

Proclamation of the State of Israel

Contributed by Uri Avnery
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1948

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In the 60 years that have passed since then, the events of the war have been buried under layer upon layer of Israeli and Palestinian, Jewish and Arab propaganda. A quasi-archeological excavation is needed in order to expose the bottom layer. Even the eye-witnesses who are still alive sometimes have problems distinguishing between what they actually saw and the myths that have twisted and falsified the events almost beyond recognition.

I am one of the eye-witnesses. In the last few days, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary, dozens of radio and television interviewers from all over the world have been asking me to describe what actually happened. Here are some of these questions and my answers to them. (If I repeat things I have already written about, I apologize.)

- How was this war different from others?

First of all, it was not one war but two, which followed one another without a break.

The first war was fought between the Jews and the Arabs in the country. It started on the morrow of the UN General Assembly resolution of November 29, 1947, which decreed the partition of Palestine between a Jewish and an Arab state. It lasted until the proclamation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. That day marked the start of the second war - the one between the State of Israel and the neighboring countries, which threw their armies into the battle.

This was not a war between two countries for a piece of land between them, like the wars between Germany and France over Alsace. Neither was it a fratricidal struggle, like the American Civil War, where both sides belonged to the same nation. I categorize it as an "ethnic war".

Such a war is fought out between two different peoples who live in the same country, each of which claims the whole country for itself. In such a war, the aim is not only to achieve a military victory, but also to take possession of as much of the country as possible without the population of the other side. That is what happened when Yugoslavia broke up and when, not by accident, the odious term "ethnic cleansing" was born.

- Was the war inevitable?

At the time, I hoped until the last moment that it could be avoided (about that, later.) In retrospect it is clear to me that it was already too late.

The Jewish side was determined to establish a state of its own. This was one of the fundamental aims of the Zionist movement, founded 50 years earlier, and was strengthened a hundredfold after the Holocaust, which had come to an end only two and a half years before.

The Arab side was determined to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state in the country which they (rightly) considered an Arab country. That's why the Arabs started the war.

- What did you, the Jews, think when you went to war?

When I enlisted at the beginning of the war, we were totally convinced that we were faced with the danger of annihilation and that we were defending ourselves, our families and the entire Hebrew community. The phrase "There Is No Alternative" was not just a slogan, but a deeply felt conviction. (When I say "we", I mean the community in general and the soldiers in particular.) I don't think that the Arab side was imbued with quite the same conviction. That was their undoing.

This explains why the Jewish community was totally mobilized from the first moment on. We had a unified leadership

(even The Irgun and the Stern Group accepted its authority) and a unified military force, which rapidly assumed the character of a regular army.

Nothing like this happened on the Arab side. They had no unified leadership, and no unified Arab-Palestinian army, which meant they could not concentrate their forces at the crucial points. But we learned this only after the war.

- Did you think that you were the stronger side?

Not at all. At the time, the Jews constituted only a third of the population. The hundreds of Arab villages throughout the country dominated the main arteries that were crucial to our survival. We suffered heavy casualties in our efforts to open them, especially the road to Jerusalem. We honestly felt that we were "the few against the many".

Slowly, the balance of power shifted. Our army became more organized and learned from its experience, while the Arab side still depended on "faz'ah" - the one-time mobilization of local villagers equipped with their own old weapons. From April 1948 on, we started to receive large quantities of light weapons from Czechoslovakia, which were sent to us on Stalin's orders. In the middle of May, when the expected intervention of the Arab armies was approaching, we were already in possession of a contiguous territory.

- In other words, you drove the Arabs out?

This was not yet "ethnic cleansing" but a by-product of the war. Our side was preparing for the massive attack of the Arab armies and we could not possibly leave a large hostile population at our rear. This military necessity was, of course, intertwined with the more or less conscious desire to create a homogeneous Jewish territory.

In the course of the years, opponents of Israel have created a conspiracy myth about "Plan D", as if it had been the mother of ethnic cleansing. In reality that was a military plan for creating a contiguous territory under our control in preparation for the crucial confrontation with the Arab armies.

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- Do you say that at this stage there was not yet a basic decision to drive all the Arabs out?

One has to remember the political situation: according to the UN resolution, the "Jewish state" was to include more than half of Palestine (as it existed in 1947 under the British Mandate). In this territory, more than 40% of the population was Arab. The Arab spokesmen argued that it was impossible to set up a Jewish state in which almost half the population was Arab and demanded the withdrawal of the partition resolution. The Jewish side, which stuck to the partition resolution, wanted to prove that it was possible. So there were some efforts (in Haifa, for example) to convince the Arabs not to leave their homes. But the reality of the war itself caused the mass exodus.

