the municipality to restore calm and restrain the attacks by local and foreign irregulars, many of them ALA volunteers. But their efforts were in vain. Violent exchanges between Arab irregulars and Haganah fighters continued through the winter months and into the spring. By early April, between twenty and thirty thousand residents had left Haifa.

The final onslaught began on April 21. As British troops were withdrawing from their positions in Haifa, the Haganah launched a massive attack to take the city. Over

the next forty-eight hours Jewish forces pounded Arab neighborhoods relentlessly with sustained mortar attacks and gunfire. On Friday morning, April 23, Jewish aircraft attacked the city, "provoking terror among the women and children," Hajj Ibrahim wrote, "who were very influenced by the horrors of Dayr Yasin."²¹ They flooded to the waterfront, where ships were waiting to evacuate the terrified civilians of Haifa.

Hajj Ibrahim described the tragedy he witnessed on the Haifa waterfront: "Thousands of women, children and men hurried to the port district in a state of chaos and terror without precedent in the history of the Arab nation. They fled their houses to the coast, barefoot and naked, to wait for their turn to travel to Lebanon. They left their homeland, their houses, their possessions, their money, their welfare, and their trades, to surrender their dignity and their souls."²² By the beginning of May, only three to four thousand Arabs, of an original population exceeding 70,000, remained in Haifa to live under Jewish rule.

Once Haifa had been secured, Jewish forces concentrated on the rest of the coastline that had been awarded to the Jewish state by the United Nations. The Irgun, working independently of the Haganah, initiated hostilities to capture the other major Arab port town of Jaffa, next to the Jewish city of Tel Aviv. Its offensive began at dawn on April 25. Armed with three mortars and twenty tons of bombs, the Irgun took the northern Manshiyya quarter of Jaffa on April 27. From its new position, the Irgun subjected the downtown areas of Jaffa to relentless bombing over the next three days.

The attacks shattered public morale and the resistance of the townspeople of Jaffa. The fact that it was the Irgun attacking raised fears of another Dayr Yasin massacre. The fall of Haifa only a few days earlier had left most of the city's 50,000 remaining residents (already by April some 20,000 residents had sought refuge outside their city) with little hope that Jaffa would withstand the attack. Panic swept the city as its residents fled in a mass exodus. Municipal leaders sought ships to evacuate townspeople to Lebanon, and they negotiated for others to withdraw from the city to the Gaza Strip through Jewish lines. By May 13, there were only 4,000–5,000 inhabitants left to surrender their city to Jewish forces.

With time running out before the British withdrawal would be finalized, Jewish forces concentrated their attacks to secure the northeastern territories conceded to the Jewish state by partition. Safad, a town of 12,000 Arabs and 1,500 Jews, was attacked by elite Palmach units of the Haganah and fell on May 11. Beisan, a town of 6,000, was conquered on May 12 and its inhabitants expelled to Nazareth and Transjordan. At the same time, Haganah operations led to mass evacuations and expulsions of villagers from the Galilee region, the coastal plain, and the Tel Aviv–Jerusalem road. The roads of Palestine were filled with streams of homeless refugees, with only

the possessions they could carry, fleeing the terrors of war. One Arab eyewitness described the human misery of the refugees: "People left their country dazed and directionless, without homes or money, falling ill and dying while wandering from place to place, living in niches and caves, their clothing falling apart, leaving them naked, their food running out, leaving them hungry. The mountains grew colder and they had no one to defend them."²³

By the end of the war, the Jews of Palestine had secured the main towns of the coastal plain and the Galilee panhandle. In the process, they had driven between 200,000 and 300,000 Palestinians from their homes. The Palestinian refugees intended to return when peace had been restored. They were never allowed back. As David Ben-Gurion told his cabinet in June 1948, "We must prevent at all costs their return."²⁴

The civil war ended on the last day of the British mandate. The Jews of Palestine declared their statehood on May 14, 1948, and would henceforth be known as Israel. The defeated Arabs had no state to dignify their Palestinian identity. They placed their trust in their Arab neighbors, whose armies were massing on Palestine's borders, awaiting the final British withdrawal.

On May 14, as they had promised, the British played the "Last Post," took down their flag, and boarded ship, turning their backs on the disaster they had made of Palestine.

The day after the British withdrew from Palestine, the armies of the surrounding Arab states invaded. On May 15, 1948, the civil war between Palestinian Arabs and Jews was over, and the first Arab-Israeli war had begun. The governments of Egypt, Transjordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon each committed their armies, ostensibly to defend Arab Palestine and defeat Israel. In fact, the Arab League only decided to commit the regular armies of the Arab states two days before the British withdrawal from Palestine, on May 12, 1948. Had their intervention enjoyed a modicum of coordination and advance planning, a glimmer of trust and common purpose, the Arab forces might have prevailed. Instead, the Arabs entered Palestine more at war with each other than with the Jewish state.

