

**THE NEW HISTORIANS
AND
ISRAELI POLICY TOWARDS THE PALESTINIANS**

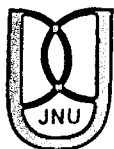
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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled *The New Historians and Israeli Policy towards the Palestinians* submitted by me for award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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CERTIFICATE

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Chapter One

Introduction

For any nation, history-writing is a contested terrain and is always, therefore, under constant review. Rewriting history is a universal and ceaseless act. It is clear then that history is far from being etched in stones as nations rediscover their past and rewrite their biographies. The world and nations change and historiography¹ – the study of history – changes with them, willingly and unwillingly.

One such case of contested history exists in the State of Israel for last two decades. The research focuses on a group of Israeli historians who have declared the re-examination of mainstream Israeli national historiography to be their goal. The leading scholars of this group are known as the New Historians. This school includes Benny Morris, late Simha Flapan, Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, and Tom Segev. Due to liberal declassification laws in Israel, many official papers became available in the late 1970s which formed the body of the New Historians' scholarship. Thus, antecedent to the rise of the New History was the release of classified Israeli archives. The New Historians base their research on the Israeli official documents and papers. The term "New Historians" was coined by Benny Morris in his book *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (1990).

This research traces the debate surrounding the New Historians and their impacts which has continued in Israel since the publication of Simha Flapan's work *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* in 1987. Since then numerous Israeli scholars have entered into an informed and at times acrimonious discussion around the birth of the State of Israel, representing a large array of viewpoints, factual findings and conclusions. The study evaluates the wider implications of this debate within Israel

¹ Historiography: The writing of history based on a critical analysis, evaluation, and selection of authentic source materials and composition of these materials into a narrative subject to scholarly methods of criticism (Oxford Dictionary).

and how it has profoundly affected not only the way Israelis view their past but, just as importantly, how they look to their future.

The critical historians view the history of Israel from a perspective which has a sharp break from the traditional² Israeli national history. The traditional narrative lays all the blame for the war of 1948³ and its consequences on the Arab side. This is a nationalist version of history and, as such, it is selective and self-serving. The conventional view argues that in 1947 the Zionist leaders accepted the United Nations partition plan which was rejected by the Arabs. The Arabs united to launch a war to expel the Jews from Palestine, a war during which Israel narrowly escaped destruction. In the course of the war, the Palestinians fled at the behest of Arab leaders. Later, Israel sought peace which has always been rejected by every Arab state. Yet, until the 1980s, this one-sided narrative went largely unchallenged within Israel. The school of the New Historians has posed a challenge to this conventional understanding on the basis of Israel's chronicle of the 1948 war.

The aim of this research is not to examine the findings of the New Historians in terms of their historical accuracy, but rather to explore the debates around their research, and its implications for Israeli conduct and policy making. Nor the study entertains the idea of judging the old history in the light of the New History. The purpose of this study is to not gauge how much truth the New History contains. Instead, the task is to highlight the results of the debate of the two generations of the historians in Israel. To pose the motif of this research in a question: did the New History impact upon Israel's society, polity and decision-making system?

² The word 'traditional' or 'conventional' history refers to the official history of 1948 war which the State of Israel has supported. For a detailed discussion see: Shlaim (2004), Morris (2008a), Said (1998), Special issues of scholarly journals are dedicated to the contested history-writing in Israel: *History and Memory* 7, no. 1 (1995); *Journal of Israeli History* 20, no. 2-3 (2001).

³ For a detailed account of the 1948 war suggested readings are Gilbert (2008) and Sachar (1979).

Key Arguments

The main arguments of the New Historians can be summarised as follows:

- The old history claims that the Palestinians fled their homes of their own free will; the New Historians counter this by stating that the refugees were either chased out or expelled.
- Traditional narrative states that Britain tried to prevent the establishment of the Jewish state; the New Historians argue instead that Britain tried to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.
- The earlier version states that the balance of power during the 1948 war was in favour of the Arabs; the New Historians contest the claim and argue that Israel had an advantage, both in manpower and in arms.
- The official version posits that the Arabs had a coordinated plan to destroy Israel; the New Historians suggest that the Arabs were deeply divided.
- The old history maintains that Arab intransigence prevented peace; the New Historians insist that Israel is primarily to be blamed for a reticence that did not result in peace after the war.

Although, many of the arguments of the New History are not new, there is a qualitative difference between the new historiography and the bulk of the earlier studies, whether they accept or contradict the official line. The difference, in a nutshell, is that the New History is written on the basis of the access to official Israeli and Western documents, whereas the earlier writers had no or only partial access, to the official documents. The access of the primary sources for writing history has been the firm platform of the New Historians, whereas, the traditional history did not have much support in the form of primary sources. Indeed, with the sole exception of the Flapan, the New Historians have carried out extensive archival research in Israel, Britain and the United States. Their arguments are backed by hard evidences and by a Western-style scholarly apparatus. The debate between the old and the New History is not merely of historical disagreement. It cuts into the very core of Israel's image of

itself and the conventional narration of history provides firm ground to the Israeli denial of its responsibility for the plight of the Palestinians (Shlaim 1995).

Definition, Rationale and the Scope of the Study

This study is a study of those who have studied and refuted mainstream versions of Israeli history. And from this objective, the research seeks to find if the New History has had any practical impact.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains one of the most enduring, and by far the most visible conflict in modern times. It is the only relic from the post World War II period that has periodically resurfaced with an acute ability to generate violence. The partition of Palestine and creation of Israel in 1948 have rendered the history of West Asia tumultuous. Indeed, it will not be far-fetched to argue that no permanent peace can be brought about in West Asia till the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is resolved. Negotiating with history is a key towards a resolution. Much of what the New Historians have argued and continue to argue point towards a possibility of resolution. What is missing, however, is the transition of the conclusions of the New History into policy actions. Two challenges pose themselves here: one, identifying the link, insofar as there is any, between conclusions and policy actions; and two, if no such link can be established (which is the hypothesis this research proposes) then identifying the reasons for this asymmetry. The answer to the second problem holds the key to resolution of the conflict and highlights the importance of researching Israel's New History.

Hypothesis

A coherent critique of the traditional view of history by the New Historians did not have a discernible impact upon Israeli policies towards the Palestinians.

Research-Questions/Problems

- What are the main points of departure between the conventional historians and the New Historians?
- Did the New History influence Israel's policy towards the Palestinians?
- Did the New History have any relevance for the quest for peace and reconciliation with the Palestinians?

Research Methods

This research focuses upon the New Historians and their contentions in interpretations of history. Anchored in history, the research questions lead the trajectory of research to the analysis and interpretation of Israeli policies in the past decade and a half. The focus while dealing with the New Historians and their counter-assertions had been on the consistency of their arguments they presented and the conclusions they drew. From that vantage point, conventional counter arguments have been analysed. Whether conventional historians and critics refute the New Historians on their own turf or from distinct locations? The research examines the refutations and criticisms against the New Historians' work by their critics. How far the criticism of the New History by the Israeli scholars and historians has contributed with its quality of evidence and consistent arguments to the debate of the 1948 war?

The eminent writings of the New Historians have primarily been the literature of research. The research relied upon the literature that emerged in response to the works of the New Historians. Thus, reliance on secondary sources had been the prime method of current research. These sources include books, journal articles, academic commentaries and journalistic accounts of the debate. The researcher does not have necessary knowledge of language to inspect the primary sources of the New History. Therefore, the writings of the New Historians are the various sources of the literature.

Survey of Literature

The year 1988 was the 40th anniversary of the creation of the state of Israel. It was accompanied by the publication of four books: Simha Flapan's *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (1987), Benny Morris's *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: 1947-1949* (1988), Ilan Pappé's *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1948-1951* (1988) and Avi Shlaim's *Collusion across the Jordan* (1988). These historical writings were the commencement of the self-critical history.

The origins of the debate between the new and old historians can be traced to 1987 when Simha Flapan wrote his groundbreaking book *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*. The book deals with what Flapan perceives as the 'Seven Myths' surrounding the establishment of the State of Israel. These myths include: that Zionists accepted the United Nations partition plan but the Arabs rejected the UN partition plan and launched war; that the Palestinian Arabs fled voluntarily; that all the Arab states united to expel the Jews from Palestinian areas; that the Arab invasion made war inevitable; that the Israel was in vulnerable condition in front of the united Arab states; and that Israel has always sought peace.

Benny Morris was the first of the New Historians to follow up on Flapan's work with his seminal study of the flight of the refugees in the book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: 1947-1949* (1988). The debate around the cause of the flight of approximately 750,000 Palestinian Arabs between December 1947 and July 1949 is potentially the most controversial of the issues examined by the New Historians. Since the establishment of the State of Israel the refugee issue has been central to all peace negotiations between Israēl and the Palestinians and has often been the cause of their continued failure. Any portion of blame the New Historians might find is likely to influence not only Israel's perception of its past but also its present political agenda and future peace. Whilst Palestinians view their displacement as an inevitable and pre-planned consequence of Israeli aggression and expansionism, Israelis see the Palestinians as largely responsible for their own fate due to their

rejection of the UN partition recommendations and their lack of internal organisation, leadership and cohesion (Karsh, 1997).

The very first bone of contention between the New Historians and the traditional historians of Israel is the British policy during the 1948 war. The New Historians have refuted the conventional narration of Israel that at the end of the Palestinian Mandate, the British policy was against the Jews and supported the Arabs to prevent the establishment of the Jewish state. Ilan Pappé, using English, Arabic and Hebrew sources, has revealed that essentially the British policy was in favour of the idea of "Greater Jordan". Pappé (1988) explained that Greater Jordan would compensate Britain for the loss of bases in Palestine. Britain did prevent the Arab Legion to attack and capture the areas allocated to the Jews by United Nations. So British policy was to unleash the Arab Legion, which was highly trained by the British army, but the target was not the Jews but the Palestinians (Shlaim 1988). It is evidently asserted that Britain endorsed the understanding between King Abdullah and the Jewish Agency to partition Palestine between themselves and abort the potential of an independent state of Palestine.

The second bone of contention between the New Historians and the old historians is the issue of the military balance in the 1948 war. The old historians viewed the 1948 war as an unequal struggle between large number Arabs and fistful Jews in 1948. The heroism of the Jewish fighters is not in question. Nor is there any question that the first round of fighting was indeed a struggle for survival. As Amitzur Ilan (1996), an Israeli military and diplomatic historian has written Israel, in defiance of the Security Council orders, took advantage of its edge, and assisted by strong Zionist pressure in the United States, came out both victorious in the battlefield and unpunished by the United Nations. Yet, throughout the war, the Israeli Defense Forces (hereafter IDF) outnumbered all the Arab forces, regular and irregular, operating in the Palestinian theatre. Estimates vary, but the best estimates suggest that on 15 May 1948 Israel fielded 35,000 troops whereas the Arabs fielded 20 to 25,000 troops (Shlaim 1988). The problem of the IDF was not manpower but firepower. Its firepower was negligible. But during the first ceasefire, Israel imported arms from the

Eastern bloc: artillery, tanks and aircrafts. Illicit arms imports decisively tipped the military balance in favour of Israel. The Israelis now not only outnumbered but also outgunned their opponents. The outcome of the war was not a miracle but a reflection of the underlying Arab-Israeli military balance. According to Morris (1990), in this war, as in most wars, the stronger side won.

Simha Flapan (1987) deconstructed the myth of Israeli vulnerability *vis-à-vis* the Arab states in the 1948 war. According to Flapan, it is a false claim that Israel faced the onslaught of the Arab armies as David faced Goliath: numerically inferior, poorly armed in danger of being overrun by a military giant. Flapan's work has subsequently been attacked by the New Historians (Morris 1990) and the traditionalist historians alike; (Teveth 1989) as a political rather than historical work with a Marxist agenda. However, the book served to push through the limited intellectual discourse which had permeated Israeli scholarship to re-examine its past. Two trends emerged within this space: historians with a traditional perspective defended and restated official Israeli history while the New Historians, guided by an objective approach to scholarship which sought to separate historical realities from their ideological frames, wrote a series of books which were aimed at debunking many of the myths Flapan had outlined in *The Birth of Israel*.

Thirdly, the most controversial conclusion of the New History pertains to the issue of the Palestinian refugees of 1948 war. The origins of the refugee problem are intimately connected with the question of responsibility for solving this problem. There are two diametrically opposed versions. The official Israeli version maintains that the Arabs left Palestine on orders from their leaders and in the expectation of a triumphal return after the Arab armies had swept the Jews. Israel was, thus, in no way responsible for turning the Palestinians into refugees (Meir, 1975). The Arab version maintains that the Palestinians did not leave of their own accord instead they were pushed out; Israel expelled them and therefore, it has to give them a choice between and a right to return to their homes or compensation (Masalha, 1992; Said, 1994).

Benny Morris, in his 1988 book, studied the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem thoroughly, carefully, and objectively. He found no evidence of Arab calls on the Palestinians to leave their homes, but nor did he find evidence of a Zionist master-plan for the expulsion of the Palestinians. In *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-49*, Morris traces the causes of the flight of the Palestinian Arabs from both towns and villages. His research reveals a general pattern of Palestinian flight largely due to Israeli actions such as atrocities, psychological warfare, destruction of harvests and villages and direct expulsion orders. Morris also cites the lack of Arab leadership, organisation and confidence in their militia as a further cause of the exodus. At the same time he fails to find any evidence to support the traditional Zionist claim that the Palestinian Arabs fled due to direct orders from their leaders in the Arab League. Morris also could not find any explicit evidence of Zionist premeditated plan for the expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs. The refugee problem, he concluded, was an inevitable by-product of the war.

Morris is criticised for his conclusion by all schools of historians. Shabtai Teveth, the biographer of David Ben-Gurion, countered Benny Morris. He (1989) accuses Morris of concluding that both parties were to blame but Israel is held more responsible for the flight of the Palestinians. Countless reviewers pointed out that Morris's conclusion did not correspond to the evidence he had unearthed. The evidence suggests a far higher degree of Israeli responsibility for the mass flight of the Palestinians. According to Avi Shlaim (1995), there were many different reasons for the Palestinian exodus but the single most important reason was Israeli political, military, and psychological pressure. Ilan Pappé also challenges Morris's conclusion that the refugee problem was born of war and not of design. He asserts that the role and function of *Plan Dalet* (Plan D) was to evacuate the land for Jews. Simha Flapan (1987) also gives firm ground for this conclusion by stating that there was a basic "philosophy of expulsion". Ze'ev Sternhell (1998), whose research centres on the inevitable nature of the clash between Zionists and the Palestinians, insists that 'although it was morally wrong to expel Palestinians, it was necessary to do so' (p.32).

Fourthly, this conventional narration has been refuted sharply that all the Arab states, unified in their determination to destroy the newborn Jewish state, joined together on 15 May 1948, to invade Palestine and expel its Jewish inhabitants. The reality was more complex. Flapan (1987) was the first to avow that the Arab states aimed not at liquidating the new state, but rather at preventing the implementation of the agreement between the Jewish provisional government and King Abdullah of Transjordan⁴. Avi Shlaim has argued the Arab coalition facing Israel in 1948 was one of the most deeply divided, disorganised, and ramshackle coalitions in the history of warfare. Shlaim (1988) has uncovered that in November 1947 an unwritten agreement was reached between King Abdullah and the Jewish Agency to divide Palestine between themselves following the termination of the British Mandate. Ilan Pappé published *The Making of the Arab/Israeli Conflict, 1947–51* in 1992 and *The Israel/Palestine Question* in 1999. Throughout these books Pappé challenges a number of ‘myths’ related to the establishment of the State of Israel, and explores theories ranging from Zionist collusion with King Abdullah of Transjordan to prevent the establishment of an Arab state in Palestine, to Israeli intransigence at the many peace overtures offered by the various Arab states, before, during and after the 1948 war.

Fifthly, it is touted that Israel’s hand has always been extended in peace, but since no Arab leader has ever recognised Israel’s right to exist, there has never been anyone to talk. On the contrary, from the end of World War II to 1952, Israel turned down successive proposals made by Arab states and by neutral mediators that might have brought about an accommodation. Morris (2000b) asserts that Jordan and Syria suggested peace initiations and recognition of Israel since 1949. The New History also shows that the war was not inevitable. The Arabs had agreed to a last-minute American proposal for a three-month truce on the condition that the Zionist leadership temporarily postpone the establishment of a Jewish state. The leadership rejected the American proposal by a slim majority of 6 to 4 (Flapan, 1987). The controversy

⁴ Transjordan was granted independence from Britain in 1946 and became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1950.

surrounding the elusive peace is examined by another scholar Itamar Rabinovich (1991) who emphasises that the failure of early negotiations was not inevitable, it was not addressed genuinely. His implicit conclusion, however, is that because of the instability of the Arab regimes, Ben-Gurion was justified in his refusal to take any political risk for the sake of peace.

The New History has been denounced by its critics for being driven not by the scholarly search for truth about the past but by an anti-Israeli political agenda (Shapira, 1995). Shapira, one of the eminent critics of the New Historians, defends Zionism and its ideological roots through the assertion of Israel's 'uniqueness'. Though stressing that history continues to differentiate Zionism from a normal colonial enterprise, Shapira views the Holocaust as the most important factor to be considered when judging the settler nature of Zionism. Tom Segev (1986), one of the leading New Historians has argued that Zionism and Israel needed to take advantage of political ramifications of the Holocaust not because of the Arabs, but because the majority of the Diaspora Jews refused to live in Israel. Further, the catastrophe supported the Zionist claim that if they had a Jewish state during World War II, the disaster would not have happened.

The most authoritative attack on the New Historians has been led by Efraim Karsh. Karsh (1997) questions the New Historians' claims to be objective and views their historiography as subjective. Norman Finkelstein (1995) was similarly criticised by Benny Morris for his lack of objectivity when he questioned Morris's conclusion regarding the cause of the Palestinian exodus. Morris contends that Finkelstein views 1948 through a thick film of preconceived notions and prejudices, whereas Finkelstein contends that Morris continues to be influenced by Zionist prejudices and in *The Birth the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-49* he simply replaced one myth with another (ibid).

The New Historians are criticised for other drawbacks too. Their negligence of the Arab sources is considered one of the key weaknesses. Masalha (1992) is also highly critical of Morris's research that it almost lacks in Arab sources and Arab

dialogue. Morris's work is largely confined to British and Israeli sources and is therefore, lacks one crucial voice, namely the Arabs. The main scholars of this school have only consulted and referred either Israeli documents or Western resources. Edward Said (2003) pointed it out as the most weakening facet of highly scholarly work. Similarly, Walid Khalidi (1993) disapproves Morris's conclusion regarding the Palestinian exodus in the 1948 war that refugee problem was a by-product of the war instead of a consequence of the Jewish policy of expulsion. There are some other impacts upon the New History that dusted its academic and research credentials with political vandalism. In detail, the impacts upon the New History are examined in the third chapter.

Outline of Chapters

Three substantive chapters follow this introductory chapter followed by a conclusion. The second chapter, **The Official History of the 1948 War**, deals with the traditional or official history of the 1948 war. The important sources and writings of the official history are taken into account. The traditional history is largely based upon sources such as political memoirs, diaries, biographies and autobiographies of the individuals who participated in the events of the 1948 war. The emphasis has been on the narrations of the crucial confrontations and outcomes of the 1948 war. How the 1948 war started and what happened during and in the aftermath of this critical war are some of the important issues that have been disputed by the New Historians. The later part of this chapter has highlighted the motivating forces behind the rise of the New History. Of course, the declassification of the 1948 documents in the late 1970s made possible the new research. Equally, the early years of the 1990s brought certain social and political developments in Israeli society and polity that inspired the New Historians to re-examine the decisive year of the 1948. Those factors have been discussed towards the end of this chapter.

How far the New History departs from the earlier one is the starting point of the third chapter- **The New History of the 1948 War**. It explores the main areas of dispute between the New and old historians regarding causes and consequences of the

1948. The key refutations of the official history by the New Historians are discussed in detail. The well-researched and document based writings of the New Historians pose sharp questions to the traditional history. The issues like causes for the Palestinian flight, military imbalance and vital roles of Britain and Transjordan (later Jordan) in 1948 and the peace standstill in the aftermath of the 1948 war are critically examined by the New Historians. Regarding these issues, the old history does not have satisfactory answers; hence the New History appears more convincing about cause and consequences of the 1948 war.

The fourth chapter, **The Impacts of the New History**, highlights the impacts of the New History. The research does not attempt to judge old or new history of the 1948 war. Nor it tries to declare the New History truer than the old one. The research problem concentrates on the outcomes or impacts of the New History. Equally important is to study the impact upon the New History. The political and societal developments impacted upon the New History as the New History influenced them. Thus, this chapter tries to capture the impacts of the New History and the impacts upon the New History as well.

