

FACTS AND FABLES

The Arab–Israeli Conflict

Clifford A. Wright

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ISRAEL AND PALESTINE



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Volume 3

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CLIFFORD A. WRIGHT

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Clifford A. Wright



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*To my mother Helen DeYeso Wright
and my father Harold I. Wright*

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Clifford A. Wright
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Introduction

The Arab–Israeli conflict is one of the most protracted, confusing and heated political struggles of our time. For 100 years Palestinian Arabs and Zionist Jews have contested the same land. It is not a simple territorial dispute but a dispute involving claims emanating from a different conceptual basis. The foundation of the Jewish claim to the land is rooted in the Bible. The Palestinian claim is based on historical permanence and residence, i.e. they are the natives of this land.

The Arab–Israeli conflict is also uniquely dangerous as the most likely point of contact should a superpower conflagration occur. The conflict is notably immune to outside intervention. No conflict in the world today elicits such strong emotional involvement not only from participants but also from distant observers.

The conflict is primarily about land but it is also an ideological struggle between two peoples which involves a score of myths and fables. Fables are most often created to serve a political purpose and all nationalisms have their own myths and falsehoods. Unfortunately, fables limit understanding about causes and reasons for events. They arise sometimes as a result of ignorance but, mostly, as a result of propaganda. Images are constructed which shape not only public opinion but the parameters of political discourse. For several decades the popular image of the Palestinian has been as terrorist and of Israel as the bastion of Western democracy. The images are reinforced through television, for example, in the startling contrast so often seen between the incoherent rambling

of a Palestinian spokesman whose poor English communicates little and the articulate American immigrant to Israel speaking of the 'pioneering spirit'. Israel, described as a Western democracy, is usually placed in the setting of a 'sea of Muslims'. Meanwhile the Arab is often portrayed as exotic, irrational, unreasonable, lecherous, hysterical, vicious and lacking decency. Discourse has been constrained by the images conveyed by these fables.

The myths and legends that have been assumed as reality have been appropriated by one side and cast a shroud around any deeper understanding of the conflict. Rather than dispel obscurity, recourse by pundits and commentators to wide generalizations such as the 'Arab tendency to terrorism', 'Arab penchant for exaggeration', 'anti-Semitism', 'intransigence' and 'senseless violence' contribute heavily to the general confusion. This popular view is reflected at the governmental level as well as in the Fourth Estate. A myopic policy at the government level was evident during the Palestinian Uprising in early 1988. By the time US Secretary of State, George Schultz, arrived in the Middle East to propose a peace initiative 100 Palestinians (half of whom were children) had been killed. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were demonstrating in the West Bank against Israeli occupation and for the Palestine Liberation Organization as their sole representative. In this climate, Schultz declared that the PLO could not participate in any negotiations and that their Observer Mission to the United Nations would be forced to close. The press too, takes for granted that the Arabs start all the wars, that the Arabs and Jews have been eternal enemies, that Arabs are inherently war-like and fight peace and that the Palestinian refugee problem is of their own making. Few Western observers find these kind of assumptions questionable, at least on the psychological level. The Palestinians who are exiled are called Palestinians yet it is denied that they come from anywhere. This ideological shroud consists of over a dozen myths that recur whenever the Arab-Israeli conflict is under discussion and especially when it heats up as during the Uprising in 1988. They permeate the media, the government as well as popular sentiment. It is interesting to observe that some of these myths have been questioned by Israeli scholars themselves, and even publicly discussed in Israel, but never reported in the West.

These fables have been exposed in one place or another. Even so, given US sympathy with Israel and the intensity of prejudices,

all accounts and documentation coming from Arabs have been treated with the greatest suspicion. Needless to say, propaganda surrounding the struggle has developed into an art.

This book is the first of its kind in that it attempts to take the demystification process into the arena of popular politics, but uses extensive documentation. It is hoped that the demystification process will eventually extend back again into the realm of the university and, more importantly, into political planning. I have avoided using Arab sources whenever Zionist sources were available. My hope is that this book might break down the suspicion from which the Arab narrative, whether oral history or scholarly research, often suffers, so that in the future we can listen to the Palestinian – and believe the story.