The Arab states were in complete disarray on the eve of the first Arab-Israeli War. The conflict in Palestine had gone worse than anyone had predicted. For all his bluster, Fawzi al-Qawuqji had proved a disaster on the battlefield, his ill-trained and undisciplined troops forced to retreat from every action against the Haganah. The Arab Liberation Army was by all accounts more of a burden than a relief to the beleaguered Palestinians, and the strategy of relying on Arab volunteers had proven an utter failure. As the date of British withdrawal neared, the neighboring Arab states

came to recognize that they would have to commit their regular armies to prevent Jewish forces from conquering all of Palestine.

The Arab states all faced a serious dilemma. They saw the conflict in Palestine as an Arab cause and felt a moral obligation to intervene to protect fellow Arabs in Palestine. This was only reinforced by the fact that the Arab states met under the aegis of the Arab League to coordinate common action. However, the individual Arab states each had their own national interests—they entered the war as Egyptians, Jordanians, and Syrians rather than as Arabs. And they brought their inter-Arab rivalries to the battle field.

The Arab League convened a cycle of meetings in autumn 1947 and winter 1948 to address the Palestine crisis. The conflict of interests between the new Arab states became increasingly apparent. Each Arab country had its own concerns, and none of the Arab states placed great trust in the others. King Abdullah of Transjordan provoked the most suspicion among his Arab brethren. His support for partition revealed his ambition to annex the Arab territories of Palestine to aggrandize his own state. This earned him the hatred of Palestinian leader Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the rivalry of Egyptian King Farouq, and the suspicion of the Syrians. In Syria, President Shukri al-Quwwatli struggled to contain the threat of the "monarchist movement" among some of his officers, who supported King Abdullah of Transjordan and his call for a Greater Syria, uniting Syria and Transjordan under Hashemite rule. Much of what Syria did in the resulting war was calculated to contain Transjordan. The Arab states ultimately went to war to prevent each other from altering the balance of power in the Arab world, rather than to save Arab Palestine.

The cynicism of Arab leaders was lost on Arab citizens, who applauded their governments' intervention to protect Arab Palestine from the Zionist threat. The Arab public, and the soldiers fighting in the Arab armies, were moved by the rhetoric and believed in the justice of their cause. Public disenchantment with their politicians in the aftermath of defeat would lead to great upheaval in the Arab world following the "loss" of Palestine.

In May 1948 the armies of the Arab states were not ready for war, in large part because most of those states had only just secured independence from their colonial rulers. France had retained control over the armed forces of Syria and Lebanon until 1946 and had left little behind in the way of arms and ammunition when its forces grudgingly withdrew. Britain had a monopoly on the supply of weapons to the armed forces of Egypt, Transjordan, and Iraq. The British guarded the flow of supplies to their semi-independent allies to ensure their national armies never posed a threat to British forces in the region.

The Arab armies were also quite small at the time. The whole of the Lebanese army probably did not exceed 3,500 soldiers, and their weapons were hopelessly out

of date. The Syrian army did not exceed 6,000 men and was more of a threat than an asset to President al-Quwwatli—hardly a month had passed in 1947 without rumors of a plotted military coup. In the end, the Syrians committed fewer than half their total military strength—perhaps 2,500 men—to the struggle in Palestine. The Iraqi army contributed 3,000 men. The Transjordanian Arab Legion was the best trained and most disciplined army in the region, but it could only commit 4,500 of its total strength of 6,000 men at the outset of the war. The Egyptians had the largest force and sent 10,000 troops into Palestine. Yet in spite of these constraints, Arab war planners were predicting a swift victory over Jewish forces within eleven days. If sincere, such an estimate confirms how little the Arab side appreciated the seriousness of the conflict that lay ahead.

Of all the Arab states, only Transjordan had a clear policy and interests in the Palestine conflict. King Abdullah had never been satisfied with the territory the British assigned him in 1921. He had aspired to restore his family's rule over Damascus (hence the call for a "Greater Syria") and since 1937 had supported the idea of a partition of Palestine in which the Arab territory would be annexed to his desert kingdom (hence the animosity between the mufti and King Abdullah).

King Abdullah had enjoyed extensive contacts with the Jewish Agency dating back to the 1920s. These contacts developed into secret negotiations during the UN debate on the partition of Palestine. In November 1947 King Abdullah met with Golda Meyerson (who later changed her name to Meir and rose to be Israel's prime minister) and hammered out a basic nonaggression pact two weeks before the passage of the UN Partition Resolution. Abdullah would not oppose the creation of a Jewish state in the territory authorized by the United Nations; in return, Transjordan would annex the Arab parts of Palestine that it bordered—in essence the West Bank.²⁵

Transjordan needed Britain's approval to proceed with its plans to absorb the Arab parts of Palestine. In February 1948, Abdullah sent his premier, Tawfiq Abu al-Huda, to London, accompanied by his British commander, General John Bagot Glubb (better known as Glubb Pasha), to secure British consent for this plan. On February 7, Prime Minister Abu al-Huda set out Transjordan's plans to the British foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin: upon the termination of the Palestine mandate, the government of Transjordan would send the Arab Legion across the Jordan to occupy those Arab lands of Palestine that were contiguous to the frontiers of Transjordan.

"It seems the obvious thing to do," Bevin responded, "but do not go and invade the areas allotted to the Jews."