A final, concluding chapter examines and answers the hypothesis set out at the beginning.

Chapter Two

The Official History of the 1948 War

History and its narration are very important for a state to build its national identity and image. A state defines its present in the light of past events. The state's narration of past events is reflected through its history and that history further shapes its present policies. The reference of history is one of the significant methods of state response to present day conflicts or disputes. History writing is a constant process. Perceptions equally matter in history. Since human behaviour is driven not only by reality but by the perception of it and it is very likely that perceptions (whether genuine or false) of the conflict affect the future course of events. A state's perception of itself has an immense role in determining its policy. Critical conceptions which deal with a state's identity are often contested. One such case of contested histories is found in the State of Israel where the official history of the war of 1948 is challenged by the new or self-critical history. The focal of this study is to inspect the radical disagreement between the two generations of historians in Israel regarding the war of 1948. The domestic milieu of Israel is divided on the major issues of the 1948 war, particularly its causes and consequences. The research examines how the New History has influenced the Israel's self perception and its foreign policy towards the Palestinians. Here, the current chapter deals with the official history of the 1948 war. In the later part of this chapter, the motivating forces behind the rise of the New History are examined.

The 1948 war has different meaning and implications for both the parties involved namely Israel and the Arabs. Israeli textbooks and historians alike term this war as the 'War of Independence'. This marks the beginning of the different accounts as well as perceptions of the war. For the State of Israel, the war marked the beginning of independence. For the Palestinians, the war of 1948 was an *al-nakba*, the catastrophe or disaster. It is not surprising why Israel considers this war which marked

its independence. The war started the day after the establishment of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948. The new fledgling state was attacked by the regular armies of Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. A distinction is often made between 'regular' and 'irregular' armies as the former reinforced the Palestinian irregular forces and the Arab Liberation Army¹, which were sponsored by the Arab League. For a day-old state it was crucial not only to survive this onslaught but also to emerge victorious at the end.

Moreover, this war established a few tenets which Israel abides by till today. Deeply symbolic to Israel, the victory of the war established that as a Jewish state with Arab neighbours, its overarching objective was survival. After encountering the sharp rejection and hostile response from the Arab states towards the partition plan, Israel had the foremost urge to survive as a state. The Arab states were not willing to allow it to survive, flourish and grow in the region. In such hostile conditions, survival and security were given the prime consideration by Israel. After the end of the 1948 war, it made a few but fundamental changes in the army as well: *Haganah*² was renamed the Israeli Defense Forces and the *Irgun*³ and *Stern Gang*⁴ were later disbanded and merged with the IDF.

The war of independence or the official version portrays the war of 1948 as a struggle between a monolithic Arab adversary and a tiny Jewish State. Israel fought

¹ The Arab Liberation Army was an irregular force that played an important role in the Arab-Israeli war of 1947-48. It had Arab volunteers from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon.

² *Haganah* (The Defence) was a Jewish paramilitary organisation in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine from 1920 to 1948, which later became the core of the Israel Defense Forces.

³ *Irgun* (National Military Organisation in the Land of Israel) was a clandestine Zionist group that operated in Palestine from 1931 to 1948, as a militant offshoot of the earlier and larger *Haganah*. Based on the teachings of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, *Irgun* was established and headed by Avraham Thomi.

⁴ *Stern Gang* (known as *Lehi* short for *Lohamei Herut Yisrael* "Fighters for the Freedom of Israel") was an armed underground Zionist faction in Mandatory Palestine that had as its goal the eviction of the British authorities from Palestine to allow unrestricted immigration of Jews and the formation of a Jewish state. The name of the group became *Lehi* after the death of its founder, Avraham Stern (1942).

this war only to defend itself from Arab offensive.⁵ The Jewish forces were few against many united Arab armies. According to the official version, united and mighty Arab armies invaded Israel upon the expiry of the British Mandate with a single aim in mind: to strangle the Jewish state as soon as it came into existence. But the Israeli forces defeated the outnumbered Arab armies and the Israel was a surprise against all odds. This popular and heroic version of 1948 war has been used extensively in Israeli propaganda and is sustained by state institutions.⁶ According to Avi Shlaim, it is a prime example of the use of a nationalist version of history in the nation building process. In a very real sense, history is the rallying point for the victors, and the Israeli official history of the 1948 war is criticised mainly for portraying the Israeli version of the war and denying the Arab version (Shlaim, 2000: 34).

The official version of history served a dual function for Israel. First, it helped to intensify a sense of nationhood amongst the Jews who emigrated from various countries. Till the establishment of Israel as the first Jewish state for nearly two millenniums, the Jews were a scattered people and were a minority in several states. The victory of Israel over the Arabs in the war, cemented these diverse people who at times, shared nothing more but a commitment to preserve and protect the Jewish identity and culture. Secondly, the official history earned international sympathy and support for the newborn State of Israel. The narration that the State of Israel had been attacked by its Arab neighbours and it merely defended its Jewish community helped to gain moral support against the Arabs. This perception of Israel as the victim and the wronged party was strengthened by the fact that there was little or no representation and articulation of the war on the behalf of the Palestinians. Also, Israel had the stronger claim of being the victim even though they had emerged victorious in the war. The Palestinians, with their aggressive Arab states, were held responsible for

⁵ Facts about Israel, 2008 edition. It is published by and available at the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Visit: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/446E7E35-5D50-4C87-B535-AE9C8E05332B/0/History.pdf>, accessed on 5 May 2008.

⁶ Ibid.

rejecting the two-state solution proposed by the United Nations. Nevertheless, the official account of 1948 war history served one more purpose. It aggravated the gulf between the Jews and the Arabs and did little to emphatically pave a path of mutual understanding and reconciliation between them.

The official or conventional perspective is one, which is found in Israeli school text books, encyclopaedias, state documents and official papers.⁷ The particular manner of the narration of the 1948 war is sustained to depict the history in ways that suited the interest of the state and its perceived interests. In the international public memory, the Jews had been persecuted for almost two millennia, and most recently during the World War II. The offensive response of the Arabs in the 1948 war almost strengthened the justification for a new state for the Jews to be formed. Hence, state formation in the initial years was of prime deliberation for the infant Jewish state. It is always significant for a state that how it is perceived not only by the outsiders but also by its own people. For Israel, therefore, the 1948 war is not a common war, like most of the states go through in their existence. The memory of the war was exploited to create the belief that the Jews had and deepened the sense of being wronged. Bernard Lewis suggests about history and its significant narration for a state,

Those who are in power control to a very large extent the presentation of the past, and seek to make sure that it is presented in such a way as to buttress and legitimise their own authority and to affirm the rights and merits of the group which they lead... This continuing thread can be traced from ancient inscriptions on rock faces through medieval annals, modern schoolbooks and textbook (Lewis, 1975: 13).

It, thus, had immense worth for Israel. The war is fundamental to Jewish existence as it gave birth to a Jewish state and defined its identity.

⁷ In the process of nation-building, certain tools and means are adopted by a state to sustain its collective memory – such as school text books, national historiography, literature, cinema or national commemorations etc. The state uses mediums to underpin its opinion about the past

The Israeli official discourse of the 1948 War

At the outset it is important to see the official discourse of 1948 history within Israel. How Israel has defined its role and activities prior and during the war of 1948 has significant value. It is difficult to assume that a state carries a shared knowledge of its past. Society might consist of various contested perceptions of its past. The people's perceptions are varied and dominated by a collective memory. Nevertheless, what is germane here is the state initiative and institutions that carry a parameter for the large society to look forward. The state has its own mechanisms and means to define its conduct and put forward its defined image for the larger masses. Israel's war of independence, as stated before, was the first war between the State of Israel and the neighbouring Arab countries. The conflict between the Palestinian Arabs and Jews is a modern phenomenon, which began around the turn of the 20th century. Although these two groups have different religions (Palestinians include Muslims, Christians and Druze), religious differences are not the cause of the conflict. It is essentially a national struggle over land. Until 1948, the area that both groups claimed was known internationally as Palestine. But following the war of 1948-49, this land was divided into three parts: the State of Israel, the West Bank (of the Jordan River) and the Gaza Strip. The war broke out following the rejection of the United Nation's partition plan (29 November 1947), by the Arab states and the Palestinian Arab Higher Committee.⁸

In a nutshell, the official history comprises of following assertions. The conflict between the Jews and the Arabs in Palestine came to a head following the passage of the partition plan by the United Nations which called for the establishment of two states, one Jewish and one Arab. The Jews accepted the United Nations plan but the Palestinians, the neighbouring Arab states and the Arab League rejected it. Although some Jewish groups criticised certain aspects of the plan, the resolution was welcomed by most of the Jewish population in Mandate Palestine or *Yishuv*. A minority of nationalist Jewish groups like Menachem Begin's *Irgun* and the *Lehi*,

⁸ The Arab Higher Committee was formed by Hajj Amin al-Husseini (1895-1974) on 25 April 1936. It was primarily concerned about the growing Jewish migration (*Aliya*) into Palestine Mandate and its consequences upon the demography.

(known as the *Stern Gang*) which had been fighting the British, rejected the partition plan. Begin warned that the partition would not bring peace because the Arabs would attack the small State of Israel (Begin, 2002: 56). The mainstream Zionist leadership accepted the partition plan as the indispensable minimum. The Arabs not only rejected the United Nations partition plan, but attacked Israel from all sides. On the day that Israel declared its independence, the Arab League Secretary General Azzam Pasha declared *jihad*, a holy war. He threatened that the war (of 1948) would be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which would be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades (Sachar, 1979: 333).

The role of the Great Britain is criticised during the final years of the mandate period. According to the conventional or old history, Britain did everything in its power to frustrate the establishment of the Jewish state envisaged in the UN partition plan. With the expiry of the mandate and the proclamation of the State of Israel, five Arab states sent their armies into Palestine with the firm intention of strangling the Jewish state at birth. The subsequent struggle was a disproportionate fight between a Jewish community and mighty and united Arab armies. The infant Jewish state fought a desperate, heroic and ultimately successful battle for survival against overwhelming odds.

During the war, hundreds of thousands of the Palestinians fled to the neighbouring Arab states. The refugee problem remains the most complicated and controversial issue in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The outcome of the refugee problem became a hotly contested issue between the New Historians and conventional historians. The reasons behind the Palestinian refugees' crisis are not agreed by both the parties. This is because the long due solution of refugee problem depends on what account of history is taken into account. The New History lays the blame on Israel for the Palestinian flight and advocates compensation by Israel. Here, the focus is mainly located on what Israel has to say for the unprecedented migration of the Palestinians. How does Israel perceive the Palestinian refugee problem and what are the refutations of the New Historians regarding the official stand of Israel? The Israeli official discourse has been narrating that the Palestinians left mainly in response to orders

from their leaders. Israel emphasises that Arab leaders gave a call to the Palestinians to vacate the land so that Arab armies could attack freehandedly on Jewish population and make the Jewish community run away. According to the Israeli version, the Palestinians were given a reason to hope to return to their homes with a victorious Arab army by their leaders (Teveeth, 1990: 228). Secondly, the Jews made efforts to reconcile with the Palestinians to stay and to demonstrate that peaceful co-existence was possible.⁹ After the war, the Israeli leaders sought peace with all their heart and all their might but there was no one to talk to on the Arab side. The Arab intransigence was singularly responsible for the political deadlock, which was not broken until President of Egypt Anwar Sadat's visit (19-21 November 1977) to Israel thirty years later.

The official version of history provides interesting insights into the way in which Israel perceives itself. The perception of being wronged and victimised makes it distinct from other nations. In fact, the culmination of the Jewish demand for a separate state reinforces the strength the Jews draw from the historic injustice committed against them. Their psychology is built on a Jewish history of being denied, and the Arab reaction to Israel's statehood in 1948 marked the persistent denial.

This conventional account or old history of the 1948 war displays a number of features. In the first place, it is not history in the proper sense of the word. Most of the voluminous literature on the war was written not by professional historians but by participants, political figures, soldiers, journalists, and biographers (Morris, 1990: 6). They worked from interviews and memoirs and often from memories. Secondly, the literature of the old history is very short on political analysis of the war and long on

⁹ Regarding the official stand of Israel of the Palestinian refugees, one can see detailed information at following links available at Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Myths and Facts Online: A Guide to the Arab-Israel Conflict the War of 1948", Visit: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Modern+History/Israel+wars/Israels+War+of+Independence+-+1947+-+1949.htm>, "The Palestinian Refugees", See: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/refugees.html> (both accessed on 15 May 2008).

chronicles of the military operations, especially the heroic feats of the Israeli fighters (Tal, 2005: 184). Thirdly, this literature maintains that Israel's conduct during the war was governed by higher moral standards than that of its enemies. Of particular relevance here is the precept of *tohar haneshek* or the purity of arms which posits that weapons remain pure provided they are employed only in self-defence and are not used against innocent civilians and defenceless people. This popular-heroic-moralistic version of the 1948 war is the one which is taught in Israeli schools and used extensively in the quest for its legitimacy to fight the Arabs in the 1948 war (Morris, 2008: 13).

In the short span of the existence of Israel, its history has been written by official biographers and has been taken from the memoirs and recollections of those who lived through and participated in the events of 1948. Benny Morris sums up the essence of the 'traditionalist view' as:

That Zionism's birth was an inevitable result of Gentile pressures and persecution, and that it offered at least a partial solution to the 'Jewish Problem' in Europe; that the Zionists intended no ill to the Arabs of Palestine, and that Zionist settlement alongside the Arabs did not, from the Jews' point of view, necessitate a clash or displacement, but that Israel was born into an uncharitable, predatory environment; that Zionist efforts at compromise and conciliation were rejected by the Arabs; and that the Palestinians and the neighbouring Arab states, selfish and ignoble, refused to accede to the burgeoning Zionist presence and in 1947-48 attacked the *Yishuv* with the aim of nipping the Jewish state in the bud (Morris, 1990: 4).

At the heart of the traditionalist perspective is the concept of 'victim'. Political Zionism emerged as a life raft from the scourge of anti-Semitism which swept across Europe in the late nineteenth century. Disillusioned after the hope of the Enlightenment and its unfulfilled promises of assimilation and liberation, the Zionists looked upon their persecution as an indication that the realisation of a nation-state with a Jewish majority would be their only safeguard against future pogroms (Shapira, 1996: viii). Heavily influenced by nationalist sentiments within Europe, the founding father of Zionism, Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), published a small political pamphlet in 1896, *Der Judenstaat*, or The Jewish State, which called for the establishment of a Jewish state. What is crucial is that Zionism emerged as a 'saviour'

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ideology, whereby a return to *Zion*, a biblical expression for Jerusalem, was seen as redemption of the Promised Land and as a beacon of hope for the longevity of the Jewish 'nation'. The Zionist movement, which emerged in Europe in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, aimed at the national revival of the Jewish people in its ancestral home namely the Jerusalem. The term Zionism was coined in 1885 by the Viennese Jewish writer Nathan Birnbaum. Zionism was in essence an answer to the Jewish problem that derived from two basic facts: the Jews were dispersed in various countries around the world, and in each country they constituted a minority. The Zionist solution was for the Jews to leave the Diaspora and acquire a territory over which they would exercise full sovereignty and establish a state of their own.¹⁰

In the aftermath of the 1948 war

During 1947–49 the Zionist movement had been the main agent working to transform the status quo in the West Asia. The idea of establishing a Jewish state had to change the West Asia's geographic boundaries. The Jewish people who started migrating from the Europe were determined to form a homeland (and subsequently a state) in the Palestinian territory which was under the British during 1917-1948. In 1948, having achieved statehood, Israel wanted to maintain the status quo. Israel controlled a territory of 20,255 square kilometres – more than the roughly 16,000 square kilometres it had been allocated by the United Nations plan (Kumaraswamy, 2006: 23). It accepted the post-war status quo and worked to preserve it in the face of Arab attempts to change it. Israel achieved what it wanted to achieve in the war of 1948. For Israel, this war brought straight victory and founded its statehood with Jewish identity. The further task was to secure its foundation and enhance its strategic interests not only within the region but also at the international level. Demography and territory were the two prime considerations for Israel at that stage. The post-war territorial status quo was established by the armistice agreements that Israel signed with its immediate Arab opponents. In 1949, Israel signed separate armistices with Egypt (24 February), Lebanon (23 March), Transjordan (3 April), and Syria (20 July).

¹⁰ A detailed account of Zionist history can be found in Walter Laquer, *The History of Zionism*, (2003).

The new borders of Israel, as set by these agreements, encompassed about 78 percent of mandatory Palestine as it stood after the independence of Jordan in 1946. This was about 50 percent more than the land allotted by the United Nations partition. These cease-fire lines were subsequently known as the 'Green Line'.

In fact, the most important issue was the displacement of thousands of Palestinians. The 1948 war had and continues to have grave consequences for the Palestinians who became homeless and had to take shelter in neighbouring Arab countries as refugees. The Arab position was that Israel had created refugee problem and that it must not be allowed to evade its responsibility from solving this problem (Masalha, 2003: 167). The number of people who were displaced from Palestine is contested by all parties involved in war. In 1951 the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine estimated that the number of Palestinian refugees displaced out of Israel was 711,000. The Arab countries insisted that the solution for the refugee problem had to be along the lines of United Nations resolution 194. Israel is held responsible for executing forceful expulsions of the Palestinian people and for not allowing them to resettle in their native places once the war ended. To keep the Palestinians out of the allocated territory to the Jews by the United Nations was believed to be the motif of Israel (Khalidi, 1988: 20).

On the other hand, Israel claimed that the Arabs had created the refugee problem by starting the war and that Israel itself was not responsible in any way. According to the Israel's stand, it was the Arab leaders' call to the Palestinians to vacate the land once, so that Arab armies could attack on the Jews and drive them out (Shamir, 1991). Unpredictably, the united Arab armies were defeated by the Jewish forces. The possibility for the Palestinians to return to their villages and towns ended with the defeat of the Arab armies. Israel did not allow the Palestinians to enter into those territories what it occupied at the end of the war. Therefore, it did not accept the United Nations resolution that gave the right of return or, alternatively, the right to compensation. The question of refugee problem's origin is thus directly related to the question of responsibility for solving the Palestinian refugee problem. Israel had denied its share of responsibility in causing refugee problem (Shamir, 1991).

Demographic considerations are main constraints to give an unfettered right of return to the Palestinian refugees for Israel. The Arab claims that the notion of forcible 'transfer' is inherent in Zionism and that in 1948 the Zionists simply seized the opportunity to displace and dispossess the Arab inhabitants rendered this controversy all the more acrimonious (Khalidi, 1998: 4).

The armistice agreements with the Arab countries were intended to serve as the first step on the road to peace. But these agreements did not fructify. Israel held Arab intransigence as the driving force behind peace deadlock and that its leaders were desperate to achieve peace but there was no one to talk to on the other side. It soon became clear, however, that Israel and the Arabs interpreted the armistice agreements differently. The former maintained that the agreements have secured its existence and plus, it had been accepted by the Arab states and saw the cease fire lines as international borders for all intents and purposes, making way for final peace agreements. It assumed full sovereignty over the extra land which was not allocated under the UN partition plan but were captured during the course of war. The victory of war was taken as a tool of legitimacy for controlling that land (Flapan, 1987: 212).

On the other hand, the armistice agreements were seen differently by the Arab parties who held that they did not terminate the state of war with Israel. Therefore, they resorted to campaigning against Israel through economic and political boycotts. The cease fire lines were considered an *ad hoc* solution, not as the final lines of demarcations. The rights of the displaced Palestinians to 'struggle against occupation' and their right of return became an Arab cause and calls were given to all Arab states to unite and fight against Israel. Thus, the fragile armistice agreements did not transform into an international peace agreement.

Forces behind the Rise of the New History

Over time, however, the official version of history has been challenged from within. The late 1980s has witnessed the emergence of a new generation of Israeli scholars and the birth of the New History. These historians and academicians, many of them living and teaching in Israel have looked and are looking afresh at the Israeli

historical experience. These scholars belong to Jewish families and grown up as a part of Jewish society. The very important conclusions of the New History are critical for the Israeli state; in brief, the question of the imperatives for the 1948 war and how the war started and who instigated it. The vital conclusion of the New History concerns the Palestinian refugees and the peace deadlock at the end of the 1948 war. Here, the focus is on how the New History emerged in the Israeli society and what inspired this phenomenon. The main characteristics and conclusions of the New History would be detailed in the third chapter. The present chapter deals with the motivating forces which paved the way for the New History in Israel.