I have not endeavored to address every issue relevant in the Arab–Israeli conflict. There are some major questions and many minor ones which have been omitted. For instance, I do not discuss the issues revolving around the activities of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammed Amin al-Husayni, during the Second World War nor the prickly question of the status of Jerusalem, nor the claim that the Palestinians sold their land to the Jews. This book focuses on the major fables, those which recur countless times, from official pronouncements to newspaper editorials. I refer the reader to Philip Mattar's *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement* on the Grand Mufti, to Henry Cattán's *The Question of Jerusalem* concerning Jerusalem and to Walter Lehn and Uri Davis's *The Jewish National Fund on the land question*.¹ I examine each belief or claim on its own merit. For example, although I personally believe the argument from divine right (chapter 15) is nonsense I treat it seriously. This book is about what I believe to be the seventeen most important and most commonly held beliefs on the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Although I conceive the book as a primer the chapters are structured in no particular order of importance; I have, however, attempted to group them logically. Each chapter recounts a common belief and explores the argument and evidence. The Palestinians themselves are the topic of the first chapter simply because it is of the utmost interest when one party to a conflict (Israel) devotes such extraordinary effort not only to defeating and destroying their enemy, the Palestinians, but also to denying their existence or importance.

The second, third and fourth chapters expand on chapter 1 to solve some of the mystery of why a nation would pack its bags and leave its home, turn its country over to its antagonists – all as a result of ‘radio broadcasts’. Who are these Palestinian refugees, how many of them are there? For several decades the public has heard about the miracle of Israel. What is this ‘miracle’ and what do the Palestinians want?

The next three chapters deal with core issues: terror, democracy and Zionism. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 examine the questions of the practice of democracy in Israel, the situation on the West Bank and Gaza, and Israeli conceptions and efforts towards peace.

Chapters 11–17 are historical chapters that can be read first. In fact, I have organized the book so that one could start at the back and read chapter 1 last.

At the end of every chapter I have recommended readings that are particularly noteworthy for all or some aspect of the chapter.

The most important question the reader might have after reading this book is whether peace is possible in the Middle East between Arabs and Jews. Recent events from 1982 onwards might lead one to believe, ever increasingly, that peace is distant. My assembled arguments do not encourage any easy or dreamy solutions. An opening for peace may arise from a bold and unpredictable new consciousness on the part of both Israelis and Palestinians. Perhaps the unique statements by two former hawks, one Israeli and one Palestinian, in early 1988 is a sign that a new plateau is being reached. Yehoshafat Harkabi, the former head of Israeli military intelligence, wrote that Israel must negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) while Bassam Abu Sharif, the press spokesman of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and a former politburo member of the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, wrote in the *New York Times* that the PLO wants peace with Israel, did not seek its destruction and was willing to sit down with Israel and work towards peace.² Both men were roundly criticized within their own communities for their respective positions and statements but the thing to remember is that precedence is important.

By the end of 1988, this precedent setting development expanded to a full-fledged diplomatic breakthrough when Arafat, in an address to the UN General Assembly on 13 December 1988, recognized Israel’s right to exist, renounced terrorism and invited

Israel to make peace with the Palestinians. The United States recognized the PLO and began talks with Arafat. This historic breakthrough does not change history as described in the following chapters; it creates a new chapter and question.

The question of what becomes of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism once peace is negotiated is yet another interesting question and one which will have to be the subject of a future book.

Notes to Introduction

1. Mattar, Columbia University Press, 1988; Cattan, Third World Centre for Research and Publishing, 1980; and Lehn and Davis, Kegan Paul International, 1988.
2. Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Israel's Fateful Decisions*, trans. Lenn Schramm, Harper and Row, 1988, p. xvi; and Bassam Abu Sharif, *New York Times*, 22 June 1988.

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Chapter 1

The Palestinians

Until recently most Zionists have claimed that the Palestinians do not exist or that they are simply part of the Arab world with no distinct identity. The Zionist slogan, first coined by Israel Zangwill, a founder of Zionism, that Palestine was ‘a land without people, waiting for a people without land’, captured this denial of the Palestinian people.¹

The concept represented by this slogan is maintained even today in Israel where the Palestinians who are Israeli citizens are officially known as the ‘Arabs of Israel’. Zionists have maintained this position in one form or another, over the years, because they contend that the Arab–Israeli conflict amounts to the stubbornness of the Arab states to recognize Israel rather than to the grievances of a people, namely the Palestinians, who were dispossessed in order that Israel might exist.