It must be understood that at no stage did the Arabs "flee the country". In general, things happened this way: in the course of the fighting, an Arab village came under heavy fire. Its inhabitants - men, women and children - fled, of course, to the next village. Then we fired on the next village, and they fled to the next one, and so forth, until the armistice came into force and suddenly there was a border (the Green Line) between them and their homes. The Deir Yassin massacre gave another powerful push to the flight.

Even the inhabitants of Jaffa did not leave the country - after all, Gaza, where they fled, is also a part of Palestine.

- In that case, when was the start of the "ethnic cleansing" you spoke about?

In the second half of the war, after the advance of the Arab armies was halted, a deliberate policy of expelling the Arabs became a war aim on its own.

For truth's sake, it must be remembered that this was not one-sided. Not many Arabs remained in the territories that were conquered by our side, but, also, no Jew remained in the territories that were conquered by the Arabs, such as the Etzion Bloc kibbutzim and the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Jewish inhabitants were killed or expelled. The difference was quantitative: while the Jewish side conquered large stretches of land, the Arab side succeeded only in conquering small areas.

The real decision was taken after the war: not to allow the 750 thousand Arab refugees to return to their homes.

- What happened when the Arab armies entered the battle?

At the beginning, our situation looked desperate. The Arab armies were regular troops, well trained (mostly by the British), and equipped with heavy arms: warplanes, tanks and artillery, while we had only light weapons - rifles, machine guns, light mortars and some ineffective anti-tank weapons. Only in June did heavy arms start to reach us.

I myself took part in the unloading of the first fighter planes that reached us from Czechoslovakia. They had been produced for the German Wehrmacht. Over our heads "German" planes on our side (Messerschmitts) were fighting "British" planes flown by Egyptians (Spitfires) .

- Why did Stalin support the Jewish side?

On the eve of the UN resolution, the Soviet representative, Andrei Gromyko, gave a passionately Zionist speech. Stalin's immediate aim was to get the British out of Palestine, where they might otherwise allow the stationing of American missiles. A sometimes forgotten fact should be mentioned here: the Soviet Union was the first state to recognize Israel de jure, immediately after the declaration of independence. The US recognized Israel at the time only de facto.

Stalin did not turn his back on Israel till some years later, when Israel openly joined the American bloc. At that time, Stalin's anti-Semitic paranoia also became apparent. The policy-makers in Moscow were then of the opinion that the rising tide of Arab nationalism was a better bet.

- What did you personally feel during the war?

On the eve of the war, I still believed in a "Semitic" partnership of all the inhabitants of the country. One month before the outbreak of war I published the booklet "War or Peace in the Semitic Region", in which I propounded this idea. In retrospect it is clear to me that this was far too late.

When the war broke out, I immediately joined a combat brigade (Givati). In the last days before I was called up I managed - together with a group of friends - to publish another booklet, entitled "From Defense to War", in which I proposed conducting the war with a view to the nature of the subsequent peace. (I was much influenced by the British military commentator Basil Liddell Hart, who advocated such a course during World War II.)

My friends at the time tried very strongly to convince me not to enlist, so I could remain free for the much more important task of voicing my opinions throughout the war. I felt that that they were quite wrong - that the place of every decent and fit young man at such a time was in the combat units. How could I stay at home when thousands of my age-group were risking their lives day and night? And besides, who would ever listen to my voice again if at the crucial moment of our national existence I did not fulfill my duty?

At the beginning of the war I was a private soldier in the infantry and fought around the road to Jerusalem, and in the second half I served in the Samson's Foxes motorized commando unit on the Egyptian front. That allowed me to see the war from dozens of different vantage points.

Throughout the war I wrote up my experiences. My reports appeared in the newspapers at the time and were later collected in a book entitled "In the Fields of the Philistines, 1948" (which will soon appear in English). The military censors did not allow me to dwell on the negative sides, so immediately after the war I wrote a second book called "The Other Side of the Coin", disguised as a literary work, so I did not have to submit it to censorship. There I reported, inter alia, that we had received orders to kill every Arab who tried to return home.

- What did the war teach you?

The atrocities I witnessed turned me into a convinced peace activist. The war taught me that there is a Palestinian people, and that we shall never achieve peace if a Palestinian state does not come into being side by side with our state. That this has not yet happened is one of the reasons why the 1948 war is still going on to this very day.

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