By some the New History is depicted as the revisionist history of the Israeli national history. It's very important to distinguish the terminological differences. The scholars of this school of the New History have well defined their position and prevented all other similar connotations to their history writings (Morris, 1990: 6). In his writing Morris gave explicit response to the label of revisionism.¹¹ He did not like the expression 'revisionist history' for three main reasons. At first, he states, the word 'revisionism' and its meaning had particular connotation in the Zionist lexicon. It conjures up the faces of Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880–1940) and Menachem Begin (1913–1992), respectively the founder and prophet and latter day leader of the Revisionist Movement in Zionism.¹²

The Revisionists are the founders of right wing political ideology. They advocated the idea of greater Israel and claimed all of the Mandate Palestine as well as the East Bank of the Jordan River (that is, the present Kingdom of Jordan) for the

¹¹ The Oxford English Dictionary's (South Asia Edition, 2003) definition of revisionism: "The somewhat vague concept of historical revisionism is applicable only when there is an abundance of well-documented historical writing which, because of its unilateral emphasis or perspective, needs to be counter-balanced."

¹² Revisionist Zionism is a nationalist faction within the Zionist movement. The ideology was developed by Ze'ev Jabotinsky who advocated a revision of the practical Zionism of David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, which was focused on independent settlement of *Eretz Yisrael* (greater Israel). Revisionist Zionism was instead centered on a vision of "political Zionism", which Jabotinsky regarded as following the legacy of Theodor Herzl (1860 – 1904), the founder of modern political Zionism. For a detailed discussion see: Heller (1995), Shlaim (2000), Segev (1998)

Jews. They earned the name "Revisionist" because they wanted to revise the boundaries of Jewish territorial aspirations and claims beyond the Mandate Palestine to include areas east of the Jordan River. In the 1920s and 1930s, they differed from Labour Zionists by openly declaring their objective to establish a Jewish state (rather than the vaguer formula of a "national home") in Palestine. They believed that armed force would be required to establish such a state. Their pre-state organisations including the *Betar* youth movement¹³ and the *ETZEL* (National Military Organisation) formed the core of what became the *Herut*¹⁴ (Freedom) Party after the Israeli independence. This party subsequently became the central component of the *Likud*,¹⁵ the largest right wing Israeli party since the 1970s. Until 1977, their place was on the fringe of the Zionist and Israeli history. Albeit, the first defeat of Labour dominated government in 1977, revived the right wing policies and since then their political vision has dominated the Israeli politics. Thus, the New History needs a categorical distinction from the revisionist tendencies. To call the New History 'revisionism' is to cause unnecessary confusion.

Moreover, Morris urges that the term 'revisionism' wrongly implies that a solid, credible prior body of history-writing existed, which current history-writing is trying to overthrow. But this, says Morris, is not the case with the traditional history. Israel's old historians were nationalist chroniclers, at best methodologically naive, at worst merely propagandist. To call the New History 'revisionist', in Morris' view would by implication confer too much merit on the old history (Morris, 1990: 6).¹⁶

¹³ The *Betar* Movement (also spelled *Beitar*) is a Revisionist Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 by Ze'ev Jabotinsky.

¹⁴ *Herut* (Freedom) was the major right-wing political party in Israel from the 1940s until its formal merger into *Likud* in 1988, and an adherent to Revisionist Zionism. It is not to be confused with *Herut*, The National Movement, a party which broke away from *Likud* in 1998.

¹⁵ *Likud* (Consolidation) is a major right wing political party in Israel. Founded in 1973 as an alliance of several right-wing and liberal parties, *Likud's* victory in the 1977 elections was a major turning point in the country's political history.

¹⁶ The other scholars amongst the New Historians have echoed similar claims. Tom Segev (1998: vu) suggests that 'before the archives were accessible, Israel had a national mythology; only after the archives were opened could real history be written, and for the first time'.

According to Morris, third reason, which is the most important one, is the fragile nature of Israeli old history. Israel's old historians, by and large, were not real historians and did not produce authentic history as such, Morris claims. This is the stark point of criticism of conventional history of Israel. The earlier historians, prior to the declassification of the 1948 war documents, did not work from and upon a solid body of contemporary documentation and did not normally try to paint a picture that offered the variety of sides of a given historical experience. Most of them primarily worked from interviews and memoirs. Morris argues that the term 'revisionism' would seem to imply that there already existed a solid, credible body of historiography of the 1948 war. To call the New History 'revisionist' would ascribe too much merit to the old history. Thus, Morris keeps the term 'New History' away from any controversy or assumption and provides to the readers of both old and New History a well defined terminology. Not only Morris but also the other scholars of the school identify themselves with the title of New Historians.

According to Tom Segev (1998: vi), "Previously, Israel had no historiography, only ideology, myth and indoctrination." He revealed that the important difference between old and new histories lays in the availability of the declassified material. Israel has a relatively liberal policy on access to archives and so it is possible to check their contents against the myths and ideology. According to Segev, some of the facts that emerged from Israeli archives are very shocking. The fact that the declassified documents are Israeli sources, the argument of foreign propaganda can not be valid. In his words, "We were told that we did everything to try to prevent the Arabs escaping. Today you can go to the Israeli army archive and find generals' reports on how they expelled the Arabs" (1986: 17).

The rise of the New History was stimulated by a number of other factors: a generational shift, political transformations, demographic changes, and a more plural and tolerant intellectual climate. All of these and more importantly emerging normalcy for a society which, while adhering to an ideology that aspired to normalise Jewish life, paradoxically continued to perceive itself as engendered by and living in unique, indeed abnormal, circumstances. As the present and future have begun to look

more secure, the past has become less threatening and hence more accessible for celebration or reproach.

Ilan Pappé, one of the prominent scholars of the New History, explains in detail the imperatives behind the rise of the New History and critical attitude in the socio-political domain. He counts that the larger thinking of the New Historians and other sociologists was shaped by five major events. According to Ilan Pappé (1998 a: 4), following are the turning points in Israeli socio-political realm that prepared the ground for critical history:

A. The 1973 Arab-Israeli War: This war shattered myth of Israel's invincibility. The relative Arab success in the war and the total failure of its military intelligence sent shock waves throughout the Israeli society. The war undermined common Israeli stereotypes about Arab military ineptitude. The Arab forces were in fact able to carry out a surprise attack and persevere on the battlefield.

B. The political earthquake of 1977: The Labour Party dominated Zionist life from 1882 until the *Likud* victory in the 1977 *Knesset* (Israeli Parliament) elections. The myth of Labour hegemony was exposed and broken in the wake of the violent polarisation of Israeli society during the election campaign. One outcome was that Labour policies of the past were subjected to new and more critical scrutiny, including its policies in the 1948 war and the early years of statehood.

C. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel in 1977 and the ensuing peace process: The myth of Arab intransigence collapsed and the Israeli claim that there was no one to talk with on the Arab side proved to be untrue. Moreover, many Israelis were ready to blame their government for the failure of the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations on the future of the Palestinian occupied territories. The new willingness to blame Israel for being the inflexible and intransigent party to the conflict led to questions about how genuine Israel had been in seeking peace in previous years, particularly after the 1948 war. The blame for peace deadlock in the aftermath of the 1948 war had been in persistent dispute as who was responsible and not responsible for the failure to have peace agreement between Israel and the Arabs.

D. Public debate about Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982: For the first time in its history Israel fought a war without a national consensus. A public debate ensued about the war aims and the need to stay in Lebanon. Never before had a substantial segment of the citizenry expressed serious doubts about the wisdom behind military operations undertaken by the government. According to Pappé, the military action had been a sacred cow, a never-to-be-touched taboo. The reservists formed a movement refusing military service in Lebanon, which was the most extreme manifestation of the readiness to slaughter the holy cow and violate the taboo. This movement gathered momentum and opened the way for a re-examination of Israel's past military initiatives.

E. The continued occupation of the Palestinian territories and the Palestinian resistance to it: Even before the first *Intifada* (the popular uprising of the Palestinians in the occupied territories, 1987-1993), Israeli Jewish society was divided on this issue in an unprecedented way. A growing number of Jewish citizens¹⁷ began to support an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories.

Besides these factors, other significant facilitating developments in the Israeli society and polity encouraged the critical history writing. Primarily, they are the following:

The most prompting event for the New History was the declassification of the 1948 war documents and official records by the State of Israel. Modelled in European political system, it has the law of declassification that binds the state to open, unless specifically excluded, all documents, official and semi-official papers for public access after thirty years. This practice is inspired by the United Kingdom which has the law of declassifying state documents. Benny Morris, the pioneer of the New

¹⁷ Some important pro-peace movements are active in Israel. Like, Peace Now is an extra-parliamentary, non-party peace movement established in 1978 to keep the peace process 'at the forefront of the public agenda'. In 1978, a group of 350 reserve army officers made an appeal to Israeli Prime Minister Begin urging him to pursue the road to peace. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, this group held many anti-war demonstrations and became famous as "Peace Now", one of the prominent peace movements in Israel.

History, thanks to the Israel's Archives Law¹⁸ and to its relatively liberal implementation by the state. From the early 1970s onwards hundreds of thousands of state documents were opened to researchers. Almost all the Foreign Ministry's papers from 1948 to 1957, as well as great masses of documents—memoranda, minutes and correspondence from other ministries—were declassified. Morris asserts that for the first time, therefore, historians—Israelis and non-Israelis alike—have been able to study the first years of the Israeli statehood. The declassification provided well-documented papers and archival material for a re-look at the first years of the Israeli-Arab conflict. The Israeli declassification policy is based on the original Archives Law of 1955. Israel State Archives and Central Zionist Archives¹⁹ are the two state institutions to preserve various document collections and official histories. So, the papers of 1948 war were declassified in 1978 onwards and it provided full access of all official and semi-official papers of the 1948 war to the scholars of the school of the New Historians.

The second factor is the nature of the generation that New Historians belong to. Most of them, born around 1948, have matured in a more open, doubting and self-critical Israeli society. This generation has been witness to offensive war operations of Israel. On the other hand, most of the old historians, indeed, had lived through 1948 as highly committed adult participants in the glorious foundation of the Israeli state. For them the year of 1948 had immense role to play not historically but more psychologically and emotionally. It was the year where their lives were changed drastically and they found themselves in a complete new world where they were victorious unexpectedly. Until the commencement of the New History, much of

¹⁸ The Israel State Archives is the national archives of the State of Israel. It was established in May 1948 and its operation is regulated by the Archives Law of 1955. See: <http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/PM+Office/Departments/deparhive.htm> (accessed on 2 April 2008).

¹⁹ The Central Zionist Archives (CZA) in Jerusalem holds the archives of the Zionist movement from 1880-1970 and documents the growth of the Zionist movement throughout the world. Amongst the important archives stored in the repository are those of the World Zionist Organisation, the Jewish Agency, the Jewish National Fund and the archives of the World Jewish Congress. The CZA also holds the private papers of individuals active in the Zionist movement and in the development of the State of Israel. See: <http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/ZA/pMainE.aspx> (accessed on 15 May 2008).

Israel's wartime history had been written by participants, whose narratives were centred on the Jewish people fighting to secure a haven from persecution following the Holocaust. One of them was Shabtai Teveth, a prize-winning Israeli journalist and biographer of the state's founding Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. According to Morris, the generation of nation-builders seldom casts doubt or looks critical towards its national ethos. For them, who lived through 1948 and took part in it, the year of 1948 has greater national value and less historical significance. The new generation of Israeli historians asserts to take on a measure of impartiality with respect to the 1948 war and its consequences.

Thirdly, the war with Lebanon in 1982 left deep marks in Israeli society and polity. Regarding the New History, this war and its aftermath are very important. It is required to look into the consequences of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in detail. The nature of Israeli operation came in for sharp criticism because it was the first time that the state's claim of building a defensive military structure was doubted due to its offensive march in Lebanon. The society was not ready to wholeheartedly approve the operations in Lebanon. All of Israel's previous wars, with the exception of the Suez War of 1956, had been wars of no choice, wars that were imposed on Israel by the Arabs. Even the Suez War of 1956 enjoyed national consensus because it was seen as a legitimate response to Arab provocation. Moreover, it did not involve high casualties (Gilbert, 2008: 510). The war of Lebanon did not achieve national consensus. This war was not imposed on Israel by the Arab states and as such turned out to be "a war of choice" (Begin, 2002: 126).²⁰

The 1948 war had never been a subject of controversy or dispute prior to Lebanon war within the Israeli society and politics. It was always considered a war of self-defence, a struggle for survival. It was fought in the wake of the United Nations resolution that proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to statehood. In spite of all

²⁰ The Lebanese war known in Israel as the Operation Peace of the Galilee and later colloquially also known as the First Lebanon War, began on 6 June 1982, when the IDF invaded the southern part of Lebanon. Israel ordered the invasion as a response to the assassination attempt against Israel's ambassador to the United Kingdom, Shlomo Argov by the *Abu Nidal* Organisation.

its disastrous consequences, the 1948 war is generally believed to have been inevitable. Yet, this apparently self-evident and unassailable truth was suddenly opened to question during the Lebanon war. It was an invasion by the IDF in contravention of both the United Nations Charter and international laws. The invasion, saturation bombing and siege of Beirut, and the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camp of Sabra and Shatila²¹ produced a sharp schism within the Israeli society. Significantly, in defending the actions of his government, Prime Minister Menahem Begin referred to the policies of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion in 1948. Begin claimed ardently that the only difference between the two was that Ben-Gurion had resorted to manoeuvre, whereas he was carrying out his policies overtly (Flapan, 1987: 5). Begin's claim of historical continuity and his attempt to vindicate his policies by invoking the late Ben-Gurion sounded preposterous. Simha Flapan called this critical juncture as if "Pandora's Box" was opened (1987: 6). Israeli historians, investigative journalists and political analysts examined the evidence. Though, some of them to defend Begin, some to unmask what they were sure were demagoguery, and some to get the truth out of his assertions. Flapan said that nearly all had to admit that, apart from political ideologies and prejudices, Begin's quotations and references were indeed, based on facts (Flapan, 1987: 6).

With this admission-cum-revelation of Begin, unprecedented in the history of the Zionist movement, the national consensus around the notion of *ein breira* (no alternative), began to crumble, creating political space for a critical re-examination of the country's earlier history. Thus, the war of Lebanon came very close to the war of Sinai in 1956 which was a war of choice more than a war of compulsion²². At this

²¹ On 14 September 1982, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel (1974-1982) was killed. On 17 September, Christian forces of Phalange affiliated with Gemayel's political party, retaliated and attacked the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila and massacred hundreds of unarmed innocent Palestinian men, women and children. Despite being aware of the prevailing mood for vengeance, Israeli forces which were in control of the areas, did not prevent the entry of the Phalangists.

²² Historian Anita Shapira was prompted by Menachem Begin's claim to embark upon a re-examination of the defensive ethos of Zionism throughout the pre-state period. Shapira (1992: vii).

time of anxiety and unrest, the declassified documents of 1948 were available to interrogate and find out what exactly happened prior to 1948 war as well as during the long course of the 1948 war.

Around the same time, in 1982 the Israel Ministry of Defence published the *War Diaries* of Ben-Gurion, who is no doubt credited with the victory in the 1948 war. Moreover, the Israeli State Archives, in conjunction with the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, had already begun publishing thousands of declassified documents dealing with the foreign policy of Jewish Agency and Israeli government. These declassified papers pertained to their contact with the Arab world in the period between the passage of partition resolution and the signing of the armistice agreements with Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon in 1949.²³

In addition to the war of 1982, the previous war of 1967 is also scrutinised by many critics and is considered to be a watershed in Israeli politics and society: Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. The majority of Palestinians were now, one way or other, under Israeli control. A critical review of the past was indispensable for the new generation of Jewish scholars who reached maturity after the June war of 1967. The new generation was taking over decision making bodies and managing political, social and economic affairs of the society. Their opinions and concepts were shaped largely by the fact that Israeli rule over the lives of thousands Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Morris poses a neat dichotomy between "a generation of nation-builders," who lived through 1948 as "committed adult participants," and a new generation, born around 1948 and raised in a "more open, doubting, and self-critical Israel than the pre-1967, pre-1973, and pre-Lebanon War Israel of the old historians" (1990: 8). The generational shift brought a critical approach amongst the youngsters who were instantly not ready to accept whatever state institutions forwarding to them regarding their own past. The emphasis on self-inquiry was strengthened by the current conduct of Israeli state in the occupied territories.

²³ The declassified documents and official papers of the period of 1948 – 56 are available at The Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. Visit: <http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/ZA/SiteE/pGallery.aspx>, accessed on 5 May 2008.

The New View on the Genesis of Zionism

If Morris, Pappé and Shlaim focused on the birth of the state itself and comprehensively undermined older nationalist preconceptions about it, a group of historically-informed sociologists, especially Baruch Kimmerling, Joel Migdal, Gerson Shafir and Avishai Ehrlich, looked at earlier developments. Shafir (1989) and Kimmerling (1983) interpreted early Jewish settlement in Palestine as more closely similar with classic settler-colonial models than Israeli writers had previously allowed. Kimmerling also, both alone and in collaboration with Migdal (1994), broke new ground by offering a sympathetic analysis of Palestinian history. They questioned much of the previous assumption by tracing the formation, or at least the pre-history, of a Palestinian political identity dating back to the 1830s. These sociologists and their writings had great significance in changing the perception of the Israeli society towards its adversary, namely the Palestinians. It is important for a society to have close interaction or some modes of understanding with others, particularly when there is a long conflict between two different societies. The Israeli society was brought into close dialogue regarding its past and its way of living with the rise of critical sociology. The development of critical sociology was the positive addition to the Israeli society that emerged as a mature and seasoned society. } ✓

The sociologists in Israel were the first scholars to adopt a critical view on early Zionism. With the help of neutral methodology, and putting aside the nationalist ideological paradigms, they examined Zionism not only as a national ideology but also as a system of domination and control. Kimmerling (1983) employed a neutral methodology as well when he examined the Zionist movement in 1976. He looked at it as a colonialist phenomenon. By so doing he sharply diverted from the official historiography's habit of looking at terms such as *Geulat Hakarka* (the Zionist redemption of the Land), *Aliya Gewish* (immigration into Palestine) and *Tebuma* (the renaissance of the Jewish people in Palestine) as neutral and professional terms rather than viewing them for what they are—an ideological lexicon. Kimmerling did not write as a trained historian but rather took the history of the Zionist movement as an interesting case-study, a successful social case-study, of a combination of colonialism

and nationalism. He attributed the success of Zionism to a fruitful alliance between British and Jewish colonialism on the one hand, and Jewish nationalism, on the other.

Gershon Shafir (1987) was another eminent sociologist who wrote critically regarding the popular perceptions of Zionism and its ideological inclinations. For Shafir, Zionism is a unique case-study in the history of colonialism since the movement succeeded in creating a state, despite the absence of any substantial military and financial means. And thus, in his account, *kibbutz*²⁴ and *moshav*²⁵ are not the implementation of a socialist ideology but rather pragmatic economic solutions in the face of the hardships encountered in Palestine (Shafir, 1987). These were instruments of a colonialist movement which wanted to take over the labour and land market in Palestine. Kimmerling and Shafir do not agree with one another on crucial points, and are not the only ones to deal with these subjects. But they do share a neutral employment of sociological theories to try and understand important chapters in the history of their own society and state.

Ze'ev Sternhell in his *The Founding Myths of Israel* — a title which summed up much of the revisionist intent — more recently launched a somewhat different but convergent line of attack. Previously known mainly as an analyst of European fascist movements, he focused on the ideology of pre-state Labour Zionist leaders (1998). The central thesis he proposed was that of the socialist, liberal and democratic values supposedly dominant among Israel's pioneers and founders. Certainly the key figures in the creation of the state proclaimed those values. But, argued Sternhell, theirs was a distinctively nationalist socialism — and in any contest of priorities, the nationalist element came out on top. Indeed, he believed that Israeli Labour's socialist rhetoric was always rather hollow. The early leaders were not seriously interested in social equality or wealth redistribution, despite their protestations: they failed even to build a comprehensive welfare state or provide free universal education (Sternhell, 1998: 16).

²⁴ *Kibbutz* (gathering) is an Israeli collective community.

²⁵ *Moshav* (settlement, village) is a type of cooperative agricultural community of individual farms pioneered by the Labour Zionists during the second *aliya* (wave of Jewish immigration during the early 20th Century).

Unpleasant, and at times shocking, chapters in the national history were exposed. As a result of these new revelations, more and more scholars became aware of the basic contradictions between the Zionists' national aspirations on the one hand, and their implementation at the expense of a living and thriving Palestinian population, on the other. Indeed, it seems that it was this last major event of 1948 war that attracted most of the public attention in Israel. It was, thus, not so much the debate on the origins of Zionism that seemed relevant, but rather the debate on the origins of the state that stirred and aroused the public conscience.

Thus, the political and social upheavals in Israel brought some critical changes. The state survived through many dangers and consolidated its statehood. The success of Israel as a state is remarkable considering its hostile surroundings and conflict driven past. The internal dynamics of the Israeli state on the social level were path breaking. Since the early 1980s, the public opinion and various peace movements demanded the state to disclose its policies towards the Palestinians and other Arab states.

