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Birth of a Jewish State

Had the Arabs accepted partition, Israel would have ended up with considerably less territory than it gained through their rejection. [The Arab armies] provided the Jews with the most severe motive in battle: survival.

David K. Shipler
Arab and Jew

Although its roots are deep and immemorial, the young State is foredoomed to many grave trials.

David Ben-Gurion
The Call of the Spirit in Israel

Desperate for a place to settle at the end of World War II, Holocaust survivors are languishing dazed and weak in makeshift refugee camps in Europe. Young Jews from the British Mandate of Palestine, healthy and bright-eyed, visit the refugees. “Come to the Promised Land, Eretz Israel,” they say. “We will help you get there, and you can help us build a new Israel.” The young Jews are operating illegally. They represent the underground organization known as *Haganah*, dedicated to bringing Holocaust survivors to Palestine. The British do not want any more Jews in their Mandate. Over the preceding sixty years, Arab Palestinians have seen more and more of their farmland purchased by Israeli settlers. Since the Nazis came into power, Jewish immigration into the Mandate has swollen. The Arab Palestinians are feeling threatened. For the past twenty years, intermittently, a Palestinian underground has been harassing Jewish settlers, and the Jewish underground has been retaliating. The settlers keep arms close at hand. The situation is volatile. The British determine to continue their policy of limiting Jewish immigration.

The British Dilemma

Britain is in a quandary. It is tied by its Mandate to protect the rights of Arab Palestinians and to maintain order. At the same time, when the Mandate is established after World War I, one of its goals is to further Jewish settlement, in accordance with a British government policy (the Balfour Declaration) that dates from 1917. It is clear that if masses of Holocaust survivors settle in Palestine, Arabs will be displaced. Already a trickle of Arabs is beginning to flee. As the first

wave of refugees reach Palestine, militant Jewish settlement groups intimidate and harass Arab property owners. The militants want the Arabs out of the Promised Land, and they make no secret of this. Not all Jewish settlers share this view, however. Most hope for a Palestine in which Arabs and Jews can live peacefully, side by side.

Jewish Zionists from Europe have been coming to Palestine since the late 1870s. Zionism wants a national homeland for Jews in the land that gave birth to Judaism, the Promised Land, Eretz Israel. With early financing from Zionists in England (soon also from Jews and some Christians in European countries), more and more Jewish pioneers come to Palestine. They buy land from the Arabs and begin to farm. They set up shops in the cities. Slowly they prosper. The Jews are European; the Arabs are Middle Eastern. Their ways are different. By the end of World War II, 300,000 Jews are living in Palestine. Although Arabs still constitute the majority of residents in the British Palestine Mandate, they fear that the onslaught of Jewish refugees will change Palestine forever, and Arab Palestinians will be a minority in their own land. The Arabs look to the British for support. The British try to hold back the tide, preventing boatloads of refugees from landing, for the landings are indeed illegal. But the landings continue. The Haganah has learned to work around the British.

Meanwhile, within Palestine, leaders of a militant Jewish underground organization called *Irgun*, formed originally to protect settlers from Arab militants – and to make life so uncomfortable for Arabs that they will leave Palestine – now realize that for the time being their enemy must be the British. They do all they can to disrupt the British, going as far as blowing up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The flood of refugees continues, Arab indignation rises, the Irgun destroys British headquarters, and the British in the end can do little to stop the violence. They seek help from the United Nations.

Independence and the First Arab-Israeli War: 1948

In November of 1947, the United Nations (UN) passes a resolution partitioning Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state (See Map 2). Jerusalem is to be a UN protectorate. All Arab countries oppose this resolution, but a majority of other countries support it. Official partition is to take place in September of 1948. But the Jewish settlers in Palestine – whose very presence is by this time vehemently opposed by the surrounding Arab states – act unilaterally. On May 14, 1948, they proclaim Israel as an independent country. At the same time, the British give up their troubled Mandate over Palestine.

A day after Israel proclaims its independence, its Arab neighbors declare war. The Israelis anticipate this action. The territory they were to receive under the UN partition includes only a portion of “Eretz Israel,” the land of the Zionists’ dreams. It is not even enough, Israelis say, to

serve as the basis for a viable state. If they are to gain more territory, indeed if they are only to keep what has been granted them in the partition, they must fight. Units of the Haganah and Irgun, bolstered by the seasoned veterans of the Jewish Brigade that volunteered to fight with the British in World War II, form the core of a hastily mobilized Israeli army. As Arab forces enter the territory of the former British Mandate, they are determined to push the Israelis into the sea. The Jordanians, with their crack British-trained Arab Legion, fight well, advancing across the Jordan River to take the land known today as the West Bank. Israeli troops, harassed from all directions, are held to the borders shown in Map 2.