"We would not have the forces to do so, even if we so desired," Abu al-Huda replied. Bevin thanked the prime minister of Transjordan and expressed his full agreement with his plans for Palestine—essentially giving King Abdullah the green light to invade and annex the West Bank.²⁶

Thus, alone among the Arab nations, Transjordan knew precisely why it was entering the Palestine theater of conflict, and what it sought to gain. The problem was that the other Arab states were all too aware of King Abdullah's ambitions, and they dedicated more effort to contain Transjordan than to save Palestine. Syria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia constituted an undeclared bloc on Jordanian ambitions, and their actions actively hindered the sound conduct of war. Though the Arab League named King Abdullah commander in chief of the Arab forces, the commanders of the individual Arab armies refused to meet with him, let alone to accept any of his orders. Abdullah himself questioned the Arab League's intentions, asking an Egyptian military delegation on the eve of war: "The Arab League appointed me as the commander-in-chief of the Arab armies. Should not this honour be conferred on Egypt the largest of the Arab states? Or is the real purpose behind this appointment to pin the blame and responsibility on us in case of failure?"²⁷

If the Arab states were hostile to Abdullah's intentions, they were none the more sympathetic to the Palestinians, given their animosity toward the Palestinian leader, Hajj Amin al-Husayni. The Iraqis begrudged Hajj Amin for the support he gave to Rashid Ali al-Kaylani's coup against the Hashemite monarchy in 1941. King Abdullah of Transjordan had long since fallen out with Hajj Amin over their rival ambitions to rule Arab Palestine. Egypt and Syria gave Hajj Amin only lukewarm support, particularly after the collapse of Palestinian defenses in April and May 1948.

The Arab coalition thus entered the Palestine War with largely negative goals: to prevent the establishment of an alien Jewish state in their midst, to prevent Transjordan from expanding into Palestine, and to keep the mufti from forming a viable Palestinian state. With such war aims, it is no surprise that the Arab forces found themselves overwhelmed by Jewish forces driven by a desperate determination to establish their state.

Jewish superiority in the battlefield was more a matter of manpower and firepower than willpower. The image of a Jewish David surrounded by a hostile Arab Goliath is not reflected in the relative size of Arab and Jewish forces. When five Arab states—Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Transjordan, and Egypt—all went to war on May 15, total Arab forces did not exceed 25,000 men, whereas the Israel Defense Force (as the army of the new state was designated) numbered 35,000. In the course of the war, both the Arabs and the Israelis reinforced their troops, though the Arabs never came near to matching Israeli forces, which reached 65,000 in mid-July, and peaked at over 96,000 by December 1948.²⁸

The Israelis needed their numerical advantage. In the first phase of the war, which ran from May 15 until the initial truce of June 11, they were forced to fight a multifront battle for survival. The army of Transjordan, known as the Arab Legion,

crossed into the West Bank at dawn on May 15. Though at first reluctant to enter Jerusalem, which by the terms of the UN Partition Resolution was declared an international zone, the Arab Legion took up positions in the Arab quarters of Jerusalem on May 19 to prevent Israeli forces from overrunning the city. Meanwhile, the army of Iraq secured the northern half of the West Bank on May 22 and secured its positions in Nablus and Jenin without going on the offensive against Israeli forces. Egyptian units swept up from the Sinai into the Gaza Strip and Negev Desert, heading north to meet up with the Arab Legion. Syrian and Lebanese forces invaded Northern Palestine. During this first phase of the conflict, all sides took heavy losses, though the Israeli position was perhaps the most vulnerable of all for having to take on so many armies simultaneously.

With the outbreak of fighting between Israel and the Arab states, the United Nations convened to restore the peace. The UN called for a cease-fire on May 29, which came into effect on June 11. Count Folke Bernadotte, a Swedish diplomat, was appointed as official mediator in the conflict and entrusted with the mission of restoring peace in Palestine. The first truce was set for twenty-eight days, and a total embargo on arms was imposed on the region. The Arab states tried to secure arms for their depleted forces but found the British, French, and Americans scrupulously abiding by the terms of the embargo. The Israelis, in contrast, secured essential arm shipments via Czechoslovakia and increased their troop numbers to over 60,000 soldiers. When the cease-fire came to an end on July 9, Israel was better prepared than its adversaries for the resumption of hostilities.

In the second phase of the war, the Israelis used their superiority of troop numbers and munitions to turn the tide against the Arab armies on every front. They mauled Syrian forces in the Galilee and drove the Lebanese back across their own border. They seized the towns of Lydda and Ramla from the Arab Legion and focused their energies on Egyptian positions in the south. The United Nations, alarmed by the humanitarian crisis in Palestine as tens of thousands of refugees fled the fighting, resumed intensive diplomacy to secure a fresh cease-fire. The UN diplomats found the Arab states—several of which had nearly run out of ammunition—all too willing to support a truce. The second cease-fire came into effect on July 19 and lasted until October 14.