The official history is subjected to scrutiny in the light of the declassified documents of the 1948 war. The New History would have not had imperative impacts if it had not been consistent with the declassified documents of the 1948 war. The official history is not found consistent with the historical documents the state archives preserved and later declassified. It is significant to answer the anomaly found between the official narration of the 1948 war and the declassified documents of the 1948 war. It is not that everything the New Historians wrote was correct and at time they have to backtrack in the face of counter-arguments and proofs. But they opened up a lively debate. The next chapter deals with the key characteristics of the New History. What are the main refutations of New History *vis-à-vis* the old history would be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

The New History of the 1948 War

The New History of the 1948 war and its consequences not only raised crucial questions about the national historiography but also regarding the general atmosphere of the Jewish society. At first, the New History originated in the academia. The main contributors who are collectively known as the New Historians are academicians. They continue to teach in and out of Israel; for example, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim are all in the profession of teaching. However, since the early 1990s the critical views of these historians came out of the academia and became the subject of one of the most contested debates in the Israeli society and polity.

The national and international media were helpful in providing platforms to these New Historians to convey and disseminate their views. Benny Morris's first and much acclaimed work *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947–49*, which was extensively based on the 1948 war documents and was the very first one to highlight the debate, was published by the Cambridge University Press in 1988. The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* published a series of articles by the New Historians and also brought out the counter arguments from other historians who contested the conclusions of the New Historians.¹ The New Historians for the most part are Israeli citizens and are publishing their debates and arguments in the various Israeli forums. More importantly, their writings are published by the most prestigious publishing houses in the English speaking world. The scholarship and academic leverage of the New Historians engaged the traditional historians and Zionist thinkers who had little choice but to respond to them.

¹ This included a series of articles by Ben-Gurion's biographer Shabtai Teveth in April-May 1989. Teveth is one of the prominent critics of the New Historians and had many debates with Benny Morris and others. In September 1989, the American monthly *Commentary* too published a series of articles by Teveth and Morris.

Once it started, the debate was no longer confined to the narrow academic circles. The significance and vitality of the 1948 war and its consequences transformed the New History into a lively and contested political and social debate. For the Israeli society, the war of 1948 is not limited to the history writing of a past event. The present day conflict with the Palestinians requires that Israel defines its stand on the major issues of the 1948 war. The contested issues related to the war are still unresolved; for examples, the origins of the Palestinian refugees, peace deadlock and demarcation of territories.

The New History particularly dealt with the issues and outcomes of the 1948 war. The research and conclusions of the New Historians were in sharp contrast to the official narration of the war. The major areas of dispute between the new and the old historians are the focus of this chapter. Besides the key contested issues of the 1948 war, it would also discuss the counter arguments of the critics² of the New Historians who challenged some of the conclusions of the New Historians.

Four major bones of contention can be identified in the debate between the new and old historians:

- a. The origins of the Palestinian refugees;
- b. The Arab-Israeli military balance and Britain's policy in 1948;
- c. The nature of Israeli-Transjordan relations and Arab war aims during the war of 1948 and;
- d. The reasons for the continuing political deadlock after the end of the 1948 war

² These are the scholars who argued against the New History and denied that New Historians brought out more accurate narration *vis-à-vis* the traditional history of the 1948 war. They do not agree that the traditional account of history of the 1948 war is inconsistent with the declassified documents of the 1948 war. They support the old history and discard the New History as polemics. To name prominent amongst them: Shbati Teveth, Anita Shapira, Efraim Karsh, Aharon Megged, Avraham Sela, Itamar Robinovich etc.

A. The Origins of the Palestinian Refugees

The very first bone of contention between the old and the New Historians concerns the origins of the Palestinian refugees. The issue of the Palestinian refugees forms the core of the New History. Its conclusion regarding the origins of the Palestinian refugees is the most important issue between the New Historians and the traditional one. The question is: did the Palestinians leave or were they expelled?

For long Israel has maintained that the Palestinians left the country on orders from their own leaders with the expectation of a triumphant return (Teveh, 1989: 28). The Palestinian side has with equal consistency maintained that Israel forcibly expelled some 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and that Israel, therefore, bears full responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugees. The question of origins is thus directly related to the question of responsibility for solving the Palestinian refugee problem. The Arab side has emphasised that the notion of forcible 'transfer' is inherent in Zionism and that in 1948 the Zionists simply seized the opportunity to displace and dispossess the Arab inhabitants of the country (Khalidi, 1988: 4).

In his *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949* Morris investigated this subject carefully and dispassionately. His book is a diligent and comprehensive analysis of the Israeli action in almost every Palestinian village and neighbourhood. According to Morris, Israeli actions ranged from 'whispering campaigns' which included threats of massacres if the population did not flee, actual massacres by both the *Haganah* and the Jewish underground forces, establishment of an unofficial Transfer Committee, a campaign to destroy Arab crops and villages to prevent a return of the refugees, and an official policy of 'no-return' after June 1948 (Morris, 1988: 135-6).

Nevertheless, it is difficult to find a clear cut answer in his book to the question of what caused the Palestinian flight. Morris writes about the prominent role that compulsory transfer played in Zionist policy, particularly since the 1930s. But in his conclusions, he gives the impression that the exodus was a mixture of flight and expulsion. Morris emphasises that there are no documentary evidences show that the

Palestinians were pushed out by the pre-state Jewish forces. In one of his later work, he observes:

As I have set out in great detail in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-49*, what occurred in 1948 lies somewhere in between the Jewish 'robber state' and the 'Arab orders' explanations. While from the mid-1930s most of the *Yishuv's* leaders, including Ben-Gurion, wanted to establish a Jewish state without an Arab minority, or with as small an Arab minority as possible, and supported a 'transfer solution' to this minority problem, the *Yishuv* did not enter the 1948 war with a master plan for expelling the Arabs, nor did its political and military leaders ever adopt such a plan. What happened was largely haphazard and a result of the war. But there was no grand design, no blanket policy of expulsion (Morris, 1990: 17).

Morris does not validate the point that there were direct expulsions carried out by *Haganah* or IDF to drive the Arab Palestinians out of Palestine. On the other hand, Morris discarded the Israeli stand that Arab leaders called on the Palestinians to come out of Mandate Palestine for a short period of time so that Arab armies could drive the Jews out of Palestine. Nor, the Palestinians were given the hope for a triumphant return to their lands. According to Morris,

At the same time, at no point during the war did the Arab leaders issue a blanket call to Palestine's Arabs to leave their homes and villages and wander into exile. Nor was there an Arab radio and press campaign urging or ordering the Palestinians to flee. Indeed, I have found no trace of such a campaign, and had it taken place, had there been such broadcasts, they would have been quoted or at least left traces in the documentation. The *Yishuv's* intelligence services (the *Shai*, the Arab Division of the Jewish Agency Political Department, the IDF Intelligence Service, and the Foreign Ministry Middle East Affairs and Research Departments) and the British and American Middle East diplomatic posts all monitored Arab radio broadcasts. So did the British Broadcasting Cooperation. But none of these, in the thousands of monitoring reports, ever refer to, let alone cite from, such an alleged broadcast. Not even once (Morris, 1990: 18).

Morris found no evidence of Arab leaders issuing calls to Palestine's Arabs to leave their homes and villages to flee. On the Israeli side, he found no blanket orders handed down from above for the systematic or pre-meditated expulsion of the Palestinians. He, therefore, rejected both the notions of Arab order and the Jewish robber state explanations. His much-quoted conclusion is:

The Palestinian refugee problem was born of war, not by design, Jewish or Arab. It was largely a by-product of Arab and Jewish fears and of the protracted, bitter fighting that characterised the first Arab-Israeli war; in smaller part, it was the deliberate creation of Jewish and Arab military commanders and politicians (Morris, 1988: 286).

Morris's conclusion stems from the absence of an archival source or evidence that shows a 'blanket order' from the Jewish Agency Executive or its Defence Department to expel the Arabs from the Jewish state areas (Morris, 1988: 289).

The study of Morris of what actually triggered the flight of the thousands of the Palestinians in 1948 presents complex and intriguing picture where it is difficult to blame only one party responsible for the refugee outcome. A decade later, Morris wrote a long article regarding the refugee issue in the English daily, *The Guardian*:

The picture that emerged was a complex one - of frightened communities fleeing their homes at the first whiff of grapeshot, as they or neighbouring villages were attacked; of communities expelled by conquering Israeli troops; of villagers ordered by Arab commanders to send away women, children and the old to safety in inland areas; and of economic privation, unemployment and general chaos as the British mandate government wound down and allowed the two native communities to slug it out. The better-organised, economically more robust and ideologically more cohesive and motivated Jewish community weathered the flail of war; Palestinian society fell apart (Morris, 2004d).

Debate around the cause of the flight of the Palestinian Arabs between December 1947 and July 1949 is potentially the most controversial of the issues examined by the New Historians. In May 1951, UNRWA³ inherited a list of 950,000 persons from its predecessor agencies, the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the American Friends Service Committee.⁴ Any portion of blame the New Historians emphasise is likely to influence not only Israel's perception of its past but also its political agenda in the

³ Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, was established by United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programmes for Palestine refugees.

⁴ See for the definition of who is a Palestinian refugee and how many were the Palestinian refugees at the end of the 1948 war, on the following link: <http://www.un.org/unrwa/overview/qa.html#c>, accessed on 17 April 2008.

future. Whilst Palestinians view their plight as an inevitable and pre-planned consequence of the Zionist aggression and expansionism, the traditionalist historians see the Palestinians as largely responsible for their own fate due to their rejection of the United Nations partition plan⁵ and their lack of internal organisation, leadership and cohesion (Karsh, 1997: 37-43).

Morris has come under attack for his conclusions from the traditionalists, New Historians and their critics as well as the Palestinian authors. Shabtai Teveth published a sharp attack on the New Historians, particularly on Benny Morris. Teveth accuses him of concluding that both parties were to blame but “under the guise of even handedness Morris unfolds a grave indictment of one party alone, namely, Israel” (Teveth, 1989: 29). Teveth challenges Morris’s research, offering one example of a document from *Haganah* intelligence which speaks about ‘rumours’ that the Arab leadership had instructed the population to flee. Teveth concludes that, “The flight of the refugees was due to ‘instruction, whether by personal example, by word of mouth or in writing, or even better, by the quickest telegraph of all, rumour” (Teveth, 1989: 30). Subsequently in *1948 and After* (1990) Morris responded to Teveth’s criticism by asserting that the documentary evidence Teveth puts forward (Teveth, 1989: 29) was a solitary document, which would not have been the case if there had been any further detection of evacuation orders delivered to the Arab population (Morris, 1990: 31).

Efraim Karsh, a foremost critic of the New Historians, too blamed Morris for distorted conclusions and manipulation of the archival materials. Morris was criticised for presenting false evidences to prove his pre-assumed conclusions regarding the flight of the Palestinians.⁶ Karsh points out:

⁵ Acting on the recommendations of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), the United Nations General Assembly voted on 29 November 1947, 33-13 with 10 abstentions, to pass Resolution 181 and partition Palestine. The UN plan granted 56.47 percent of the Palestine Mandate to the Jews and 43.53 percent to the Arabs (Kumaraswamy, 2006: 200).

⁶ Karsh has starkly criticised Morris’s findings. The exchange of arguments became bitter between them. Morris himself did not address any of Karsh’s criticisms and accused him of distorting his work. See: Karsh (2005).

Indeed, even after the Palestinian Arabs launched their war of annihilation against the Jews of Palestine Ben-Gurion told his party members that ‘In our state there will be non-Jews as well – and all of them will be equal citizens; equal in everything without any exception; that is: the state will be their state as well’. Not surprisingly, Morris mentions none of this (Karsh, 2005: 487).

On the contrary, Pappé challenges Benny Morris for having arrived at a softer conclusion by saying that the refugee problem was born out of war and not of design. Pappé’s point of departure from Morris occurs over the role and function of Plan *Dalet* (Plan D).⁷ Morris seems to agree that Plan D came very close to a policy of expulsion, but paradoxically maintains that because the expulsion orders were not enforced often, the importance of Plan D in the creation of the refugee crisis is diminished. Morris observes:

In most cases, the Jewish commanders, who preferred to occupy empty villages . . . were hardly ever confronted with the decision whether or not to expel an overrun community: most villages and towns simply emptied at the first whiff of grapeshot (Morris, 1990: 21).

Yet, Pappé argues that just because the expulsion order was not used regularly does not mean that it did not exist and was not important. He emphasised, “In the final analysis, if I plan to throw someone out of my flat, the fact that he had left before I had the chance to expel him in no way alters the fact of my intention” (Pappé, 1999: 94).

Baruch Kimmerling, one of the eminent Israeli sociologists, concurs with Pappé that Plan D was, for all intents and purposes, a call for expulsion. Kimmerling states:

Plan D took into consideration the inability of the Jews to spread their forces among hundreds of Arab villages, the logical consequence of which was the destruction of almost all conquered Arab villages and the banishment of their inhabitants beyond the borders of the presumed Jewish State (Kimmerling, 2001: 39).

⁷ Plan *Dalet* or Plan D was a plan that the *Haganah* in Palestine worked out during autumn 1947 to spring 1948. The purpose of the plan was, according to its Jewish planners, a contingency plan for defending a Jewish state from Arab invasion. According to Yoav Gelber, a professor at Haifa University and expert on the history of the Israel Defense Forces, Plan D was primarily defensive in nature. According to other sources it was a plan with the purpose of conquering as much of Palestine as possible and to expel as many Palestinians as possible. For example, see: Khalidi, W. (1988).

The Palestinian scholar Walid Khalidi (historian and academician) similarly attacks Morris's dismissal of Plan D. He charges that it was a plan for the expulsion and pauperisation of the bulk of the Palestinian Arab masses. He was exasperated at Morris's refusal to acknowledge that there was a general policy of expulsion throughout the 1948 war. To this end, Khalidi points to the history of Zionism and the central role transfer played in discussions in the Zionist circles.⁸ Khalidi argues:

He (Morris) sees no link between this [Zionist talk of transfer] and Plan *Dalet*. He regards the obvious linear dynamic binding together the successive military operations of Plan D as fragments in an, as it were, cubic configuration accidentally related to one another only through their joint occurrence in the dimension of time (Khalidi, 1988: 5).

Morris is aware of the history of the discussion of transfer in certain Zionist circles. He recognises this in his later work "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948", published in the collection of essays called *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*. In this article, Morris traces Zionist thoughts on transfer back to the 1937 Peel Commission⁹ and asserts that it "continued to exercise the Zionist imagination during the following decade" (Morris, 2001: 41). Morris believes that as the issue of transfer was highly sensitive, the topic may have continued to have been discussed throughout the 1940s in high Zionist circles, with all evidence being erased from the official transcripts later (Morris, 2001: 44). Morris documents the enthusiasm of the prominent Zionist leaders namely, Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952) and David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) for the concept of transfer and states that 'the consensus or near-consensus in support of transfer—voluntary if possible, compulsory if necessary—was clear' (Ibid.).

In a critique of Benny Morris, Palestinian scholar and academician Nur Masalha also finds Morris's conclusions problematic in that he fails to take account of the wider political environment in which the *ad hoc* decision of expulsion was made.

⁸ Khalidi further elaborates on his position that from its birth Zionism incorporated the concept of transfer. See for details: Khalidi, W. (1971).

⁹ The British Peel Royal Commission was set up by the British government to investigate the question of Palestine and released its findings in July 1937. Its findings recommended partition between Jews and Arabs and suggested population and land transfer.

Masalha concludes that in Morris's 'new historiography', "There was no inherent link between the 'transfer' of the Arabs and the acquisition of their lands on the one hand and Zionism's long advocated imperative of accommodating millions of Jewish immigrants in the Jewish state on the other" (Masalha, 1999: 219). Rather than seeing the various transfer methods adopted by the Jewish forces as random, *ad hoc*, and purely militarily motivated, Masalha accepts Khalidi's view that there was a linear relationship between the need for an exclusivist Jewish state and the emptying of Jewish lands of the Arab population. For him, whether this linear relationship was guided by a blanket order or an implicit understanding between Ben-Gurion and his generals makes little difference to the policy.¹⁰

Masalha is also critical of Morris's research that it is almost devoid of Arab sources.¹¹ Morris's work is largely confined to British and Zionist sources and is therefore lacks one crucial voice, namely the Arabs. Most confounding of all for Masalha, is Morris's reluctance to be drawn into a dialogue with Palestinian scholars who have been heavily involved with the study of the refugees, and his refusal to acknowledge that they have contributed to the growth of the new historiography (Masalha, 1991: 90-5). Morris seems to view the new historiography as an internal Israeli phenomenon and is reluctant to engage with those outside of Israeli circles. In turn, Palestinian scholars have reacted to the 'new historiography' with reservations. Typical of this reaction is the following statement by Masalha:

The rewriting of the 1948 events by revisionist Israeli historians has been received with mixed feelings among Palestinian historians. On the one hand, it was a relief to find out that after years of being branded as mere propaganda, major Palestinian claims were proved to be acceptable on the basis of professional historical research. On the other hand, there was something disturbing and annoying in these claims becoming valid only after Israeli Jews made them, as if Palestinian historians were suspected of non-professionalism (Masalha, 1999: 211).

¹⁰ Masalha expands further on this argument in Masalha (1992), *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948*, Washington, DC: Institute for Palestinian Studies.

¹¹ Morris has also come under attack for his lack of Arab sources from the other critics of the New Historians. See: Karsh (1997: 5).

The reasons and causes of the Palestinian refugees are still sharply contested.¹² The New History, particularly, Benny Morris has contributed significant knowledge to it. The flight of the Palestinians occurred during the course of a protracted war of the 1948 war and still in search of its remedy. To resolve the refugee problem, both the parties would have to agree on some key issues regarding its origins. An observation which is frequently made, by Western and critical Israelis as well as the Palestinian reviewers is that the evidence presented in the Morris's books¹³ suggests a far higher degree of Israeli responsibility than implied by Morris in his conclusion.¹⁴ But despite the criticisms of Morris's conclusion, his book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949* (1988) remains an outstandingly original, scholarly and important contribution to the study of a problem which lies at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The debate of the new and old historians regarding the origins of the Palestinian refugees has revived the centrality of this issue in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. The issue of the Palestinian refugees is the main bone of contention between the Palestinians and Israel. The impacts of the New History on the refugee problem will be dealt in detail in the next chapter.

B. The Military Balance and Britain's Policy

The second contested issue between the new and old historians relates to the Britain's role in the 1948 war. Britain is considered to be secretly aligned with the Arabs to abort the Jewish state and supposed to have had its vested interests in Transjordan. The Arab Legion¹⁵, the Jordanian army, was trained by the British army

¹² For further instances of direct Israeli involvement in the expulsions, see Morris (1995) and Segev (2000).

¹³ *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, (1988); *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, (2004) both were published by Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ See, for example, Abu-Lughod (1989); Khalidi, R. (1988); Masalha (1992); and Palumbo (1990).

¹⁵ The Arab Legion (*al-Jaysh al-Arabi*) was the regular army of Transjordan. In 1948 war the Arab Legion was the most effective and best organised Arab fighting force. Established by Britain in 1920–1921 when the Emirate of Transjordan was formed, the Legion was funded, trained, and commanded by British officers.

officers. In such conditions, the Israeli victory was achieved in the face of overwhelming military odds. The fight was between *Yishuv* and five united Arab armies and it hints at the military imbalance and weakness of the Israeli forces. Moreover, the military imbalance was ostensibly the result of British alliance with the Arab states against the interests of the infant Jewish state. The central Israeli charge, articulated by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is that Britain armed and secretly encouraged its Arab allies, and especially its client, King Abdullah of Jordan, to invade Palestine upon expiry of the British Mandate and battle with the Jewish state as soon as it came into the world (MFA, 2003).

According to the Israeli official narration (MFA, 2003a), the 1948 war was an offensive attack on Israel by the Arab states. The war was fought along the entire, long border of the Mandate Palestine: against Lebanon and Syria in the north; Iraq and Transjordan in the east; Egypt, assisted by contingents from the Sudan – in the south; and Palestinians and volunteers from Arab countries in the interior. It was the bloodiest of Israel's wars and 6,373 were killed in action (from pre-state days until 20 July 1949), accounting for almost one percent of the *Yishuv*. The official narration (Ibid.) mentions following three phases:

In the First Phase (29 November 1947–1 April 1948), it was the Palestinian Arabs who took the offensive, with the help of volunteers from neighbouring countries; the *Yishuv* had little success in limiting the war and it suffered severe casualties and disruption of passage along most of the major highways.

In the Second Phase (1 April–15 May), the *Haganah* took the initiative, and in six weeks, was able to turn the tables, capturing, *inter alia*, the Arab sections of Tiberius, Haifa and later also Safed and Acre, temporarily opening the road to Jerusalem and gaining control of much of the territory allotted to the Jewish State under the United Nations Resolution 181.