Zionists today, especially those who live in Israel, have come to grant that there are Palestinians, mainly because the enormous effort to subjugate them has drawn the world’s attention and demonstrated to even the most myopic Zionist that it is not a mirage throwing rocks at Israeli occupation troops. But although granting that they exist as persons Zionists deny that the Palestinians exist as a nation.

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Another Zionist claim suggests that since the Palestinians consider themselves Arabs, part of the Arab nation and have called for Arab unity they therefore do not have a separate existence as Palestinians.

What are the Facts?

The famous Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt, once said that if Israel could not come to terms with the central fact of its existence, the dispossession of the Palestinians, then it would degenerate into a small warrior tribe such as Sparta.² She understood that the success of Zionism *necessarily* meant the dispossession of the Palestinians.

The existence of the Palestinians constitutes a perennial and stark reminder that the Zionist enterprise has a fundamental moral flaw. As the pro-Zionist British historian Christopher Sykes said, 'This was indeed the whole problem of Palestine: it was inhabited.'³

The earliest Zionist colonialists in Palestine knew that the land they were settling was inhabited. Some chose to ignore this 'minor' problem while others tried to overcome it. Many Zionists, as with most Europeans of the late nineteenth century, agreed with Theodor Herzl's characterization of Arab Palestine, and for that matter all the Arab world, as a 'plague-ridden blighted corner of the Orient' to which the Jews would 'bring cleanliness, order and the well-distilled customs of the Occident'.⁴

Herzl, the father of Zionism, believed that the native Palestinians would resist the takeover of their country and therefore he recommended that they be dealt with through 'assured supremacy', a euphemism for brute force and military superiority.⁵ Herzl wrote that military power was an essential component of his strategy and that, ideally, the Zionists should acquire the land of their choice by armed conquest.⁶

As for the already existing and native Arabs living in Palestine, the site of Zionist territorial desires, the Zionists should 'try to spirit the penniless population across the border'. The process of dispossession must be done 'discreetly and circumspectly', Herzl advised.⁷ In fact, in 1901 Herzl tried, unsuccessfully, to obtain a

charter from the Ottoman Turkish rulers to establish a Jewish colonization association in Palestine which would have had the right to deport the native Palestinians.⁸

Seven decades later, the Zionists continued their refusal to recognize the Palestinians, let alone their 'rights'. Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel, in all seriousness, claimed that 'there was no such thing as Palestinians'.

There was no such thing as Palestinians.

Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel
London *Sunday Times*, 15 June 1969.

Today, the twin claims, that the Palestinians don't exist and that Palestine was empty, are maintained in one form or another.

This denial of the Palestinians is a wholesale dehumanization of a people. In 1982, Prime Minister Menachem Begin described the Palestinians, in a speech in the Knesset, as 'two-legged beasts'.⁹

Former Israeli Army Chief of Staff Raphael Eitan likened the Palestinians to drugged cockroaches.¹⁰ In July 1981 the Israeli Air Force bombed an apartment building in a residential neighborhood of Beirut killing 300 Palestinians civilians; not a single Israeli leader dissented or expressed a hesitation about the morality of this act.

During the Palestinian Uprising in early 1988, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin announced a new policy towards the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza, one of 'force, power, and blows'. Civilians, mostly children, were rounded up by the Israeli forces and beaten indiscriminately. Although the policy of beatings was condemned by the US State Department it continued unabated.¹¹

By the 1980s only ardent Zionists denied or degraded the existence of the Palestinians. The world community overwhelmingly recognized the Palestinian people and their right to national self-determination. The United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution in 1975 establishing a Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and declared 29 November to be a day of international solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Who, then, are the Palestinians?

Palestine has been continuously inhabited since the dawn of history. From Ottoman sources it can be estimated that, by 1850,

more than half a million people lived in Palestine. Of this Palestinian population, 80 percent were Muslim, 10 percent Christian and 7 percent Jews.¹²

By 1914 the British estimated Palestine's population at 689,272 of whom no more than 60,000 or 9 percent were Jews.¹³ The most accurate census at that time was the 1922 census conducted by the British. Of the total of 757,182, 78 percent were Muslim, 10 percent were Christian, 11 percent were Jewish. Seventy-five percent of the Jews were Europeans and their offspring.¹⁴ About 10,000 or 1 percent were classified as 'other'. The census also did not count the nearly 50,000 Bedouin Palestinians in the Negev desert.