Whatever common aspirations the Arab states might have held before May 15 had been shattered by two disastrous months of war. The divisions between the Arab states, already deep before the start of the war, were seriously exacerbated by the losses their armies had suffered in the first two rounds of the war. Instead of a quick victory as the Arab League planners had optimistically foreseen, the Arab states saw their armies pinned down in a conflict that looked increasingly unwinnable. Nor did any of the Arab states see a clear exit strategy. Arab public opinion looked on in

shocked disbelief as they saw their national armies subdued by a foe they had dismissed as mere "Jewish gangs."

Rather than accept the blame for their own lack of preparation and coordination, the Arab states began to pin the blame on each other. The Egyptians and Syrians turned on Transjordan. Hadn't King Abdullah met in secret with the Jews? Wasn't his British commander Glubb Pasha fulfilling Britain's promise to create a Jewish state in Palestine? The fact that the Arab Legion held the West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem against determined Israeli attacks was seen as proof of Jordanian treachery and collusion with the Zionists rather than valor. These squabbles had terrible consequences for the Arab war effort. The more the Arab states alienated each other, and acted in isolation, the easier it was for Israeli forces to pick off their armies one by one.

Count Bernadotte led UN efforts to find a resolution to the Arab-Israeli crises during the three months of cease-fire. On September 16 he proposed a revised partition plan for Palestine in which the Arab territories would be annexed to Transjordan, including the towns of Ramla and Lydda, which had fallen to the Israelis, and the Negev Desert, which had been allocated to the Jewish state by the original UN Partition Resolution. The state of Israel would comprise the Galilee and coastal plain, and Jerusalem would remain in international hands. Although both the Arabs and Israelis were quick to reject Bernadotte's plan, his diplomatic efforts were brutally cut short when terrorists from the Lehi assassinated the Swedish diplomat on September 17. With no prospect of a diplomatic solution, war resumed upon the expiration of the cease-fire on October 14.

In the third round of fighting, between October 15 and November 5, 1948, the Israelis completed the conquest of the Galilee region, driving all Syrian, Lebanese, and Arab Liberation Army forces back into Syrian and Lebanese territory. Thereafter, the Israelis concentrated all of their efforts on defeating the Egyptian forces. The Israeli army surrounded the isolated Egyptian units, and their air force pummeled Egyptian positions for three weeks.

Egyptian losses in Palestine would have serious political implications in Egypt. A large detachment of Egyptian forces was under siege in southern Palestine, in the village of Faluja, some 20 miles northeast of Gaza. Pinned down for weeks with little relief, the Egyptian soldiers felt betrayed. They had been sent to war with inadequate training, arms, and ammunition. The more politically minded officers had plenty of opportunity to meditate on the political bankruptcy of Egypt's monarchy and government. Among the officers trapped in Faluja were Gamal Abdel Nasser, Zakaria Mohi El Din, and Salah Salem—three of the Free Officers who later would plot the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy. "We were fighting in Palestine but our dreams

were in Egypt," Nasser wrote.²⁹ As a result of their experiences in the Arab-Israeli War, the Free Officers would eventually turn defeat in Palestine into victory in Egypt, vanquishing the very government that had betrayed them.

The Arab states continued to meet in a vain attempt at collective action to stave off disaster. On October 23 the Arab leaders convened in the Jordanian capital, Amman, to discuss a plan to relieve Egyptian forces, but mutual mistrust between Syria, Transjordan, and Iraq prevented any meaningful collaboration. The Egyptians, for their part, were loath to admit to their Arab brothers that they were beaten and refused to coordinate military action even when it would have brought their own besieged forces relief.

Arab division played to Israel's advantage. In December the Israelis not only succeeded in forcing a total Egyptian withdrawal from Palestine—aside from those Egyptian troops still encircled in Faluja—but actually invaded Egyptian territory in the Sinai. King Farouq's government had no choice but to invoke the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty—much despised by nationalists for the way it perpetuated Britain's influence in Egypt—to request British intervention to force an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. On January 7, 1949, a truce was struck between Egypt and Israel. The last Israeli offensive was in the Negev Desert, seizing territory down to Um Rashrash on the Gulf of Aqaba, where the port of Eilat would later be built.

With the conquest of the Negev, the new state of Israel took final shape within 78 percent of the territory of Mandate Palestine. Transjordan had retained the West Bank, and Egypt held the Gaza Strip, as the last territories of Palestine to remain in Arab hands. With the defeat of the Egyptian, Syrian, and Lebanese armies, and the containment of the Arab Legion and the Iraqi army, the Israelis won a comprehensive victory in 1948 and could impose their terms on the Arab states. The UN introduced a new cease-fire and opened armistice negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors on the Mediterranean island of Rhodes. Bilateral armistice agreements were concluded between Israel and Egypt (February), Lebanon (March), Transjordan (April), and Syria (July). The first Arab-Israeli War was over.

For the Palestinians, 1948 would be remembered as *al-Nakba*—the Disaster. Between the civil war and the Arab-Israeli War, some 750,000 Palestinians were reduced to refugees. They flooded into Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan, and Egypt, as well as to the surviving Arab territories of Palestine. Only the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, remained in Arab hands. The Gaza Strip came under Egyptian trusteeship as a nominally self-governing territory. The West Bank was annexed to Transjordan, which, now spanning both banks of the River Jordan, shortened its name to Jordan.