The Third Phase (15 May–19 July), considered the critical one, opened with the simultaneous, coordinated assault on the fledgling state by five regular Arab

armies from neighbouring countries, with an overwhelming superiority of heavy equipments, armour, artillery and air force (Ibid.).

Avi Shlaim and Ilan Pappé researched extensively and challenged to the official narration and the details of the key issues. According to Shlaim,

The War of Independence constituted a glorious contrast to the centuries of powerlessness, persecution, and humiliation. Yet the traditional Zionist narrative of the events surrounding the birth of the State of Israel was still constructed around the notion of the Jews as the victims. This narrative presents the 1948 war as a simple, bipolar no-holds-barred struggle between a monolithic and malevolent Arab adversary and a tiny peace-loving Jewish community. The biblical image of David and Goliath is frequently evoked in this narrative. Little Israel is portrayed as fighting with its back to the wall against a huge, well-armed and overbearing Arab adversary. Israel's victory in this war is treated as verging on the miraculous, and as resulting from the determination and heroism of the Jewish fighters rather than from disunity and disarray on the Arab side. This heroic version of the War of Independence has proved so enduring and resistant to revision precisely because it corresponds to the collective memory of the generation of 1948. It is also the version of history that Israeli children are taught at school. Consequently, few ideas are as deeply ingrained in the mind of the Israeli public as that summed up by the Hebrew phrase, *me'atim mul rabim*, or 'the few against the many' (Shlaim, 2001: 79).

Ilan Pappé, using English, Arabic and Hebrew sources, has contested the traditional rendition of British policy towards the end of the mandate.¹⁶ He has summed up the New History of Israeli military logistics during the long course of the war of 1948:

The New Historians argue that annihilation was impossible because of Jewish superiority in two crucial areas, diplomacy and military preparedness. The Jewish community had carried the day in diplomatic manoeuvring in the United Nations and by accurately analysing the balance of military power on the ground. An unwritten agreement between the Jewish Agency and the Arab Legion, the strongest Arab force in the area, practically guaranteed that the battle-ready Jewish forces would prevail. The Jewish community in Palestine is depicted as more highly organised than the Palestinians and much more

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion by the New Historians regarding the role of Britain in 1948 war, see: Pappé (1988); Shlaim (1987), (1988). On the conjecture that the British wanted to reduce the Jewish part of Palestine, See Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Post-war Imperialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 372-79.

aware of the need to prepare itself for the end of the Mandate. The Jewish community benefited from a neutral British policy. London was worried only about securing a safe British withdrawal from Palestine once it had decided it could no longer hold the territory. Contrary to both the Palestinian and Zionist historical narratives, the New Historians do not accuse Britain of favouring either side or of collusion with the enemy. They also reject the claim of Jewish extremists that their terrorist campaign forced Britain to withdraw. An economic crisis in Britain and the overall decline of the British Empire forced Britain to be content with holding only those areas of its empire that were of high strategic value in the Cold War era. Palestine was not one of them (Pappe, 1998: 6).

Regarding the manpower and imbalance of forces also, the narrations differ. The official narration starts the history of the 1948 war with the very first fact that there were five regular armies under a unified command of Arab states to fight against the irregular forces of Jews namely *Haganah* and *Yishuv*. In any possible estimation, the Arabs were more in number *vis-à-vis* the Jewish forces in Palestine. The 1948 war did not start and end in one battleground. It was a long war with many small scale and large scale battles. The end result was surprising not only for the Arabs but also for the Jews who did not hope to have defeated Arab armies altogether.

The New History did not support this version. Pappe states:

The result was that the Jewish community was superior both militarily and financially when a civil war broke out between the two communities in November 1947. Jewish superiority also was evident in the number of fighting men. In the local war, which lasted between November 1947 and May 1948, Jewish forces took control of all of the mixed Jewish-Arab towns in Palestine and seized crucial transport routes as well. The end of Palestinian presence in Palestine began not because few Jews fought against many Arabs, as the official Zionist version would have it, nor was it a miracle, as the mainstream Israeli historians tend to describe it. It was simply the outcome of a military advantage (Pappe, 1998: 7).

The key to British policy during this period is defined by Pappe in two words: 'Greater Jordan'. According to Pappe,

[British Foreign Secretary Ernest] Bevin¹⁷ felt that if Palestine had to be partitioned, the Arab area could not be left to stand on its own but should be united with Transjordan. A Greater Transjordan would compensate Britain for the loss of bases in Palestine. Hostility to Hajj Amin al-Husayni and hostility to a Palestinian state, which in British eyes was always equated with a Mufti state, were important and constant features of British policy after the war. By February 1948, Bevin and his Foreign Office advisers were pragmatically reconciled to the inevitable emergence of the Jewish state. What they were not reconciled to, was the emergence of a Palestinian state.¹⁸

Karsh came out with rigorous criticism of Shlaim and Pappé regarding the role of Britain. Karsh emphasised that the Arabs and Britain were partners in adversity, namely the emerging State of Israel. Karsh has pointed out the reasons for Britain and dominant Arab states being close:

Three of the invading Arab states—Transjordan, Egypt and Iraq—were tied to Britain by special treaties of alliance and the British felt obliged to ensure their success: when it appeared that Israel was about to transgress Transjordan territory, the British sent a military force to Aqaba and stated their readiness to fend off such an incursion; the rest of the warring Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia, occupied an important place in British imperial interest. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that throughout the Palestinian crisis, from the surrender of the British Mandate to the United Nations in February 1947 to the end of the 1947 – 49 war, Bevin and his advisers, and by extension the British Cabinet, identified with the Arab cause to the extent of viewing its failures as their own (Karsh, 1997: 176-77).

Mordechai Bar-On¹⁹, who was a participant in the 1948 war and later wrote an account, presented his experiences of the battlefield in the 1948 war. According to him, in the initial phases of the war, the Jewish forces fought for their survival because they were not only outnumbered but also did not have much weaponry to

¹⁷ Ernest Bevin (1881-1951) was British Foreign Secretary in Palestine during the British Mandate. His role during the last year of British Mandate in Palestine became controversial and both the Israeli and the Arabs accused him of aligning with each other's enemy.

¹⁸ The balance of military power and the British policy are discussed in detail in Ilan Pappé (1992: 102-134). Norman G. Finkelstein, one of the prominent scholars and a historian, has dealt with the key issues of the 1948 war. He is very critical of Israeli national history. Though, he is not counted amongst the New Historians due to his polemical writings. He has written critical account of the 1948 war in his book *Image and Reality in the Israeli-Palestine Conflict* (New York 1995), pp. 51-87.

¹⁹ Mordechai Bar-On took part in 1948 war as Company Commander of IDF. Later, he served as the Chief of IDF's History Branch with main assignments to research and record the history of the 1948 war and he also became IDF Chief Education Officer and *Knesset* member in the Eleventh *Knesset* (1984 –1988). See: Bar-On (2008: 29-46).

fight against the Arab armies. Towards the end of the war, Israel achieved distinct superiority in terms of both men and weapons. It happened because of the United Nations Truce, during the short period of 11 June – 6 July 1948, Israel succeeded in getting arms from Czechoslovakia. Despite their initial vulnerability, the Israelis, through efficient organisation and improvisation, managed to fully utilise their resources and end the war victoriously. Bar-On believes that the Israeli victory in the 1948 war was a miracle:

It was an anecdote of a lucky combination of action and miracle: the action was the prayers of one's devout community; the miracle was the timely arrival of the *Palmah*. There is much truth in this anecdote, since divine miracles are always performed through the agency of people. The 'miracle' that helped the 650,000 Jews of Palestine defeat 1.3 million Palestinians and the Arab armies of neighbouring states was effected through the Jewish ability to mobilise a superior force and defy the initial demographic imbalance. It was a miracle, indeed, but someone had to perform it (Bar-On, 2008: 40-41).

Israel's collective memory, which remembers the 1948 war as the victory of the few against the many, is not entirely misplaced. It was, however, not the hand of God that intervened but human energy and resourcefulness. That is what changed the odds. For some reasons, it is doubtful that the detailed research and well documented narrations of the New Historians will manage to change the popular perception. Collective memory, in general, has a high resistance to innovations based on research, especially when that memory feeds on national pride and a sense of moral superiority.

Nevertheless, the New History helps to analyse better the events of the 1948 war. The New History explains why and how the 1948 war resulted in favour of Jews. The defeat of the Arab parties *vis-à-vis* Jewish forces reveals that Arab states were not well co-ordinated and nor they had one command to follow. Even though, the Arab armies were large in numbers comparing to the Jewish forces in the beginning and as war progressed the Jewish forces became better equipped and fought war with far more efficiency and professionalism.

C. Israeli-Jordanian Relations and the Arab War Aims

The third bone of contention between the new and old historians is related to the war-aims of the united Arab armies and alleged coordination between the Jordan and the Jewish Agency.²⁰ The Arab Legion, the most powerful army in the Arab world, was trained, funded and armed by Britain during the Mandate years. The official history had denied any mutual cooperation or understanding between King Abdullah and Jewish leadership in the 1948 war (Meir, 1975: 181).

Pappe published *The Making of the Arab/Israeli Conflict, 1947–51* in 1992 and *The Israel/Palestine Question* in 1999. Throughout these he challenges a number of conventional impressions related to the establishment of the State of Israel. He explores theories ranging from Zionist invisible coordination with King Abdullah of Transjordan to prevent the establishment of an Arab state in Palestine, to Israeli intransigence at the many peace overtures offered by the various Arab states, before, during and after the 1948 war.

The outcome of New History regarding Israel and Transjordan gave rise to a lively controversy in Israel. This concerns the nature of Israeli-Jordanian relations and, more specifically, the contention that there was “collusion” or tacit understanding between King Abdullah and the Jewish Agency during 1947–49. The two meetings between Golda Meir (1898–1978) and King Abdullah I (1882–1951) in November 1947 and May 1948 form the basis of this likelihood for a shared understanding between Transjordan and the Jewish leadership.²¹

²⁰ The Jewish Agency for Israel (established in 1929) also known as the *Sochnut*, served as the pre-state Jewish government before the establishment of Israel and later became the organisation in charge of immigration and absorption of Jews from the Diaspora.

²¹ In 1948, David Ben-Gurion appointed Golda Meir to be a member of the Provisional Government. A few days before the Declaration of Independence, Ben-Gurion sent her disguised as an Arab on a hazardous mission to persuade King Abdullah of Transjordan not to attack Israel. Visit: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/biography/meir.html>, accessed on 17 April 2008. Golda Meir gave details of her two meetings with Abdullah in her autobiography (1975). In the second meeting on 11 May 1948, Meir insisted Abdullah to fulfil his promise (of not fighting against the Jewish forces) made to her in the first meeting of November 1947. But with the Arab League, the King had already decided that his army would attack on the Jewish forces following the British departure (Meir, 1975: 176–179). It is apparent that Abdullah was not willing to fight against the Jewish forces right from 1947.

Avi Shlaim pioneered research in this regard and wrote a book titled *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine*²² in 1988. The central thesis advanced by Shlaim is that in November 1947 an unwritten agreement was reached between King Abdullah and the Jewish Agency to divide Palestine between themselves at the termination of the British mandate and that this agreement laid the foundation for mutual restraint during the 1948 war and for the collaboration between the Jewish state and Jordan since then. A subsidiary thesis is that Britain knew and approved of this secret King Abdullah–Zionist agreement to divide up Palestine between themselves rather than along the lines of the United Nations partition plan.

Shlaim's thesis challenges the conventional view of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a simple bipolar affair in which a monolithic and hostile Arab world is pitted against Israel. It suggests that in 1948 the Arab rulers were deeply divided among themselves on how to deal with the Zionist challenge and that one of these rulers favoured accommodation rather than confrontation. The deal also denied that Israel was under all-out attack by the united Arab armies. According to Shlaim, not surprisingly, the official history of the 1948 war fails to even mention the unwritten agreement with King Abdullah. Even when this agreement was acknowledged, the official line was that Abdullah went back on it at the critical moment and that it consequently had no influence or only a marginal influence, on the conduct of the war.²³ Shlaim emphasises that:

The policy of Greater Transjordan implied discreet support for a bid by Abdullah to enlarge his kingdom by taking over the West Bank. At a secret meeting in London on 7 February 1948, Bevin gave Tawfiq Abul Huda,

²² In this book the word "Collusion" in its title became a matter of controversy. Avi Shlaim replaced the word "Collusion" with a neutral one and changed the title of the book to *The Politics of Partition: King Abdullah, the Zionists and Palestine, 1921-1951* (Oxford University Press, 1990). See the controversial debate on its title and his views in Avi Shlaim (1995) He regretted with the omission of the word "collusion". In his words, "On reflection, I rather regret that I changed the title of my book. The original title was an apt one. Collusion is as good a word as any to describe the traffic between the Hashemite king and the Zionist movement during the period 1921-1951, despite the violent interlude in the hot summer of 1948" (Shlaim, 1995: 296).

²³ See, for example, the author's interview with Yigal Yadin, acting chief of staff in 1948, in Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan*, (1988) p. 236.

Jordan's Prime Minister, the green light to send the Arab Legion into Palestine immediately following the departure of the British forces. But Bevin also warned Jordan not to invade the area allocated by the United Nations to the Jews. An attack on Jewish state territory, he said, would compel Britain to withdraw its subsidy and officers from the Arab Legion. In short, if there is a case to be made against Bevin, it is not that he tried to abort the birth of the Jewish state but that he endorsed the understanding between King Abdullah and the Jewish Agency to partition Palestine between themselves and leave the Palestinians out in the cold (Shlaim, 2001: 92).

The conventional opinion alleges that the partial role of British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin helped the Arab forces to carry attacks on *Yishuv*. Bevin is blamed for deliberately instigating hostilities in Palestine and giving encouragement and arms to the Arabs to crush the infant Jewish state (Meir, 1975: 154).

Karsh challenged the Shlaim's thesis that King Abdullah and the Jewish Agency had an understanding to divide Palestine between the Jews and Transjordan to have Greater Jordan. He criticises Shlaim for not including Zionist sources and totally relying upon the British archives in his study. According to Karsh,

Avi Shlaim's conspiracy theory is false, to which his fellow New Historians subscribe, of an Anglo—Hashemite—Jewish 'collusion' to divide Palestine between Transjordan and the prospective Jewish state in flagrant violation of the UN Partition Resolution. Apart from being a hat adorned with flashy 'revisionist' feathers, this theory fundamentally flawed in several critical respects (Karsh, 1997: 199).

Closely related to Israeli-Jordanian relations is the question of Arab war aims in 1948, another bone of contention between the old and the New Historians. The questions are: why did the Arab states invade Palestine with their regular armies on the day that the British mandate expired and the State of Israel was proclaimed? Secondly, were they really united for the sake of a state for the Palestinians? The conventional answer from Israel is that the motive behind the invasion was to destroy the infant Jewish state and to throw the Jews into the sea (MFA, 2003a). The reality was more complex. Shlaim puts the situation in these words:

It is true that all the Arab states, with the exception of Jordan, rejected the UN partition plan. It is true that seven Arab armies invaded Palestine the morning after the State of Israel was proclaimed. It is true that the invasion was accompanied by blood-curdling rhetoric and threats to throw the Jews into the

sea. But King Abdullah, who was given nominal command over all the Arab forces in Palestine, wrecked this plan by making last minute changes. His objective in sending his army into Palestine was not to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state, but to make himself the master of the Arab part of Palestine which meant preventing the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Since the Palestinians had done next to nothing to create an independent state, the Arab part of Palestine would have probably gone to Abdullah without all the scheming and plotting, but that is another matter. What is clear is that, under the command of Glubb Pasha, the Arab League made every effort to avert a head-on collision and, with the exception of one of two minor incidents, made no attempt to encroach on the territory allocated to the Jewish state by the United Nations cartographers (Shlaim, 1995: 292).

Restating the official line, Shabtai Teveth denies that the Jewish leaders were involved in collusion or had an ally on the Arab side. He admits that 'Israel and Jordan did maintain a dialogue' but goes on to argue: "At most theirs was an understanding of convenience ... There was nothing in such an understanding to suggest collusion designed to deceive a third party, in this case the Palestinian Arabs" (Teveth, 1989: 26-27).

Shlaim did not accept Teveth's argument against his thesis and insisted more that the understanding between the King Abdullah and Israel was certainly not limited to a dialogue. The relations between Jordan and Israel in the 1948 war were reviewed recently by Avraham Sela. Sela's use of archival sources and comprehensive examination of the literature on this subject, especially in Arabic, makes this a valuable contribution to the historiography of the 1948 war. Sela's thesis is that:

The conditions and basic assumptions that had constituted the foundations of the unwritten agreement between Abdullah and the Jewish Agency regarding the partition of Palestine as early as the summer of 1946 were altered so substantially during the unofficial war (December 1947-May 1948) as to render that agreement antiquated and impracticable (Sela, 1992: 630-31).

Sela maintains that in the early part of the war, the two sides, and especially the Israeli side, behaved according to the old French adage '*à la guerre comme à la guerre*' (make do with what you have, do what you have to do). Though they became enemies at the height of the war, they remained in Uri Bar-Joseph's apt phrase, the

best of enemies.²⁴ In conclusion, Sela tells that war is a complex and intricate phenomenon. One reason for this complexity is that war involves both politics and use of force. The old historiography deals mostly with the military side of the war. Sela goes on to state that, “The collusion myth implicitly assumes the possibility for both Zionist and Palestinian acceptance of the partition plan and its peaceful implementation” (Ibid. 680). Shlaim does not agree with this type of conclusion and further argues that:

On the contrary, precisely because the Palestinians rejected partition, I consider collaboration between Abdullah and the Jewish Agency to have been a reasonable and realistic strategy for both sides. In other words, I accept that in the period 1947-49 Israel had no Palestinian option or any other Arab option, save the Jordanian option. King Abdullah was the only Arab head of state who was willing to accept the principle of partition and to co-exist peacefully with a Jewish state after the dust had settled. From March-April 1948 this understanding was subjected to severe strain as the Jews went on the offensive. In the period May-July 1948, the two sides came to blows. From Abdullah's post-war vantage point, this was merely a *fitna*, a family quarrel, and the Jews had started it. And after the initial outburst of violence, both sides began to pull their punches, as one does in a family quarrel (Shlaim, 1995: 291).

One of the critics of the New History, David Tal, tried to explain that the lack of military history of the 1948 war makes it difficult to pinpoint any one actor or collusion of actors for the outcomes of the war. Tal acknowledges the significance of the New History and its historians' findings in deepening the understanding of the 1948 war. But he reveals one missing dimension of the New History:

While the “New Historians” of the 1948 Palestine War have deepened our understanding of those events, they have primarily been interested in its diplomatic history. What is still missing is a thoroughly documented military history of the war, which can help us treat the war as a war, and not as a political or ideological event (Tal, 2005: 183).

Tal pointed out that the findings of New Historians did not have much access of military history or they used less of military sources while writing on the key

²⁴ Uri Bar Joseph is an Israeli academician. He specialises in strategic and intelligence studies. For his detailed study of close ties between Transjordan and the Jewish leadership, see: *The Best of Enemies: Israel and Transjordan in the War of 1948* (London: 1987).

political and diplomatic developments of the 1948 war. Tal did not find much reliance in Shlaim's key thesis that Jordanian army, the Arab Legion, and Jewish forces did not fight against each other and were pretentious during the course of the 1948 war.

Tal claims:

At first sight the Israeli-Jordanian fighting seems to have been superfluous—not because of the collusion theory, according to which Jordan's King Abdullah and the Zionist leaders conspired to divide Palestine among them, at the expense of the Palestinian Arabs, but because the two sides had nothing to fight about. The one point of friction was the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem's Old City, but even that could not be counted as a reason for fighting. All that Abdullah wanted was to occupy the area to the west of his kingdom that had been allocated by the United Nations to be part of the Arab-Palestinian state, an area that the Jews had no intention of acquiring, while the Jews wanted to make the Jewish part of Jerusalem part of their state, even though the United Nations had decided that that area would be internationalised. It seems that the two sides fought so fiercely, with intervals, from May to July 1948 simply because each side had no idea what the other side's intentions were and consequently acted to frustrate what it assumed was the other side's plan (Ibid. 188).

Thus, various dimensions of the new and the old history elucidate the complex war history of the 1948 war. The war involved many actors and there was hardly any uniformity in their actions. It is true in the case of Arab armies. The major Arab armies united to fight a war against Jewish forces but failed to be unified under one command. As a result, did not succeed in their war aims in spite of their large number armies.