The British conducted a second census in 1931. Of the more than 1,000,000 people, 73 percent were Muslim, 9 percent were Christian. Because of Jewish emigration from Europe the Jewish population in Palestine constituted a significant minority of 17 percent. After 1931 the British only provided estimates of the population.

The last official estimate was in 1947 which gave a population of 1,908,775 (61 percent Muslim, 8 percent Christian and 31 percent Jewish). The Jews had increased their share in the population from 11 percent in 1922 to 31 percent in 1947.

The increase in the Jewish population was the result of massive immigration. The share of the Palestinian population, on the other hand, decreased from over 90 percent in 1922 to less than 70 percent in 1947, although the actual number had increased in that period from 673,000 to 1,319,000. The latter figure is probably low since the Palestinian population was under-enumerated in the 1931 census and the Bedouin population was assumed, by British census officials, to have remained unchanged. Arab immigration into Palestine amounted to 40,500 people between 1922 and 1945.¹⁵

There is, however, a difficulty from which the Zionist dares not avert his eyes, though he rarely likes to face it. Palestine proper has already its inhabitants.

Israel Zangwill
The Voice of Jerusalem, London, 1920, p. 88.

Did these Arabs consider themselves, and did others consider them, to be Palestinians?

Palestine's geographic location, its physical characteristics, and, partly as a result of these, its history, distinguish it from surrounding regions.¹⁶ It would, therefore, be surprising if its inhabitants had not responded in their own distinct way to their particular circumstances and developed into a people distinguishable from, but not without close affinities with, their neighbors.

To be a nation means, generally, to share a language and, to the people concerned, to feel an intimate attachment to a homeland, perceiving their past, present and future to be inextricably linked with the land they hold dear. It is also usual for other communities to acknowledge the separate status of that people's land. Did the area which became the British Mandate of Palestine signify nothing more to its inhabitants, or to others, than the areas which surround it? Was it perceived to be nothing other than the southern part of Syria or a part of the larger Arab world?

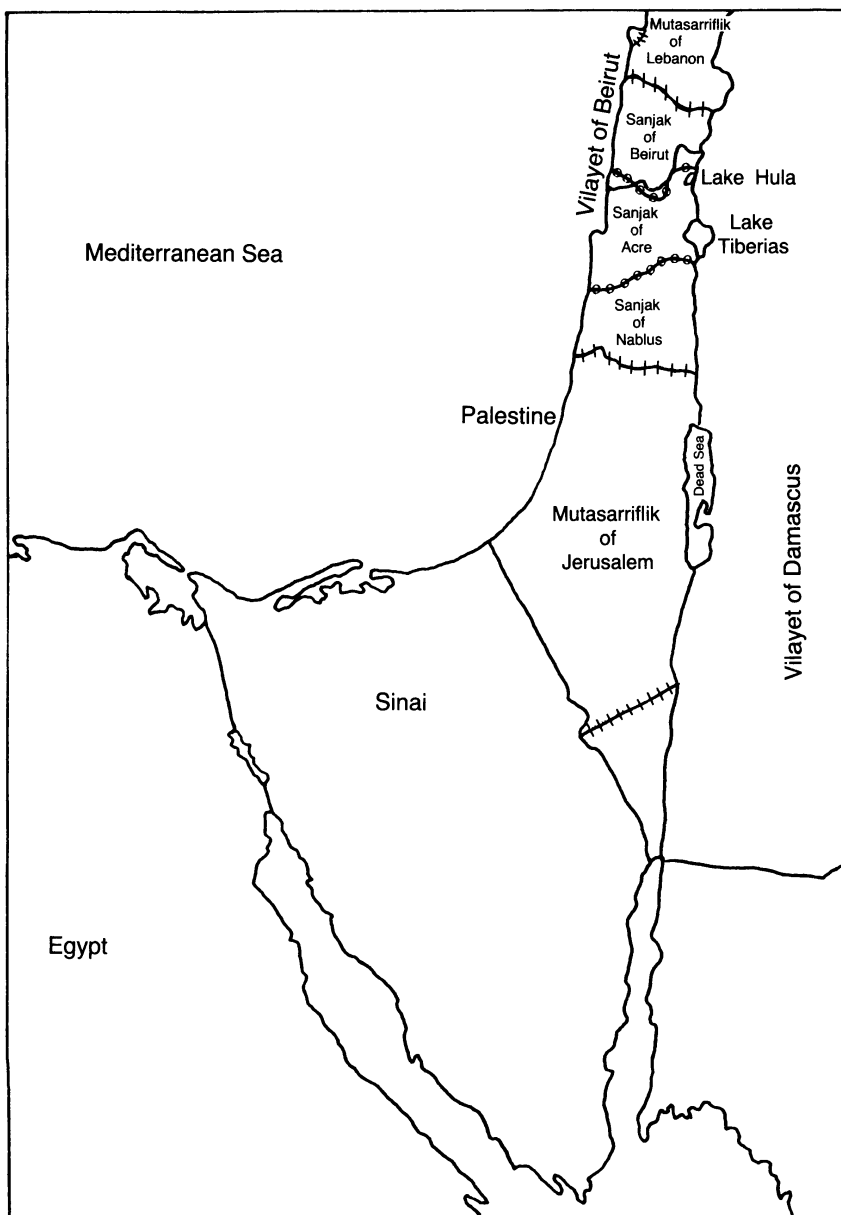
The Arabic name for Palestine, Filastin, was derived from the Latin Palaestina, the name given by the Romans to Judea after the last Jewish revolt in AD 132–35. The Latin name, in turn, was derived from Philistia, the name given to the area by the ancient Philistines. Palaestina was divided into three units: Palaestina Prima (the West Bank of today and the southern part of the eastern side of the Jordan valley), Palaestina Secunda (the Jordan Valley, eastern and central Galilee and the northern part of the eastern side of the Jordan valley) and Palaestina Tertia (the southern part of Transjordan, the Negev and Sinai).