At the end of the first Arab-Israeli war, there was no place left on the map called Palestine, only a dispersed Palestinian people living under foreign occupation or in

the diaspora, who would spend the rest of their history fighting for recognition of their national rights.

The entire Arab world was stunned by the magnitude of the Palestine disaster. Yet in this moment of crisis, Arab intellectuals proved remarkably clear-sighted about both the causes and the consequences of the loss of Palestine.

Two critical works appeared in the immediate aftermath of the first Arab-Israeli War that set the tone for Arab self-criticism and reform. The first was written by Constantine Zurayk, one of the great Arab intellectuals of the twentieth century. Born in Damascus in 1909, Zurayk had completed his B.A. at the American University of Beirut, his M.A. at the University of Chicago, and his doctorate at Princeton—all by the age of twenty-one. He spent his life between academic and public service in Lebanon and Syria, and wrote a string of hugely influential works on Arab nationalism. It was Zurayk who gave the 1948 war its Arabic name, *al-Nakba*, with his influential tract *Ma'nat al-Nakba* (or, "The Meaning of the Disaster"), published in Beirut at the height of the war in August 1948.³⁰

The second landmark book was written by a Palestinian notable named Musa Alami. The son of a former mayor of Jerusalem, Alami studied law at Cambridge before entering service with the mandate government in Palestine. He rose to the rank of Arab secretary to the high commissioner and crown counsel before resigning in 1937 at the height of the Arab Revolt, to enter private practice and support the nationalist movement. Alami represented Palestinian aspirations in the London conferences of 1939 and 1946–1947 and served as Palestinian representative to the formative meetings of the Arab League. His March 1949 essay *Ibrat Filastin* ("The Lesson of Palestine"), reflected on the Arabs' total defeat and the route to national regeneration.³¹

Both authors recognized that the loss of Palestine and the creation of Israel opened a dangerous new chapter in Arab history. "The defeat of the Arabs in Palestine," Zurayk warned, "is no simple setback or light, passing evil. It is a disaster in every sense of the word and one of the harshest of the trials and tribulations with which the Arabs have been afflicted throughout their long history—a history marked by numerous trials and tribulations."³² Arab failure to confront this new danger would condemn them to a future of division and rule, not so unlike the colonial era from which they were only just gaining their independence.

Given the similarities in their diagnoses of Arab ills, it is not surprising that Alami and Zurayk recommended similar cures. The spectacle of Arab divisions impressed on both men the need for Arab unity. The post-World War I settlement, and the

partition of the Arab world between Britain and France, had fragmented and weakened the Arab nation. The Arabs, they argued, would only realize their potential as a people by overcoming the divisions of the imperial order through Arab unity. They recognized the contradictions between narrow nation-state nationalism (e.g., the distinct nationalism of Egyptians or Syrians) and the broader Arab nation to which they aspired. Zurayk believed formal union was impossible in the short term, given deeply entrenched national interests among the newly emergent independent Arab states. So, in the first instance, Zurayk called for "far-reaching, comprehensive changes" to the existing Arab states in advance of the long-term goal of unity.³³ Alami placed his hopes in an "Arab Prussia" that might, through force of arms, achieve the desired unity.³⁴ The role of Arab Prussia would appeal to a number of nationalists in the upper ranks of Arab armies, as the military men prepared to take their place on the political stage in the aftermath of the Palestine disaster.

In their response to the Palestine disaster, Alami and Zurayk both called for nothing short of an Arab renaissance as prelude to Arab unity, and as a prerequisite for the redemption of Palestine and Arab self-respect in the modern world. Their books enjoyed wide circulation and were hugely influential, precisely because their analyses reflected the spirit of their times. Arab citizens had grown deeply disenchanted with their rulers. The old political elites, who had led the struggle for national independence, had grown tainted by association with their imperial masters. They had been educated in European universities and spoke their language, they dressed in Western clothes, they worked through the institutions imposed by colonialism—all in all, they reeked of collaboration. They bickered over small gains, and their worldview had been narrowed to the borders of the states the imperialists had imposed on them.

Politicians in the Arab world had lost sight of the greater Arab nation that still inspired so many of their fellow citizens. The bankruptcy of their politics had been revealed to all through the disastrous Arab performance in Palestine. Hence the remedies proposed by Alami and Zurayk, of a greater Arab nation composed of empowered citizens facing the challenges of the modern age with the strength of unity, struck so many Arabs as the obvious solution to their present weakness. The lesson of Palestine was that divided, the Arabs were sure to fall, and only if united could they hope to withstand the challenges of the modern world.

The times were changing. Arab rulers were gravely weakened by their failures in Palestine. A new generation was rising to the call of Arab nationalism and took their own governments as their first targets.

Arab defeat in Palestine and the emergence of the state of Israel completely destabilized the newly independent Arab states. The months immediately following

al-Nakba were stained by political assassinations and coups in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Following the Palestine disaster, Egypt was thrown into political chaos. For a new religious party, the loss of Muslim land to create a Jewish state was nothing short of a betrayal of Islam. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had been founded in March 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, a primary school teacher in the Suez Canal city of Ismailiyya. Al-Banna was a charismatic reformer who fought against the Western influences that he believed were undermining Islamic values in Egypt. Between European-inspired reforms and British imperialism, al-Banna argued, the people of Egypt had "departed from the goals of their faith."³⁵ What began as a movement for the renewal of faith within Egyptian society evolved into a powerful political force that had, by the late 1940s, come to rival in power the established parties, even the Wafd.