King Abdullah of Transjordan had always been something of a recluse in the rest of the Arab world, not least because of his friendship with the leaders of *Yishuv*. Syria and Lebanon felt threatened by his long-standing ambition to make himself master of Greater Jordan. Egypt, the leader of the anti-Hashemite bloc within the Arab League, also felt threatened by Abdullah's plans for territorial aggrandisement in Palestine. Therefore, there were rather mixed motives behind the Arab states which fought the 1948 war. And there was no single Arab plan of action during the 1948 war. It was the inability of the Arabs to co-ordinate their diplomatic and military plans that was in large measure responsible for the disaster that overwhelmed them.

In the light of the New History, the causes of the 1948 war appear multifarious. The Arabs were not united under a single command. The alleged secret pact between the Jewish leadership and Transjordan remains a contested issue. The possibility of Jewish forces seeking secret pact with the mightiest army of the Arab world, namely the Arab Legion, seems to be rationale in *realpolitik* terms. The Jewish leadership was aware of the strength of the Arab Legion (Meir, 1975: 175). The Arab legion was the most powerful army and was well trained by Britain. The rift in Arab war aims is not doubted because if the five Arab armies had fought the war of 1948 with unity the result of the war would have been in their favour.

D. The Elusive Peace

Last but not least of the contentious question in the debate between the old and the New Historians is the question of why peace proved unattainable in the aftermath of the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948. The rise and significance of the New History in Israel shows the vitality of the war of 1948 and its outcomes. With the development of the New History, the process for Israel to adjust its society and polity with the prolonged and pending issues of the 1948 war has been inaugurated. The traditional Israeli history maintains that main obstacle to achieving a peace agreement with the Arabs has been the Arab states' refusal to recognise Israel's existence. Since no peace can be made with a non-existent entity, there has been no peace (Meir, 1975: 252). According to this version, Israel strove indefatigably towards a peaceful settlement of the conflict but all its efforts foundered on the rocks of Arab intransigence. But the New Historians believe that post-war Israel was more intransigent than the Arab states and that it consequently bears a larger share of the responsibility for the political deadlock after the end of 1948 war.²⁵

After the 1948 war, the official history asserts, Israel was committed to settling the conflict on the basis of compromise, but it could not find Palestinian or

²⁵ The critical account of the Israeli peace efforts and the reasons for the political standstill in the post-1948 war are discussed in the following writings of the New Historians. See: Flapan (1987); Morris (1990); Pappé (1992); and Shlaim (1988).

other Arab leaders to negotiate with. As Abba Eban famously put it, “The Arabs never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity” (BBC, 2002).

The controversy surrounding the elusive peace is examined in a book by Itamar Rabinovich, one of Israel's leading experts on modern Arab politics. The title of the book, inspired by a poem by Robert Frost, is *The Road Not Taken: Early Arab-Israeli Negotiations* (1991). This title implies that the failure of these talks was not inevitable, that there was another road leading to peace—the one that was not taken. But the book does not advance any concluding remark nor does it engage directly in the debate between the old and the New Historians. Rabinovich prefers to remain above the battle of the old and the New Historians and was reluctant to assign blame and his book ends without an explicit conclusion. According to him, “The choices of 1948–49 were made by Arabs, Israelis, Americans and others. The credit and responsibility for them belong to all” (Rabinovich, 1991: viii). His implicit conclusion, however, is that because of the instability of the Arab regimes, Ben-Gurion was justified in his refusal to assume any political risks for the sake of peace. Regarding the Arab initiatives for peace, Avi Shlaim details the attempts made by the Arab leaders to have peace with newly born Israeli state through territorial compromises. He presents:

Evidence to back the new interpretation comes mainly from the files of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. These files burst at the seams with evidence of Arab peace feelers and Arab readiness to negotiate with Israel from September 1948 onwards. The two key issues in dispute were refugees and borders. Each of the neighbouring Arab states was prepared to negotiate with Israel directly and prepared to bargain about both refugees and borders. King Abdullah proposed an overall political settlement with Israel in return for certain territorial concessions, particularly a land corridor to link Jordan with the Mediterranean, which would have enabled him to counter Arab criticisms of a separate peace with Israel. Colonel Husni Zaim, who captured power in Syria in March 1949 and was overthrown four months later, offered Israel full peace with an exchange of ambassadors, normal economic relations and the resettlement of 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria in return for an adjustment of the boundary between the two countries through the middle of Lake Tiberius. King Farouk of Egypt demanded the cession of Gaza and a substantial strip of desert bordering on Sinai as his price for a *de facto* recognition of Israel. All three Arab rulers displayed remarkable pragmatism in their approach to negotiations with the Jewish state. They were even anxious to pre-empt one

another because they assumed that whoever settled up with Israel first would also get the best terms. Zaim openly declared his ambition to be the first Arab leader to make peace with Israel (Shlaim, 1995: 297).

In an interview with the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, Avi Shlaim and Mordechai Bar-On (2005) had long conversation about what killed the possibilities of Arab-Israeli peace at the end of 1948 war. Shlaim replies to the question of how far Israel extended a helping hand towards peace in 1948:

Take, for example, Hosni Zaim (the Syrian chief of staff who took over the government in 1949 and was deposed a few months later). He said that his ambition was to be the first Arab leader to make peace with Israel. He proposed an exchange of ambassadors, agreed to absorb a quarter of a million Palestinian refugees in Syria, but demanded that the border pass through the middle of Lake Kinneret. He didn't issue any ultimatum about the rest of the refugees. I was astonished by the Israeli reaction. Ben-Gurion said: first we'll sign a cease-fire agreement with Syria, then we'll see. That destroyed my childhood version. It's not that Ben-Gurion didn't want peace, he wanted peace, but on the basis of the status quo. Israel said at the time that there was nobody to talk to. The truth is that Israel was actually saying that there was nothing to talk about (Ibid.).

Bar-On suggests that the conditions were far complex at the end of the 1948 war for both Israelis who won and for Arabs who lost. He concludes that at the end of the war peace possibility was very bleak. The political rhetoric and decision of the Arab states not to accept the UN Partition Plan made Israel suspicious of going for any peace soon after of the 1948 war. Israel achieved its much – awaited statehood by the end of the war of 1948 and it preferred to hold on the status quo. Bar-On states:

It's true that Israel rejected all the Arab proposals and it's true that up until May 1967, the Arabs had no real plan to attack Israel. But the Arab proposals were unacceptable, and the war was unavoidable, because the Arabs could not forget what the Israelis had done to them in 1948. Israel did not want to get peace under the minimal conditions that the Arabs were willing to discuss: the UN Partition Plan borders and the return of the refugees. Had we agreed to that, there would be no State of Israel today (Ibid.).

Even Benny Morris, in his otherwise one-sided attack on Itamar Rabinovich, displayed some admirable humility and ability to understand the arguments of those who criticise the New Historians (Morris, 1994: 80). Admitting that the issues were far from simple, Morris allowed that it was legitimate to ask:

Was Ben-Gurion 'right' in his rejectionism, in his refusal to meet Arab leaders or to consider substantial concessions in exchange for peace? ... Is peace worth more than bits of land, especially for a country as small as Israel and given its peculiar geopolitical situation as a Jewish (and European or quasi-European) state surrounded by a hostile, Islamic world? Clearly, from the long, historical perspective, the answer is not simple — certainly not as simple as some left-wingers (or revisionist historians) would make out. Take the massive waves of Jewish immigration to Israel that followed the state's establishment.... Take the grave water shortages that afflict the region, and that threaten worse in years to come. Was not every sliver of land, every pool of water, existentially necessary? Perhaps Ben-Gurion was short-sighted when it came to Arab sensibilities and intentions, but visionary when it came to the *Yishuv's* development and needs. Nor is there any certainty that if Israel had agreed to territorial concessions in 1949-52, real and lasting peace would have been the outcome. Second thoughts, a palace coup, or an assassin's bullet—such as cut down Abdullah in 1951 – could have intervened, or successors could well have torn up whatever agreement was concluded (Morris, 1994: 85).²⁶

Avi Shlaim's *The Iron Wall* throws light on Israel's fifty years of history. The title of the book is inspired by the idea of Ze'ev Jabotinsky and his essay of 'Iron Wall'.²⁷ According to him, Jabotinsky's achievement was to foresee that Arab acceptance of Jewish settlement in Palestine would come only after the Arabs were finally persuaded that they could never throw the Jews into the sea. Only then would they learn to speak about compromise; and the compromise, according to Jabotinsky's view, would take the form of a generous autonomy within the framework of the Jewish state. In his epilogue, Shlaim observes, "In a way, this is what has happened. The history of the state of Israel is a vindication of Jabotinsky's strategy of the iron wall. The Arabs—first the Egyptians, then the Palestinians, then the Jordanians—have recognised Israel's invincibility and were compelled to negotiate with Israel from a position of palpable weakness" (Shlaim, 2000: 597).

The veteran historian Benny Morris gave an interview to Ari Shavit of the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* in 2004 that shocked fellow New Historians as well as the old ones. He sustained the Shlaim thesis of an iron wall and its strategic values for Israel

²⁶ Morris went on to argue that, "Nonetheless, the Israeli leadership of 1949-52 was niggardly in its concessions and stuck to every square foot of land as if the land, and not peace, was the ultimate goal".

²⁷ "The Iron Wall" (We and the Arabs) is an essay written by Ze'ev Jabotinsky in 1923. It was originally published in Russian, the language in which Jabotinsky wrote for the Russian press.

since its inception. He shared Jabotinsky's view and stated, "What Jabotinsky proposed is what Ben-Gurion adopted. In the 1950s, there was a dispute between Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett. Ben-Gurion argued that the Arabs understand only force and that ultimate force is the one thing that will persuade them to accept our presence here" (Shavit, 2004).

Ben-Gurion was ready to conclude peace on the basis of the status quo; he was unwilling to proceed to a peace which involved more than minuscule Israeli concessions on refugees or on borders. Ben-Gurion considered that the armistice agreements with the neighbouring Arab states met Israel's essential needs for recognition, security and stability. He knew that for formal peace agreements Israel would have to pay by yielding substantial tracts of territory and by permitting the return of a substantial number of Palestinian refugees and he did not consider this a price worth paying.²⁸ Whether Ben-Gurion made the right choice is a matter of opinion but he had choices.

The New History presented the causes and consequences of the 1948 war quite differently than the earlier studies of the 1948. On the issue of Palestinian refugees, the New Historians have done much to contest standard Israeli claim that the Palestinians left on their own volition hoping a gallant return once the Arab army had defeated Jewish forces. The question of military balance – whether the Jewish forces were stronger and in greater number or the Arab army – has received critical attention. Scholars like Avi Shlaim and Ilan Pappé have posited that the Arab army was divided and its mightiest force—the Arab Legion—had little or no incentive to fight the Jewish forces given their monarch's close ties with the Jewish leadership. Related closely with the issue of military equation is the Israeli claim that the British role in the war favoured the Arabs. Here, the New Historians have argued that since the Arabs served no purpose of the British, the latter had no interest in ensuring their win.

²⁸ David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) A Brief Biography & Quotes Based on: Declassified Israeli Documents & Personal Diaries. Visit for details: <http://www.palestineremembered.com/Acre/Famous-Zionist-Quotes/Story638.html>. Visit the official website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs that provides biography of Ben-Gurion: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Facts+About+Israel/State/David+Ben-Gurion.htm>, both accessed on 10 June 2008. Also see: Teveth (1989). Shabtai Teveth was the famous biographer of Ben-Gurion.

Right from the Balfour Declaration²⁹, Britain was in favour of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and in 1948 it did not obstruct the establishment of the Jewish state. Finally, why has peace been elusive? Traditional history suggests Arab intransigence and their denial of Israeli existence. New Historians, on the contrary, pose that the winning side – Israel – was much better positioned to explore the possibilities of peace and strike a peace accord if it wanted to. But it chose not to, since status-quo in the aftermath of the war of 1948 suited it the most.

How important is this new outlook in shaping Israel's future conduct and nature? It is a difficult issue which brings the debate to a more general question: how much does the academia in general affect society as a whole? The impacts of the New History will be dealt in the next chapter. Not only the New History influenced Israeli society and politics, but also it came under the influences of the society and polity.

²⁹ The Balfour Declaration was issued by the British government on 2 November 1917. It provided a formal basis for Zionist claims to Palestine and promised them a Jewish state in Palestine.

Chapter Four

The Impacts of the New History

History makes one aware that there is no finality in human affairs;
There is not a static perfection and an unimprovable wisdom to be achieved.

Bertrand Russell¹

The clash of the historians in Israel has improved the knowledge about the 1948 war. As the debate continues, it is clear that the New Historians have for ever altered the discourse and common understanding of the events of 1948. One of the foremost contributions of the New History and the New Historians is in deepening the understanding of the prolonged and unresolved conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The solution of the 1948 war is still awaited. A prerequisite for mutual understanding is the readiness to see the viewpoint of the adversary. The New History could prepare the ground for a common narrative of the 1948 war between the Palestinians and Israelis. One of the reasons for the failure of both two parties to resolve their problem is the lack of agreement regarding the causes and consequences of the 1948 war. The Palestinians and the Israelis have discarded other's national account of history by the single yardstick that it is enemy's story and hence not true. The official Israeli narration of the 1948 war was not found accommodative and was labelled as prejudiced and partisan by the Palestinians and larger Arab world (Masalha, 1991). On the other hand, Israel could not accept the Arab portrayal of the 1948 war and its causes and consequences. Israel denied the Arab historical narration in which it was depicted as an aggressor and colonial counterpart. As a result, the common understanding of the events of the 1948 war could not develop between them. According to Ilan Pappé, the first requirement for reaching mutual understanding is a common effort to remove contradictory readings of the events that

¹ Quoted in Peter Watson *A Terrible Beauty: The People and Ideas that Shaped the Modern Mind—A History* (London: 2000), p. I.

brought Israel into existence in 1948 and which have been at the origin of the intensification of the conflict ever since (Pappe, 1995).²

Various sources of the traditional historiography of Israel have been mentioned earlier. In brief, the traditional history is carried through diaries, memoirs and writings of those who participated in the 1948 war. The New Historians questioned the objectivity of such writings and stated that the personal accounts of the individuals and participants could not be a non-partisan source of history-writing. The scholars of the New History are committed to more serious scrutiny of history-writing and emphasise on documentary evidences and archival sources. What is the relationship between historical facts and history-writing? The philosopher and famous historian of the 20th century, E. H. Carr's view of history-writing is applicable in this regard. According to him, "The facts of history never come to us 'pure', since they do not and can not exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. It follows that when we take up a work of history, our first concern should not be with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it" (Carr, 1961: 24).

Thus, the national historiography of Israel is scrutinised on the principles of history-writing by the scholars of the New History. It is said that a historian writes history of the past in the light of the present problems that society faces. Historian is affected with the present of his society while writing the history of the past. Carr has explained the intrigue relationship between the past and the present, "The historian is an individual human being. Like other individuals, he is also a social phenomenon, both the product and the conscious or unconscious spokesman of the society to which he belongs; it is this capacity that he approaches the facts of the historical past" (Carr, 1961: 42).

This chapter focuses on the impacts of the New History. The inquiry is to locate the changes that occurred in the Israeli society and polity due to the New

² This is equally valid for the Arab narrative which is yet to evolve a more introspective view of the events of the 1948 war.

History. Not only did the New History impact the society and polity of Israel, but it also came under the influences of societal and political developments in Israel.

Inclusion of the Palestinian narrative

The most profound impact of the New History was the inclusion of the Palestinian narrative of the war in the Israeli educational curriculum. This was quiet revolutionary as it indicated that the approach of the New Historians was not confined to narrow academic elite but became a visible representation of historical events in history education.

Commemorative activity, such as anniversary celebrations is a social setting that embodies the historical memory of a nation. In 1998 Israel celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. As part of the extensive celebrations, the Israeli National Broadcasting Authority (a national public authority under the Ministry of Communication) produced and broadcasted a twenty-two-part documentary series *Tkuma*³ (Resurrection), on the history of Israel. Episodes of this documentary depicted the landmarks of the first fifty years of the State of Israel. The depiction of the 1948 war incorporated the displacements and plight of the Palestinians. *Tkuma* which challenged the all-glorious Zionist narrative by including the long-silenced critical voices of Israeli Arabs, Jewish immigrants from Arab and North African countries, and dispossessed Palestinians, provoked widespread outrage within Israel. Ariel Sharon, then Minister of National Infrastructure in Benjamin Netanyahu's government (1996–1999), went so far as to call for the banning of the series, charging that it "distorts the history of rebirth and undermines any moral basis for the establishment of the State of Israel and its continued existence."⁴For Tom Segev—one of Israel's New Historians who have done pioneering research on Israel's early years – *Tkuma* was controversial because, "history in Israel is a sensitive subject in ways that politics is not. Zionism is a particular interpretation of Jewish history. So, in addressing this

³ "Tkuma: Israeli History In 6 Hours: Controversial documentary 'Tkuma' to air", *The Jewish Week*, November 1998. See: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb5092/is_199811/ai_n18522317, accessed on 2 May 2008.

⁴ On the wider significance of *Tkuma* see Silberstein (1999) and Pappé (1998c)

history, *Tkuma* is addressing the most basic ideological and existential discourses of Israeli society" (as quoted in Usher, 1998).

The history education is a tool in the process of nation-building that plays the role of strengthening citizens' allegiance to the state. History textbooks reflect the spirit of a period and changes in it. Moreover, both these settings not only indicate change in representation of the past, but are also mechanisms of change due to their socialising role in constituting the nation's image and tradition.

The very first change in traditional account of history of the 1948 war occurred in the school textbooks in 1999.⁵ The revised textbooks published in that year stated that it was the Israelis who had the military edge in 1948. They mention that many Palestinians left their land not—as has traditionally been taught—because they expected the Arab states to sweep back victoriously, but because they were afraid, and in some cases expelled by Israeli soldiers. The books freely use the word "Palestinian" to refer to a people and a nationalist movement, unheard of in previous textbooks. They used the Arabic expression for the 1948 war—the *Nakba*, or catastrophe—and suggested the pupils to put themselves in the shoes of the Arabs and consider how they would have felt about Zionism.⁶

The powerful link between history and memory is especially salient in the educational system, which is responsible for implanting knowledge and values in the younger generation. The process of nation building has significant relationship with the collective memory and it is the vehicle through which the national history is strengthened. The sources used in the TV documentary and the thrust of the Palestinian narrative in the new textbooks indicate the influence of the New Historians upon the Israeli education system.

The debate between new and old historians brings out the criticality of the national narratives. The traditional historians as well as the critics of the New History

⁵ For the detailed information and discussion on the changes in curriculum and the textbooks see Al-Haj (2005); Bronner (1999); Feige (2001); Hirsch (2007); Podeh (2000); and Kimmerling (1995).

⁶ For a revision of schoolbooks, see Caplan (2001) Due to the lack of Hebrew language, the primary sources of the original textbooks are not cited. Since, major school books are in Hebrew language.

find the political message of the New Historians to be unacceptable. There is sharp criticism of the New Historians' ideological stands.⁷ Nevertheless, the New History is undeniable for its archival back-up and methods of history-writing. This is true for the critics of the New Historians such as Efraim Karsh who equally rely on archival material to contest the New History. The best one can do is to accumulate narratives, not with a view to displacing older with newer ones, but to develop a larger or, pointedly in this context, more useful, picture of the 1948 war.

Changes Regarding the Palestinian Refugees

As discussed earlier, the official Israeli stand regarding Palestinian refugees is shaped by the traditional account of history of the 1948 war. To briefly recount, its stand has been that the Palestinian Arabs willingly left their homes during the course of the war. Moreover, the Arab leaders gave a call to the Arab inhabitants of the Mandate Palestine to vacate the land so that Arab armies could attack on the Jews freehandedly. The Jewish forces did not use forceful tactics to chase them out of Palestine. The Arabs did not accept the United Nations partition plan and they were the first to launch war against the *Yishuv*. So the Jewish forces fought to defend Jewish population and to secure the allocated land to the Jews and established a Jewish national state. No one, let alone the New Historians could refute the Arab rejection of the United Nations' partition plan. The Arab parties united and declared a war on Jewish population is also not contested by the New Historians. The disagreement took place regarding the causes of the Palestinian displacement. The New Historians did not agree that Israel did no harm to the Palestinians and Jews were not responsible for their flight.

Depicting the traditional portrayal, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir stated the reasons behind the plight of the Palestinian refugees and who should be held responsible for Palestinians being refugees so long. Speaking at the Madrid Conference he declared:

⁷ The controversy surrounding the Teddy Katz affair could be cited as an example.

Arab hostility to Israel has also brought tragic human suffering to the Arab people. Tens of thousands have been killed and wounded. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs who lived in Mandatory Palestine were encouraged by their own leaders to flee from their homes. Several hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs live in slums known as refugee camps in Gaza, Judea, and Samaria. Attempts by Israel to rehabilitate and house them have been defeated by Arab objections. Nor has their fate been any better in Arab states. Unlike the Jewish refugees who came to Israel from Arab countries, most Arab refugees were neither welcomed nor integrated by their hosts. Only the Kingdom of Jordan awarded them citizenship. Their plight has been used as a political weapon against Israel (Shamir, 1991).