When the Arabs arrived they retained (as they usually did elsewhere) the administrative organization of the territory of Palestine as it had been under the Romans and later the Byzantines. The Arabs named the territory Djund Filastin (military district of Palestine).

In 1517 the Ottoman Turks conquered Palestine and divided its area into three districts. In the late nineteenth century, still under the Ottoman Turks, the area of Palestine which was to come under British rule and later be known as 'mandated Palestine', included the *sanjak* (sub-province) of Jerusalem and two *sanjaks* of the *vilayet* (province) of Beirut. After 1887 the Jerusalem *sanjak*, because of its significance for the monotheistic religions, was administered directly from Constantinople (Istanbul) as though it were a full province (see map 1).

The Israeli scholar Y. Porath has demonstrated that 'at the

Map 1 Ottoman Palestine



Shown with 1917 Ottoman jurisdictional boundaries and boundaries of British Mandate 1922–48.

——— British Mandate boundaries.
+++++ } Ottoman boundaries.
-o-o-o-

end of the Ottoman period the concept of *Filastin* was already widespread among the educated Arab public, denoting either the whole of Palestine or the Jerusalem Sanjak alone'.¹⁷

Zionists who deny the existence of the Palestinians, or 'Palestine', claim that when the Western Powers, after the First World War, laid down the modern frontiers of the Middle East they did so entirely arbitrarily. The facts show that, in establishing the boundaries of 'mandated Palestine' where they did, the Western Powers implicitly recognized the reality of Palestine as an area of special significance whose residents were a people distinguishable from their neighbors. Equally revealing, Palestine was also recognized as a distinct area by tourists. Baedeker's famous guidebook, published in 1876, was entitled *Palestine – Syria*. Herzl himself, in his correspondence with the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid, referred to 'Palestine' and neither seems to have been confused by the term.

*When we have settled the land, all the Arabs will be able to do about it
will be to scurry around like drugged cockroaches in a bottle.*

Raphael Eitan, Israeli Chief of Staff
New York Times, 14 April 1983.

The boundaries then established for Palestine by the Western Powers after the First World War enhanced the already existing unity of the area. Evidently the Palestinians and others did regard pre-British Mandate Palestine as a distinct area, as something much more than a part of Syria or the Arab world.

In short, the Palestinians recognized it as their homeland, and others recognized it to be so. It hardly needs stating that these facts alone would be enough on which to base the conclusion that Palestine's residents regarded themselves, and were regarded by others, as Palestinians. But what other evidence is there to support this conclusion? Two categories of evidence demonstrate the existence of a Palestinian nation before and during the Mandate. First, the Palestinian opposition to Zionism and, second, the opinions of outsiders.

[The Palestinians are] beasts walking on two legs.

Menachem Begin, Prime Minister of Israel in a speech to the Knesset,