The Brotherhood had declared the Palestine War a jihad and dispatched battalions of volunteers into Palestine to fight against the creation of a Jewish state. Like the other Arab volunteers in the Liberation Army, they had underestimated Jewish strength and organization. Unprepared for battle, they were equally unprepared for defeat. They saw the Arab failure in Palestine as a betrayal of religion and pinned the blame on Arab governments generally and on the Egyptian government in particular. They returned to Egypt to organize demonstrations and accused the government of responsibility for the defeat.

The Egyptian government took quick action to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood. In the closing months of 1948, the organization was accused of fomenting riots and plotting the overthrow of the Egyptian government. Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi, who had declared martial law, approved a decree dissolving the Muslim Brotherhood on December 8, 1948. The assets of the society were frozen, its records seized, and many of its leaders arrested.

The leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, was left at liberty, and he tried to reconcile extremists inside his own movement with the government. His efforts were undermined by intransigence on both sides. Prime Minister al-Nuqrashi refused to meet with al-Banna or to make any concessions to the Brotherhood. Extremists within the society resorted to violence. On December 28, the Egyptian premier was gunned down while entering the Ministry of Interior, shot at close range by a veterinary student who had been a member of the Brotherhood since 1944. Al-Nuqrashi was the first Arab leader to fall in the tense aftermath of the Palestine disaster.

The government never arrested Hasan al-Banna for al-Nuqrashi's assassination. The leader of the Muslim Brotherhood took little comfort in his freedom, knowing that so long as he was at liberty he would be at risk of a retaliatory assassination. Al-Banna tried to negotiate with al-Nuqrashi's successor but found all government doors closed to him. He protested the Brotherhood's innocence of all attempts to overthrow the political system, but to no avail.

On February 12, 1949, Hasan al-Banna was shot and killed outside the headquarters of the Young Men's Muslim Association. It was widely assumed that the assassination had been ordered by the government with the support of the palace. The two political murders in the space of six weeks raised political tensions in Egypt to unprecedented levels.

In Syria, the Palestine disaster provoked a military coup d'état. President Shukri al-Quwwatli had long feared that his army would overthrow him, and on March 30, 1949, his fears were vindicated. Colonel Husni al-Za'im, army chief of staff, led a bloodless coup described by veteran Syrian political Adil Arslan as "the most significant and strangest event in recent Syrian history." In his diary, Arslan elaborated: "The general public celebrated, and the majority of the students took the opportunity to hold demonstrations in the streets. However, the political elites were struck silent with anxiety over the fate of their country."³⁶ Syria's political elite were anxious to preserve the young Syrian republic's democratic institutions. They feared military dictatorship, and with good reason. Though al-Za'im's government lasted less than 150 days, his coup marked the entry of the military into Syrian politics. Except for a couple of brief hiatuses, military men would remain in control of Syria for the rest of the century.

One of the strangest aspects of al-Za'im's rule, according to his foreign minister, Adil Arslan, was his willingness to come to terms with Israel so soon after Syria's defeat. The armistice between Syria and Israel was concluded by Husni al-Za'im's government on July 20, 1949. Behind the scenes, al-Za'im was willing to go far beyond an armistice, to pursue a comprehensive peace treaty with Israel. With the full support of the U.S. government, al-Za'im relayed a series of proposals to Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion through the Syrian team at the armistice negotiations. Al-Za'im offered full normalization of relations between Syria and the Jewish state—an exchange of ambassadors, open borders, and full economic relations with Israel.

Al-Za'im's proposal to settle up to 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria attracted the attention of both American and UN officials. It was already clear that the refugee problem would prove the greatest humanitarian issue and a major sticking point in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Al-Za'im sought U.S. development assistance for the Jazira District, north of the Euphrates River, where he proposed to settle the Palestinians. He believed that the injection of Palestinian labor and American funds would help modernize his country and develop its economy.³⁷

The Israeli prime minister had no interest in al-Za'im's offer. Despite the best efforts of the Truman administration, UN mediator Dr. Ralph Bunche, and the Israeli foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, Ben-Gurion refused to meet with al-Za'im or even to discuss his proposals. Ben-Gurion insisted the Syrians sign an armistice first.

He knew that al-Za'im wanted to adjust Syria's boundaries to divide the Lake of Tiberias between Syria and Israel, which Ben-Gurion rejected out of hand. The Israeli prime minister was in no hurry to conclude peace deals with his Arab neighbors, and he certainly did not want to set a precedent of making territorial concessions to secure peace. If anything, Ben-Gurion worried that the boundaries of Israel, as reflected in the armistice agreements with its Arab neighbors, fell well short of the needs of the Jewish state.