The Israeli position on the refugee issue has not radically changed. But there are some visible modifications in its position. At least in semi-official levels, there are nuanced changes and accommodation of some of the arguments of the New Historians. Yossi Katz⁸ (Member of the *Knesset* during 1992 to 2003) acknowledged the findings of the New History findings regarding the origin of the refugee problem. He stated:

During the war some left because of the Arab leadership, some fled and some were even expelled. I think that Israel can't accept any moral responsibility, but we do need to acknowledge that the establishment of the State of Israel caused suffering, and therefore we are part of it, like the Arabs. . . I don't think we can get to an agreement about the causes, but I think it is enough that we will acknowledge the misery and wrongdoing. . . We can't agree on more than that. We do need to be a part of the efforts to rehabilitate the refugees. . . The Palestinians must understand that we [the Jews] have nowhere else. It may well be that we did injustice, but we have no other place. I am a Zionist (Lynfield and Harris, 1999).

Katz accepted the influence of the New History, its research on 1948 war and its outcomes. It did not change his views, but it supported and strengthened what he already knew and thought. According to Katz, "The significance of the New Historians is not so much the new information they presented, but primarily the public debate they provoked. We all know exactly what we learned throughout the years in our history books, and from this point of view the Israeli historians contributed. They provoked a public debate. I do not agree with all they say. I don't think it is all true or

⁸ Profile of the Members of the *Knesset*, Access From: <http://www.knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mkeng.asp?mkindividualid=68>, accessed on 2 May 2008.

accurate, but they broke a taboo and created an argument and this is good in itself' (Hirsch, 2007: 249).

In the peace negotiations Israel has been seeking mutual understanding on the 1948 war related issues and outcomes. The matter of the refugees stands at the forefront of all the talks. In Stockholm, May 2000, both sides—Shlomo Ben-Ami and Gilad Sher representing Israel and Ahmed Qurei (Abu-Ala) and Hasan Asfor representing the Palestinian Authority⁹—discussed the refugee problem at length and reportedly agreed on the need to set up an apparatus that would settle the claims made by refugees. More significant is that the negotiators paid particular attention and stated the importance of resolving the gap in the historical portrayal of the origins of the refugee problem. It was reported that the negotiators drafted a mutual and somewhat vague-enough statement that corresponds with both the Israeli and the Palestinian national historical narratives (Hirsch, 2007).

During the Camp David talks in July 2000 the Israelis and Palestinians engaged in both formal and hypothetical bargaining¹⁰. The parties negotiated over concrete numbers of refugees who would be allowed to return to Israel. Also, the acceptance of Israeli historical responsibility and offer of an official apology were evidently also negotiated, though the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak (2000) rejected both of them. Avi Shlaim recollects one of the incidents where the chief Israeli negotiator accepted the influence of the New History. According to him,

Former Israeli foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, who took his Oxford doctorate as a student of St Antony's, represented Israel in the Camp David and Taba negotiations. He believes the 'new history' made a real contribution to the political process. 'The negotiations', he says, 'were a struggle of narratives, and the New Historians definitely helped in consolidating the Palestinians' conviction as to the validity of their own narrative. However

⁹ The Palestinian National Authority (PNA or PA; Arabic: *Sulta Al-Wataniyya Al-Filastiniyya*) was formed in 1994, pursuant to the Oslo Accords between the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the government of Israel. The Palestinian National Authority is the administrative organisation established to govern parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

¹⁰ For the detailed information on the Camp David Talks, See "The Middle East Peace Summit at Camp David-July 2000", 11 July 2000 <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/The+Middle+East+Peace+Summit+at+Camp+David+July+2000>, accessed on 10 June 2008.

critical they might have been of the New History of the Arab-Israeli conflict as “unpatriotic” or “unbalanced”, the Israeli peacemakers came to the negotiating table with perspectives that were shaped by recent research (Shlaim, 2007b).

Gilad Sher, the Bureau Chief and Policy Coordinator for Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Barak, and a senior negotiator with the Palestinians during 1999–2001, mentions that before and during the negotiations he read the works of Benny Morris. He felt that the Israeli society, with its many cleavages, was not strong enough to deal with the potential backlash that would arise from assigning Israel the responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem. He, however, noted:

On the Palestinian side it has great importance (the formal acknowledgement of Israel). The establishment of Israel for them is expulsion, flight and eviction. . . For us it is a heroic ethos and for them an ethos of humiliation and shame, from both individual and national point of view. Therefore, it is very significant for them to get the acknowledgment that the other side says: ‘I did it.’ Therefore the solution is in the vagueness—to acknowledge tragedy and suffering but not responsibility. During the negotiations it appeared that all the participants thought of it as a sufficient solution.¹¹

Another round of talks was held in Taba, Egypt in January 2001. As the content of the talks became public in the months that followed, it was clear that the both parties moved closer than ever before on several issues, including the question of refugees.

Another interesting insight comes from Daniel Levy, a member of the Israeli Delegation to Taba and an advisor to Yossi Beilin who headed the team negotiating the refugee issue. He admitted the significance that the Israeli team attached to the debate over the events of 1948 and the origins of the refugee problem. According to Levy, resolving this debate has relatively minor implications for the practical solutions; however, it was important for paving the way for an agreement with the Palestinians and later for the public legitimisation of the agreement, once it was reached:

¹¹ Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch, “From Taboo to the Negotiable: The Israeli New Historians and the Changing Representation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem” *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (2) June 2007 p. 249.

A different approach of the Israelis to their history is important for the Palestinians as a way to promote acceptance for the practical solution. Mainly since the solution is not likely to include an actual return into Israel. It is also a relatively important element *vis-à-vis* the Israeli public. . . . If we ask the Israeli taxpayer to pay for X years X amount of money [to cover Israeli compensations to the refugees], the public must be convinced that paying those compensations is justified. With the old narrative—that the Arabs fled out of their free will—it will be hard to convince the Israelis that the Palestinians deserve anything (Hirsch, 2007: 249).

Levy further described how the Israeli team came to realise that incorporating changes in the Israeli historical narrative was important for the negotiations:

Our feeling that the narrative could be an important factor came from years of back channel talks we did with the Palestinians and from our impressions from material that we read. The feeling was that in practice there was a Palestinian willingness to relinquish demands for actual return and what is needed are creative formulas (Ibid. 255).

According to Levy, the historical work of the New Historians was part of the material they read in preparation for the negotiation. He also mentioned that in Taba, both Yossi Beilin and Nabil Shaat (the head of the Palestinian team) cited the work of the New Historians in their opening remarks: “Beilin spoke of the classic Israeli narrative and presented the question marks that were raised in light of the studies of the New Historians. He accepted parts of what was written in these studies” (Hirsch 2007: 250). Another participant in the talks, Gidi Grinstein, the Secretary of the Israeli delegation to the permanent status negotiation, evaluated the input of the New Historians:

It did not change grounds but for some, including me, it gave the documentary evidence for views that we had for long. Anyone who thinks seriously about 1948 does not think that 700,000 people just left everything voluntarily; it just doesn't make any sense. The New Historians gave the historical validation and the recorded evidence that support this thinking (Hirsch, 2007: 251).

The course and content of the permanent status talks provide clear evidence of sophisticated Israeli stand. Its approach to the negotiation over the refugee problem included Israeli recognition of the Palestinian tragedy. Moreover, it is clear that Israeli negotiators realised that the conflicting historical narratives over the origins of the refugee problem promote a zero sum perception. There was not sufficient evidence that linked this view to the New Historians or to the debate they provoked. It is more plausible that Israeli negotiators came to appreciate the emotional and psychological significance of the changes in the narrative from their interactions with the Palestinian negotiators.

It was clear that the Israeli negotiators recognised the publicity that the New Historians received within Israel, and some noted the significance of the changes in the Israeli history textbooks and other public settings. The changes in the representation of the refugee problem are significant since they indicated to the negotiators that at least parts of the Israeli public know and might even accept that Israel had a direct, if not active, role in the creation of the refugee problem. As a result, the negotiators were less constrained by the old Israeli historical account of the 1948 War. This allowed them to incorporate the new narrative, including the role of Israel in the displacement of the Palestinians, into the negotiations over a compromised solution.

The findings of the New History have pushed the contested issues involved in the Israel-Palestinian conflict towards a mutual understanding which might lead to a peaceful solution of the protracted conflict. Shlaim elaborated the undefined purpose of the New History. According to him, “Our common purpose was to understand, not to impute shame or allocate blame” (Shlaim, 2007b: iii). Most New Historians did not start writing history for any political or ideological propaganda.¹⁴

¹⁴ There are however, some exceptions. In later years, Ilan Pappé used the arguments and findings of the New Historians for political activism. His role in the Teddy Katz affair and his campaign for an academic boycott of Israel could be cited as examples. Same ideological underpinnings hold true for Simha Flapan who began the new debate over 1948.

The post-Zionism and the New History

The New Historians have often been identified with the post-Zionist school and are frequently called post-Zionists. The New Historians do not agree with the ideological terms like post-Zionism or anti-Zionism. The critical sociologists who adopted and shared the conclusions of the New Historians were too supposed to be the members of the post-Zionist school. Post-Zionism is understood differently by people depending upon their position and perspective. Moreover, there is no one form of post-Zionism¹⁵ or post-Zionist discourse, but several. One of the prominent sociologists Laurence J. Silberstein explained about the post-Zionism,

Post-Zionism is a term applied to a current set of critical positions that problematise Zionist discourse and the historical narratives and social and cultural representations that it produced. Like the term Zionism, post-Zionism encompasses a variety of positions. The growing use of the term post-Zionism is indicative of an increasing sense among many Israelis that the maps of meaning provided by Zionism are simply no longer adequate (Silberstein, 1999: 2).

There is no agreement as to how the post-Zionist movement should be defined, or even of who belongs to it. But the most common idea is that Israel should leave behind the concept of a "state of the Jewish people" and instead strive to be a state of all its citizens and adopt pluralistic democratic values. The emphasis of the post-Zionism has been on unconditional peace with the Palestinians and the larger Arab world. The peace is unavoidable as per the post-Zionist beliefs. Post-Zionists raise different questions which are related to Zionism and to the State of Israel. The post-Zionist school consists of the critical sociologists who are contemporary of the New Historians. The difference between these two schools of thoughts is disciplinary. The New Historians have written purely in terms of history-writing based on the primary sources. On the other hand, the critical sociologists have analysed the rise and growth of the Zionism as a political and social ideology. To a certain extent, the post-Zionists belong to the realm of sociology. One of critical sociology's principal targets is Israel's own collective memory, which, like any historical consciousness, is shaped

¹⁵ For the detailed debate on post-Zionism these readings are suggested: Aronson (2003); Epstein (2004); Kimmerling (1992); Laskier (2000); Lissak (1996) and Ram (1995).

by symbols, milestones, and narratives. Laurence Silberstein, in his 1999 study, *The Post-Zionism Debates*, which is generally sympathetic to the critical school, explains the true impact of sociology's challenge to the Zionist narrative:

For Israelis, as for all national groups, the narratives of their nation's past provide a framework through which to interpret the events of the present. In calling into question prevailing Israeli historical narratives, the New Historians, together with a group known as critical sociologists, render problematic the very foundations on which Israeli group identity has been based (Silberstein, 1999: 2).

The majority of critical sociologists, like the New Historians who have pursued similar goals in history departments across Israel, regard the disproving of the Zionist narrative as a means of effecting far-reaching political and social change.¹⁶ Only if Israel is freed from the ideological grip of nationalist prejudice, they claim, can it become a progressive and enlightened country, a state of all its citizens. Uri Ram presents the debate as follows:

A struggle is being waged in Israel for our collective memory.... This is a battle among three main historical approaches: The national approach to history, with its inherent and insoluble contradiction between democracy and Jewishness; the nationalist approach to history, which resolves the contradiction by forgoing democracy; and the approach to history based on citizenship, which resolves the contradiction by relinquishing the ethnic past. This is a conflict between a past that seeks to bury the future, and a future that looks to shake off the past. This is the choice: A troubled past, or a reasonable future (Ram, 1996: 20).

In brief, the post-Zionism poses stark questions to Zionism and the Jewish state. For example, is it really possible for Israel to be both Jewish and democratic? Should Israel become a state of all its citizens? Secondly, is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict entirely black and white? Did Israel always maximise its efforts to obtain peace? Should all the blame on the continuation of the conflict be heaped only upon the Arab side?

¹⁶ For a summary of the parallel development in Zionist historiography, see Heydemann (1991) and Polisar (2000).

Israel is in the midst of a cultural clash not only of the old and the New Historians but also of the critical sociologists¹⁷ who have painstakingly influenced the larger perception of the Zionism. There are confronting ideologies that want to have greater role in defining the basic tenets of the nation building in which one side would like to see their country continue to exist as a Jewish state and the other believes that Zionism, the founding idea of the state, has reached its end.¹⁸ For the latter group, the time has come for Israel to enter its post-Zionist stage; for this reason, it describes itself as "post-Zionist." They believe that the Zionist enterprise has lacked moral validity since its conception and, therefore, must be re-evaluated.¹⁹ There are some politicians and thinkers who have gradually become very critical of the State of Israel for its oppression of the Palestinians under occupied territories. Avraham Burg²⁰ is one of the prominent critics of Zionism and he calls himself as a post-Zionist. According to him,

Israel, having ceased to care about the children of the Palestinians, should not be surprised when they come washed in hatred and blow themselves up in the centres of Israeli escapism. They consign themselves to Allah in our places of recreation, because their own lives are torture. They spill their own blood in our restaurants in order to ruin our appetites, because they have children and parents at home who are hungry and humiliated. We could kill a thousand ringleaders a day and nothing will be solved, because the leaders come up from below - from the wells of hatred and anger, from the "infrastructures" of injustice and moral corruption (Burg, 2003a).

¹⁷ One of the leading sociologists in Israel is Professor Uri Ram. To have glance at his sociological writings, see, "The Colonisation Perspective in Israeli Sociology," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Sept. 1993, pp. 327-350.

¹⁸ The debate between sustaining a Jewish state or a liberal democratic state with minimal religious affiliations has been influential. See some of the critical writings as Yonah (1999) and Smooha (1998).

¹⁹ It is important to point out here that the post-Zionists do not question the existence or the legitimacy of the State of Israel; yet they point out that the Zionist enterprise had flaws and that Israel need to abandon the Zionist agenda; see Selberstein (2002) and Pappé (1997).

²⁰ Avraham Burg was speaker of Israel's *Knesset* in 1999-2003 and is a former chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel. See his articles online "The End of Zionism" *The Guardian*, September 15, 2003 Visit: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/sep/15/comment> (Accessed 2 on May 2008) A. Burg, "A Failed Israeli Society is Collapsing", *International Herald Tribune*, September 6, 2003. Ari Shavit, *Ha'aretz* Correspondent wrote an article on the book release of Burg on July 6, 2007 titled as "Burg: Defining Israel as a Jewish state is the key to its end" Visit: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/868215.html> (Accessed 2 on May 2008).

Burg advocates that Israel must accept the United Nations partition plan in spirit and vacate those territories which were allocated to be a state for the Palestinians. According to his suggestion, "Here is what the prime minister should say to the people: the time for illusions is over. The time for decisions has arrived. We love the entire land of our forefathers and in some other time we would have wanted to live here alone. But that will not happen. The Arabs, too, have dreams and needs" (Ibid.)

Meyrav Wurmser, an expert of Israeli affairs and former director of the right-leaning Middle East Media and Research Institute (MEMRI), wrote about the rise and influence of the post-Zionism. According to him,

Post-Zionists consist primarily of left-wing Israeli intellectuals. This way of thinking was first introduced into Israeli life through the works of Israeli academics, particularly historians and sociologists. 'New Historians' and 'new sociologists', as these individuals described themselves, challenged mainstream Zionist historiography as ideologically biased in employing research to prove the moral validity of the Zionist claims (Wurmser, 1999).

There are apparent impacts of the New History upon the rise and growth of the post-Zionism. One of the leading New Historians, Ilan Pappé declares himself as a post-Zionist. According to him, "Zionism is bound to change with the unfolding of the peace process and will tend to develop into two contradictory trends: 'neo-Zionism' and 'post-Zionism'. The former will be based on the premise that Israel's future depends on its understanding that peace is impossible, and that, consequently, to ensure its survival, Israel must retain absolute military superiority over all Arab armies taken together." The term 'post-Zionism' is used by Pappé to describe the school of thought in Israel which proceeds from the assumption that peace is unavoidable (Pappé, 1995). Benny Morris, on the other hand, forcefully resists attaching any notion of "post-" to his name or work. He insists that he is a Zionist, and that his work has "no political purpose whatsoever."²¹ Morris makes it explicit

²¹ In a 2004 interview with Ari Shavit, Morris not only proclaimed again that he is a Zionist but also went further arguing that "there are circumstances in history that justify ethnic cleansing," and that in 1948 "that is what the Zionists faced." See Shavit, Ari, "Survival of the fittest", *Ha'aretz* weekly edition, January 9, 2004. Visit: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=380986&contrassID=2> (accessed 2 on May 2008).

that he does not have any affiliation with the left or the right wing politics. As a historian he is primarily engaged with history-writing.

Regardless of the way the New Historians viewed themselves or their work, proponents and opponents of the New Historians made the association between the New Historians and post-Zionism. For both, the New Historians' detailed and careful documentation gives professional substance, which supports the post-Zionist arguments. Post-Zionism presents a radical agenda, which is far from the Israeli consensus and as such, attracted a lot of criticism and therefore, great attention. Since the New Historians were viewed in the public and the media as part of post-Zionism, their works were debated mostly in this context. This explains some of the forceful reactions and the wide coverage and attention the New Historians' writings received in Israeli academia, media, and politics. These reactions to the work of the New Historians did not focus merely on historical data and research, but on the political struggle over Israeli national identity and collective memory.

The New History was influenced with the political and social developments in Israel. Some of the significant impacts upon the New History are as follows.

Impacts upon the New History

The rise and evolution of the New History left many changes—overt and covert—on the society and politics of the Israeli state. Simultaneously, the New History also came under the impacts of the society and polity. History writing and historians are the products of the present day society and can not be alien to what happens in their contemporary society. Carr cautioned the student of history while reading history. According to him, “Before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment. The historian, being an individual, is also a product of history and of society; and it is in this twofold light that the student of history must learn to regard him” (Carr, 1961: 54).

The first *Intifada* (1987-1993) and the *al-Aqsa Intifada* (2000-) had a direct impact upon the New Historians, particularly on Benny Morris who has been the pioneer. The First *Intifada* was a mass Palestinian uprising against the Israeli

occupation and Morris was sympathetic towards what the Palestinian agitated. It was their right to resist the Israeli occupation and he viewed the Palestinian demonstrations, mostly non-violent and peaceful, as legitimate protest against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which Israel had captured in the 1967 war. In 1988, protesting against the nature of Israeli occupation Morris refused to serve in the Israeli army and instead spent three weeks in jail (Morris, 2007a).

Nevertheless, the second *Intifada* had a reverse affect upon Morris. The large scale violence and suicide bombing killed many civilians in Israel. "My feeling during the first *Intifada* was that they wanted us off their backs," he says of the Palestinians. "My sense of the second *Intifada* was that they both wanted us off their backs and they wanted to destroy us. Something had changed within the Palestinians."²² For Morris, the nature of the second *Intifada* became disappointing development because of the failure of the Oslo peace process signed by the Palestinians and Israel in 1993. Morris concluded that the Palestinians marred the peace possibility and resorted to violence and according to him,

Since 2000, after rejecting fair Israeli-American peace proposals, the Arabs of the occupied territories have waged a terrorist war against Israel. On one level, no doubt, they simply seek the removal of Israeli rule. But on another — to judge from the utterances of the fundamentalist Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and various secular Fatah spokesmen — they ultimately seek Israel's destruction (Morris, 2007).²³

His opinions have stunned his New-Historian colleagues, who, until he began speaking up during the *al-Aqsa Intifada*, had assumed his political views conformed to their own. Avi Shlaim says it was "A psychological process—the suicide

²² Benny Morris's present stand on the Israel-Palestine conflict and its possible solution is much contested. The other scholars of the New History have countered Morris on his present stand where he thinks that Israel did in 1948 war what it had to do. He implies that the expulsion of the Palestinians was the only choice Israel had in 1948 war. See the detailed view of him in Morris (2004b). Scott Wilson, "Israel Revisited: Benny Morris, Veteran 'New Historian' of the Modern Jewish State's Founding, Finds Himself Ideologically Back Where It All Began", *Washington Post*, Foreign Service Sunday, March 11, 2007.