When Ben-Gurion refused to meet with al-Za'im, the U.S. administration suggested a meeting between the foreign ministers of Syria and Israel. The U.S. ambassador to Damascus, James Keeley, approached al-Za'im's foreign minister, Adil Arslan, to propose the meeting. Arslan was the scion of a princely Druze family who had entered government under al-Za'im with some misgivings. In his diary he described the colonel as both a friend and a madman, though Keeley's proposal, recorded by Arslan in his diary on June 6, 1949, convinced him that al-Za'im had lost his bearings.

"Why do you want me to agree to hold a meeting with [Israeli foreign minister Moshe] Shertok," Arslan asked the U.S. ambassador, "when you know that I have never been fooled by the bluffs of the Jews, and I am the last among the Arabs to make concessions to them?"

"Your question forces me to give you a candid reply," Keeley responded, "though I am not at liberty to discuss the matter, which remains secret. However, as I know you are an honourable man, I would ask for your word to keep the matter secret."

Arslan gave his word, and Keeley continued. "It was Za'im who suggested he meet with Ben-Gurion . . . who refused, so we [i.e., the U.S. administration] thought a meeting might be held between the foreign ministers of Syria and Israel. Shertok agreed, and put forward the suggestion which you have now rejected."

The astonished Arslan tried to hide his emotions as Keeley exposed al-Za'im's secret diplomacy with the Israelis, and tried to dismiss the overture as a diplomatic ploy by the Syrian president. The American did not force the point and withdrew, leaving Arslan to contemplate his next move.³⁸

Arslan stayed in his office late that night. He conferred with a member of the Syrian delegation to the armistice talks, who was convinced al-Za'im intended to meet with Shertok himself. Arslan considered stepping down but decided to stay in office to keep the Israelis from achieving their objective of getting Syria to break ranks with the other Arab states by concluding a separate peace deal. He began to contact other Arab governments to warn them of "a great danger," though he was careful not to reveal what it was.

Arslan's reaction indicates how out of touch al-Za'im had grown with both Syrian public opinion and the views of the political elite. Coming out of a bruising defeat, the Syrians were in no mood to make peace with Israel—the army least of all. Had

al-Za'im gone public with his peace plan, he would have faced insurmountable opposition at home. Even so, too many respected international figures, including U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, UN mediator Ralph Bunche, and a host of Israeli political and intelligence agents, were sufficiently persuaded of the merits of al-Za'im's plan at the time for us to dismiss it out of hand today. What does emerge from the story is that it was in fact Ben-Gurion who ruled out the first Arab peace initiative. Faced with a peace plan that had both U.S. and UN backing, Ben-Gurion said no.

Al-Za'im did not head Syria long enough to give peace a chance. His reforms (of which peace overtures with Israel represented but a small part) alienated the different social groups that had originally supported his rise to power, leaving him isolated. Some of the officers who had supported his coup now plotted against him. On August 14, 1949, they repeated the measures taken in the March coup, arresting leading government figures and securing the radio station. A group of six armored cars surrounded al-Za'im's house and, after a brief shootout, arrested the deposed president. Al-Za'im and his premier were taken to a detention center, where they were summarily executed.

The man who arrested and executed Husni al-Za'im was a follower of Antun Sa'ada, one of the most influential nationalist leaders in the Arab world. Sa'ada (1904–1949) was a Christian intellectual who returned to his native Lebanon from Brazil in 1932 to found the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. A lecturer at the American University of Beirut, he opposed the French mandate and its efforts to break up Greater Syria, and he militated for a union of the states of Greater Syria. His political views provided an alternative to pan-Arab nationalism and, with his call for separation of religion from politics, appealed to a wide range of minority groups who feared Sunni Muslim domination in a pan-Arab state.

In July 1949, Antun Sa'ada launched a guerrilla campaign to overturn the Lebanese government. His revolt was short-lived; he was caught by the Syrians within days of launching his campaign and handed over to the Lebanese authorities, who promptly tried and executed the would-be revolutionary on July 8, 1949.

Sa'ada's zealous followers were quick to seek their revenge. On July 16, 1951, a Sa'ada partisan assassinated the former Lebanese premier, Riyad al-Sulh (whose government had executed Sa'ada) while he was on a visit to the Jordanian capital, Amman.

Arab politics were growing increasingly violent as political coups, executions, and assassinations marked the change of leadership in Arab states. Only four days after the assassination of Riyad al-Sulh, King Abdullah of Transjordan was assassinated as he entered the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem for Friday prayers. His fifteen-year-old grandson Hussein, the future king of Jordan, was with him when he was killed.

"I wonder now," Hussein wrote in his autobiography, "looking back across the years, whether my grandfather had an inner knowledge of the tragedy that was so close." Hussein remembered a conversation with King Abdullah on the morning of his death. The old king spoke words "so prophetic that I would hesitate to repeat them. The old king spoke words 'so prophetic that I would hesitate to repeat them had they not been heard by a dozen men alive today,'" Hussein recorded. "'When I have to die, I would like to be shot in the head by a nobody,' he said. 'That's the simplest way of dying. I would rather have that than become old and a burden.'" The old king would see his wish granted sooner than he expected.

King Abdullah knew that his life was in danger. He was surrounded by enemies in the Palestinian territories recently annexed to his kingdom. Many Palestinians accused him of striking a bargain with the Jews to expand his country at their expense, and Hajj Amin al-Husayni blamed King Abdullah for betraying Palestine. Yet, no one could have foreseen the new culture of Arab political violence reach right into one of the holiest Muslim places of worship.

The "nobody" who shot King Abdullah was a twenty-one-year-old tailor's apprentice from Jerusalem named Mustafa 'Ashu. More a hired gun than a man with political motives, 'Ashu himself was shot dead instantly by the king's guard. Scores of arrests were made, and ten men were charged with complicity in the assassination, though the trial did little to shed light on who lay behind the king's murder. Four of the ten were acquitted, two condemned to death in absentia (both had defected to Egypt), and four men hanged for their role in the assassination. Three of the men who were executed were common tradesmen—a cattle broker, a butcher, and a café owner—with criminal records. The fourth, Musa al-Husayni, was a distant relative of the mufti's.³⁹ Both the mufti and King Farouq of Egypt were suspected of bankrolling the assassination, though the truth has now surely been lost forever. Ultimately, King Abdullah was another victim of the Palestine disaster.

After the post-World War I partition of the Middle East, the Palestine disaster stands as the most important turning point in twentieth century Arab history. We are still living its consequences today.

Among the most enduring legacies of the war is the Arab-Israeli conflict that continues today. Between Arab refusal to accept the loss of Palestine and Israeli aspirations for more territory, further Arab-Israeli wars became inevitable and have recurred with deadly frequency over the past six decades.

The human costs of this conflict have been devastating. The Palestinian refugee problem remains unresolved. The original 750,000 displaced persons now exceeds 4.3 million refugees registered with the United Nations, the result of further territorial losses in 1967 and natural growth over sixty years. Over the intervening decades, the

Palestinians have created representative bodies to advance their goal of statehood, but they have also pursued their goals through armed struggle ranging from border raids on Israel to terrorist attacks on Israeli interests abroad, to popular insurrection and armed resistance in the Occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank, and terror attacks against Israel. In spite of—some would argue, because of—these strategies, Palestinian national aspirations have gone unfulfilled.

The Palestine disaster had a terrible impact on Arab politics. The hopes and aspirations of the newly independent Arab states were overshadowed by their failure in 1948. In the aftermath of defeat in Palestine, the Arab world witnessed tremendous political upheaval. The four states bordering Mandate Palestine were wracked with political assassinations, coups, and revolution. A major social revolution was taking place, as the old elites were overthrown by a younger generation of military men, many from rural backgrounds who were more in touch with popular politics than the foreign-educated political elites of the interwar years. Whereas the old-guard politicians struggled for national independence within the boundaries of their own states, the firebrand Free Officers were Arab nationalists who promoted pan-Arab unity. The *ancien regime* spoke European languages; the new vanguard spoke the language of the street.

In a very real sense, the Palestine disaster spelled the end of European influence in the Arab world. Palestine was a problem made in Europe, and Europe's inability to resolve the problem reflected its own weakness in the aftermath of the Second World War. Britain and France emerged from that conflict as second-rate powers. The British economy was in tatters after the war effort, and French morale was shattered by years of German occupation. Both had too much to rebuild at home to invest much abroad. Empire was on the retreat, and new powers dominated the international system.

The young officers who came to power in Syria in 1949, in Egypt in 1952, and in Iraq in 1958 had no ties to Britain or France and looked instead to the new world powers—the United States and its superpower rival, the Soviet Union. It was the end of the imperial age and the beginning of the new age of the Cold War. The Arabs would have to adapt to a new set of rules.

The Rise of Arab Nationalism

The Arab world entered the new era of the Cold War in a state of revolutionary ferment. The anti-imperialism of the interwar years gained renewed vigor at the end of the Second World War. Hostility toward Britain and France was rife in the aftermath of the Palestine War. This complicated Britain's position in Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq, where it still enjoyed preferential alliances with the monarchies it had created.

The old nationalist politicians, and the kings they served, were discredited for their failure to make a clean break from British imperial rule. A host of radical new parties, ranging from the Islamist Muslim Brothers to the Communists, vied for the allegiance of a new generation of nationalists. The young officers in the military were not immune to the political ferment of the age. The younger generation questioned the legitimacy of Arab monarchies and the multiparty parliaments installed by the British, instead showing more enthusiasm for revolutionary republicanism.

The transcendental ideology of the age was Arab nationalism. Liberation from colonial rule was the common wish of all Arab peoples by the 1940s, but they had yet higher political aspirations. Most people in the Arab world believed they were united by a common language, history, and culture grounded in the Islamic past, a culture shared by Muslims and non-Muslims. They wanted to dissolve the frontiers drafted by the imperial powers to divide the Arabs and build a new commonwealth based on the deep historic and cultural ties that bound the Arabs. They believed that Arab greatness in world affairs could only be restored through unity. And they took to the streets, in their thousands, to protest against imperialism, to criticize their governments' failings, and to demand Arab unity.

Egypt was in many ways at the forefront of these developments. Medical doctor and feminist intellectual Nawal El Saadawi entered medical school in Cairo in 1948.