²³After the second *Intifada*, Morris wrote number of articles in the international press and gave interviews. He has been blunt and outspoken of what he thinks of the protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. His interviews and press articles are available online. For the detailed discussion on his views and ideas and counter arguments with the other scholars of the New History, these writings are important: Morris (2002a); (2004c); (2004); (2007) and Kimmerling (2004).

bombings, the violence—that sent him off the rails. There are two Benny Morris. There is the first-rate archival historian whose work is of utmost importance in understanding the Arab-Israeli conflict. And there is the third-rate political analyst who has little understanding of what is driving the modern conflict" (Shlaim, 2002).²⁴

Nevertheless, the failure of Oslo and the rise of the second Intifada did not affect other historians to that extent what Morris was influenced. They still hold onto their political stand that Israel has the greater role for political standstill. Shlaim and others look at the failure of the peace process from a different point of view and do not subscribe to what Morris concludes. Replying to Morris, Shlaim (2002) wrote in *The Guardian*:

I was cautiously optimistic after Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation signed the Oslo accord in September 1993, but our interpretation of the subsequent history is very different. Oslo represented a historic compromise for the Palestinians: they gave up their claim to 78 percent of mandatory Palestine in return for a state of their own over the remaining 22 percent, comprising the West Bank and Gaza. Israel, for its part, recognised the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and the two sides agreed to resolve their outstanding differences by peaceful means. For Benny the principal reason for the collapse of this historic compromise is Palestinian mendacity; for me it is Israeli expansionism. The building of settlements in the occupied territories has always been illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace. Expanding Jewish settlements on the West Bank is not a violation of the letter of the Oslo accord, but it is most certainly a violation of its spirit. Israel's protests of peaceful intentions were vitiated by its policy of expropriating more and more Palestinian land and building more Jewish settlements on this land. By continuing to build settlements, Israel basically went back on its side of the deal that had been concluded at Oslo.

The New Historians, thus, do not have a consensus regarding the current peace process and the Palestinian or the Israel's sincerity in pursuing peaceful co-existence. The different opinions of the New Historians have come in light quite often. The evolution of the New History in last two decades has been summarised by Shlaim,

²⁴ The London based English daily *The Guardian* published a series of articles by Morris and Shlaim in February 2002. The long debate between the two prominent scholars of the New History highlighted the different perspectives and divided opinion of the New Historians on the current developments of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In the late 1990s, when this project (history-writing on the basis of primary sources) was conceived, public opinion in Israel seemed increasingly receptive to the ideas of the “new history.” Many of the claims that a decade earlier were denounced as dangerous revisionism began to be incorporated into the intellectual mainstream. Some of the findings of the “new history,” like those of Benny Morris on the expulsion of Palestinians, even found their way into history textbooks for secondary schools. Our unspoken assumption at the time was that the New Historians would bring about a quiet revolution in the way in which their compatriots viewed their past. This assumption turned out to be overly optimistic. In the last few years various developments in the political arena made the Israeli public more suspicious of the new interpretations of the past and more receptive to the old ones. The breakdown of the Oslo peace process, the outbreak of the *al-Aqsa Intifada*, and the rise to power of Ariel Sharon at the head of a Likud-dominated government in February 2001 resulted in a swing in public opinion away from the new history towards the old history (Shlaim, 2001: 81).

One of direct impacts upon the New History came from the political side. The right wing government of *Likud* returned to power in 2001 under the firm leadership of Ariel Sharon as the Prime Minister (2001-2006). Six months before the election, Ariel Sharon was asked what changes he thought the education system needed and Sharon replied: “I would like them to study the history of the people of Israel and the land of Israel ... the children must be taught Jewish-Zionist values, and the ‘New Historians’ must not be taught” (Kimmerling, 2004). Underlying this reply was a sense, widely shared among the country’s conservatives, that the New Historians were undermining patriotic values and young peoples’ confidence in the justice of their cause. Sharon’s aim was to nullify the effect of the New Historians and to reassert traditional values in the educational system. Limor Livnat, the education minister (2001-2006), launched an all-out offensive against the New History and post-Zionism. One of the first things that Livnat did on becoming Minister of Education was to order new history text books for secondary schools to be re-written, removing all traces of the influence of the New Historians. This however, did not last long. In April 2006, the new government under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert came to power. His Education Minister Yuli Tamir approved the re-inclusion of the Palestinian account of

the 1948 war in the third grade school textbooks, which came into force in July 2007. The Education Ministry also approved a school text describing the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as *Nakba*, or catastrophe, to be used in schools in the Arab sector. Tamir supported this change and advocated, "The Arab public deserves to be allowed to express its feelings," (Stern, 2007). To this date, this change continues in textbook.

In addition to these, one other development that weakened the cohesion and credibility of the new historiography was the trial case of Teddy Katz. The Teddy Katz affair²⁶ instigated very political and legal debate about the research of the New Historians. In 1998, Teddy Katz submitted a master's thesis to Haifa University that made extensive use of oral history. The thesis charged that in May 1948 Alexandroni Brigade perpetuated a massacre in the Arab village of *Tantura*. Katz concluded that more than 200 *Tantura* villagers were shot dead after the village surrendered and his research was reported in the press in January 2000. This unleashed a storm of protest and members of the Alexandroni Brigade filed a defamation case. The court case prompted Haifa University to institute an internal inquiry that led to Katz re-tracking some of his earlier arguments.

In the academic controversy that ensued, a number of scholars came to the defence of Katz, notably Ilan Pappé. In Pappé's view the case shed light on the extent to which mainstream Zionists are prepared to go to in discouraging research that brings to the fore such aspects of the 1948 war as "ethnic cleansing" (Pappé, 2001). The controversy surrounding the case was bitter and overtly political. The other scholars of the New History did not support Pappé for advocating Katz thesis. Due to Katz's flaw of sole dependence on oral history the critics called into question the credibility not only of Katz and Pappé but, by extension, of the entire school of the New History. Meyrav Wurmser (2001) describes the *Tantura* episode as a "made-up

²⁶ Ilan Pappé, "Academic Freedom under Assault in Israel", 24 March 2003. Visit Ilan Pappé's website to have full details of the Teddy Katz case. See: <http://ilanpappe.org/Articles/Academic%20Freedom%20Under%20Assault.htm> (accessed on 15 May 2008). For the detailed discussion on Katz affair, see Zalman (2005) and Halkin (2005).

massacre." He criticised the scholars who advocated for Katz and stated that its the political agenda of the post-Zionists.

Yehoshua Porath professor at the Hebrew University criticised the New Historians for their imbalance and disapproval of Israeli democratic and liberal institutions. The New History tends to paint Israel in dark colour by stating that Israel does not want to confront its past mistakes and sanctifies everything what has been written in the national historiography. Porath pointed out wisely that,

Israel made its decisions about archival access against the backdrop of a struggle for national independence that in many respects is still unfinished. Israel opened its archives not because it was victorious, but because it sought to follow the tradition of democratic, Western countries in allowing free access to information, even information that could be used to harm it in the long run (Porath, 2002).

According to the New Historians, the traditional historians on both the sides namely the Israelis and the Palestinians have equally ignored the historical truth because on both sides, academicians and researchers have subordinated themselves to the dictates of the state. The history-writing is closely watched and states tend to monitor what is being written in the history books:

Governments in the region enjoy many direct and indirect powers over the writing of history. Elementary and secondary school texts in history are the preserve of the state. Most universities in the Middle East are state-run and their faculty members are state employees. National historical associations and government printing presses serve as filters to weed out unauthorised histories and to disseminate state-sanctioned truths. As promotion within the historical establishment is closely linked to adherence to the official line, historians have had little incentive to engage in critical history writing. Instead, most Arab and Israeli historians have written in an uncritically nationalist vein. In Israel, nationalist historians reflected the collective memory of the Israeli public in depicting the Palestine War as a desperate fight for survival and an almost miraculous victory. In the Arab world, histories of the Palestine War have been marked by apologetics, self-justification, onus-shifting, and conspiracy theories. Both the Arab and the Israeli nationalist histories are guided more by a "quest for legitimacy" than by an honest reckoning with the past (Shlaim and Rogan, 2001: 122).

The New History has gone through many phases in last two decades. The distinction of the history-writing by the New Historians has sustained some of the challenges it faced and countered the questions posed by the old historians and critics

of the New History. On some occasions, the New Historians could not convince that they kept away their writings from being affected with political-ideological opinions of them. For example, in 1996, Ilan Pappé unsuccessfully fought the *Knesset* elections on behalf of the communist party led *Hadash*. His left-wing political ideology and activism encourage political criticism against the New History. The divided political opinions of the scholars have affected their coordinated work of history-writing. The ideological orientation of an individual scholar spills over the school of the New Historians. The Katz affair exposed the divided opinion of the New Historians and had impacts upon the New History.

The other political use of the New History is seen outside Israel. The New Historians are cited and their research has been quoted often by Arabs and the Palestinians because they criticised the Israel's conduct and policy of 1948. The use of the findings and conclusions of the New History has been a political gain for the Palestinians. The political message derived out of the New History supports their anti-Israel agenda and hence, the New Historians are considered pro-Arabs and anti-Israel. In result, the New Historians have been countered by the various ideological groups. Though, the scholars of the New History make a point of not joining any post-Zionist or anti-Zionist ideology, they are frequently cited by the political camps.

One can not ignore the contributions of the critics of the New History to the debate of the 1948. To counter the arguments of the New Historians, some of the critics have used the declassified material and documents that referred by the New Historians. For example, Efraim Karsh researched the documents used by the New Historians and wrote *Fabricating Israeli History: The "New Historians"* (1997). Avi Shlaim's research on Israeli-Jordanian relations during 1948 was cross-examined by Karsh. Subsequently that Shlaim had to change the title of his book from *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (1988) to *Politics of Partition: King Abdullah, the Zionists, and Palestine 1921-1951* (1998). It was not just the changing title. The use of primary sources by the critics of the New History did not allow the New Historians to manipulate, omit or tailor declassified materials to suit their arguments. Shlaim was forced to admit that

there was enough evidence to prove that collusion took place between King Abdullah and Jewish leadership in 1948.

The other criticism of the New Historians is concerning their exclusive research of Israeli and Western documents. The Arabs sources are not used by them. Significantly, it is due to non-availability of the Arab documents. That resulted into non-inspection of the Arab parties' role and involvement in the 1948 war. How did Arabs unite and fight this war remains unexamined. What were their war-aims? If they were divided amongst themselves, how did they form united army of the five states? They did not destroy Israel at the end of the 1948 war but did they want to? These are some important issues that are not dealt with. Hence, leading New Historian, Morris has been criticised for his exclusive reliance upon Israeli documents for history-writing. The intentions and motives of the Arabs in 1948 are not inquired.

The New History flourished at the time of the Oslo Accords, but after the general disappointment and frustration following the second *Intifada*, its influence remained confined to small intellectual elite with little impact on real everyday relations. Benny Morris, who came out very strongly against the Palestinians in the wake of the second *Intifada*, in a way symbolises the frustration among the New Historians. The political developments of the conflict influenced them and the failure of Oslo weakened their political assertions for a two state solution.

The New History is subject to scrutiny like the old history. The drawbacks of the New History are yet to be analysed since it is not complete. That is the nature of history that remains always open-ended. But after the two decades, the relevance of the New History has amplified. The Palestinian scholar and Professor Edward Said acknowledged the-importance of New History for the Palestinians in particular, and for Israel and the rest of the Arab world in general. He pointed out that if Israelis and Palestinians are to learn to co-exist peacefully side by side, it is essential that they understand their own history and each other's history. Said stated:

It is certainly true that the great political importance today of the new Israeli historians is that they have confirmed what generations of Palestinians, historians or otherwise, have been saying about what happened to us as a people at the hands of Israel. And of course they have done so as Israelis who

in some measure speak for the conscience of their people and society. But here, speaking self-critically, I feel that as Arabs generally, and Palestinians in particular, we must also begin to explore our own histories, myths, and patriarchal ideas of the nation, something which, for obvious reasons we have not so far done (Said, 1998).

The debate about 1948 goes on and might continue for long. Consequently, it is premature to pass a final verdict on the New History. But a review of the last two decades suggests that the New History has already had significant political consequences for the Israeli society as well as the Palestinians. Most importantly, it spurred a major advance in the teaching of new history in most Israeli high schools. The inclusion of the Palestinian narration of the events of the 1948 war in the school textbooks influenced the mind set of younger generation of Israel. The knowledge that the Palestinians suffered in the 1948 war might earn sympathy for the Palestinians fighting for a state. Second, it enabled ordinary members of the Israeli public to understand how Arabs perceive Israel and how they view the past. Third, it presented to the Arabs an account of the conflict which they recognise as honest and genuine, and in line with their own experience.

The new narrative can bridge the different opinions of the Palestinians and Israelis and bring them close to have common understanding of what happened in 1948 and after. In all these different ways, the New History helped to create a climate, on both sides of the Arab-Israeli divide, which was conducive to the progress of the peace process. A more complex and fair-minded understanding of the past is therefore, essential for preserving at least the prospect of reconciliation in the future. The re-writing of the history of 1948, thus, remains a practical as well as an academic imperative. The rise and evolution of the New History in Israel indicates a psychological change in the Israeli society that does not want to keep the status quo and have peace with Palestinians. Any peace attempt would be strengthened if the honest and frank description of the 1948 is taken into account. The New History has given a well documented and balanced description of the 1948 war.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Israel's liberal policy to open its archives has resulted in a group of Historians re-examining the country's history and providing a self-critical account of the 1948 war. These New Historians started examining records and saw a different view of Israel than ever before and began the process of re-writing history. The collected experience of the New Historians shows that Israel now feels mature and secure to re-evaluate its history. The intellectual battle over the 'new' versus 'old' historiography has certainly contributed to scholarship in general and on the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular. It has livened up an otherwise dreary corner of academia and provided historians with a creative spark, a critical tension and a useful focus for ongoing archival research. The critical history shows its impacts upon many spots. The significant development took place when the New History was included in the Israeli school education. The larger debate and attention the New Historians received proved the relevance of the New History for Israeli society and its quest for peace. The self-critical narrative of 1948 has prepared the necessary ground for Israeli society and polity to have an accommodative view of the Palestinians' rights. In the light of the New History, Israeli society seems to be willing and mature enough to go for some concessions for peace with the Palestinians.

Is the Israeli new history truer, more accurate, or "better" than the old? The research does not intend to pronounce a verdict. Instead, approaching history pragmatically, one needs to evaluate the degree to which historical programs, or narrative schools, can resolve problematic situations rather than think in terms of true/untrue or good/bad.

By adopting a pragmatist approach to historical research, one can see that even though history is constructed, what is important is not the degree of objectivity of the texts one uses, but rather their usefulness to answer questions and anomalies left unaddressed by other sources and accounts. Rather than search for the "best" or most

accurate historical texts, political scientists must assume multiple competing historical schools and seek to uncover what prompts their respective answers to important questions.

Rather than judging new or old history, the study has emphasised on the inquiry of direct-indirect impacts of the New History on Israeli polity in general and on Israel-Palestinian conflict in particular. So the important question to be asked in the evaluation of the New History is that: how far have the conclusions and findings of the New Historians influenced the Israeli policies towards the Palestinians? Did the New History help Israel move closer to peace with the Palestinians and larger Arab world? On both counts, the answer is positive. The New History helped Israel move closer to peace. The New History had discernible impacts upon Israeli society and polity that influenced the policy makers and decision-making system.

Since history writing is a constant process, there is no vantage point that after that history is completed. The New History is still in its infancy, it is too early to extract and enlist the outcomes of the New History. Nevertheless, a review of the last two decades suggests that the New History produced significant political consequences on at least four levels. First, it acted as a spur to a quiet revolution in the teaching of history in most Israeli high schools. The inclusion of the Palestinian version of the 1948 war in school textbooks and adopting why the Palestinians call the war of 1948 a war of catastrophe paved the way for mutual understanding of the 1948 war. The younger generation is aware of what happened with the Palestinians in the 1948 war.

Second, the New History has enabled ordinary members of the Israeli public to understand how Arabs perceived Israel and how they view the past. The ramifications of the debate of the historians are too large to be worded here. But the rise and growth of the debate in the academia and media indicate the attention it received in Israel and abroad.

Third, it has influenced the policy makers and that resulted in some modification in the Israeli stand from Oslo. Fourth, it inspired the sociologists in

Israel to have critical view of Zionism as a political ideology. Of late, new development in Israeli academic is the rise of critical sociologists who have re-examined the evolution of Zionism and have insisted on limiting its influence on the state. These scholars are known as the post-Zionists.

As the account in preceding paragraphs suggests, this study has ended up falsifying its working hypothesis. It concludes that the New History *did* have relevant policy impacts and larger implications for the Israeli society. Though they remain off the radar, they matter, perhaps, the most. After all, some of the most defining moments in history have appeared to have emerged out of nowhere. That does not mean history was not being made. Just that it was not acknowledged. Israel's acknowledgement of a version of its own and shared past appears a step in positive direction. Conflict resolution makes headway if the stakeholders – the people – are self-critical and devoid of pride and prejudices. It is in this larger context one has to view the role and importance of the New Historians and the passionate debate that these scholars generated within the Israeli society.

Appendix

Profiles of Key Historians in the Debate

Flapan, Simha (1911–1987) was an Israeli historian and politician, probably best known for his book *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (1987), published shortly after his death. Flapan was National Secretary of the left Zionist *Mapam* party, and the director of its Arab Affairs department. He was the first one to instigate the debate upon the events of the 1948 war, although he was a generation older than most of the scholars of the New History, he was identified with that label. His book was not an historical account of the 1948 war nor did he consult the primary sources of history as the other historians did. Nevertheless, he paved the way for the rise of the new and self-critical history of the 1948 war.

Karsh, Efraim (born 1953) is Professor and Head of Mediterranean Studies at King's College, London. He is regarded as the most vocal critic of the New Historians. Karsh, as a historian, has written histories of regional politics and society. He criticises the New Historians for their pro-Arab writings and for their failure to produce objective history. His important books include *Fabricating Israeli History: "The New Historians"* (2000), *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923* (1999) and *Rethinking the Middle East* (2003).

Morris, Benny (born 1948) is Professor of Middle East History at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev. For a number of years, he was the diplomatic correspondent of *The Jerusalem Post*. He is considered to be a pioneer of the New History. His original research on the Palestinian refugees is the most important contribution to the evolution of the New History. Of late, Morris's political views have become contentious and has inspired heated debates within Israel and abroad as well. He has written extensively including most important ones such as, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (1989), *1948 and after; Israel and the Palestinians* (1990) and *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (2008).

Pappe, Ilan (born 1954) is a professor of history at the University of Exeter. Born in Israel, he taught political science at Haifa University from 1984 to 2007. His original research on the British policy and Arab-Israel conflict in 1948 added to the scholarship of the New History. In recent years, he has been active in politics and his political opinions are not shared by the other scholars of the New History. He calls himself a post-Zionist and is very vocal with his left-wing political ideology. His key writings are *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948-1951* (1988) and *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006).

Segev, Tom was born in 1945 in Jerusalem. In *Ha'aretz*, Israel's most prestigious newspaper, he publishes a weekly column dealing mainly with the politics of culture and human rights. His research regarding Britain's policy in 1948 war concluded that Britain was pro-Zionist. Unlike other historians, he has not done much historical research and has been an outspoken journalist and an activist peace making between Israel and the Palestinians. His important books include *The Seventh Million: Israelis and the Holocaust* (2000) and *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* (2000).

Shapira, Anita (born 1940) is the founder of the Yitzhak Rabin Centre for Israel Studies and Ruben Merenfield Professor of the Study of Zionism at Tel Aviv University. She has debated the issues of the 1948 war with the New Historians and she sympathises more with the traditional history of the 1948 war. Her important works include *Israeli Historical Revisionism: From Left to Right* (co-edited with Derek J. Penslar, 2003) and *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force 1881-1948* (1992).

Shlaim, Avi is a fellow of St. Antony's College and a professor of international relations at the University of Oxford. He was born in Baghdad on October 31, 1945, and grew up in Israel, where he did national service during 1964-66. He holds dual citizenship of Israel and Great Britain. Professor Shlaim is the author of numerous books, most notably *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (1988) and *The Iron Wall: Israel*

and the Arab World (2000). Original research on the Israeli-Jordanian relations during 1948 is his significant contribution to the New History.

Teveth, Shabtai (born 1925) is best known as a biographer of David Ben-Gurion. He ardently argued with the New Historians and held that the traditional account of the 1948 war is flawless. Teveth has accused the New Historians of undermining the Israeli state and endanger the Jewish identity with their polemics. According to him the New Historians hold Israel responsible for the 'Original Sin' of fighting the 1948 war.

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