



In the war that followed Israel's declaration of independence as a Jewish state, Arab forces attacked the Old City of Jerusalem on June 15, 1948. Photograph by John Phillips/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock

The Road to 1948

How the decisions that led to the founding of Israel left the region in a state of eternal conflict.

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A discussion moderated by Emily Bazelon

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One year matters more than any other for understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 1948, Jews realized their wildly improbable dream of a state, and Palestinians experienced the mass flight and expulsion called [the Nakba](#), or catastrophe. The events are burned into the collective memories of these two peoples — often in diametrically opposed ways — and continue to shape their trajectories.

If 1948 was the beginning of an era, it was also the end of one — the period following World War I, when the West carved up the Middle East and a series of decisions planted the seeds of conflict. To understand the continuing clashes, we went back to explore the twists and turns that led to 1948. This path could begin at any number of moments; we chose as the starting point 1920, when the [British mandate for Palestine](#) was established.



The Old City in Jerusalem in the early 1900s. Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress

Over the following decades, two nationalisms, Palestinian and Jewish, took root on the same land and began to compete in a way that has ever since proved irreconcilable. The Arab population wanted what every native majority wants — self-determination. Jews who

immigrated in growing numbers wanted what persecuted minorities almost never attain — a haven, in their ancient homeland. ¹A primary source dates the existence of a people called Israel to at least

1200 B.C. In 538 B.C., Jews built the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The Romans took the city in 70 A.D., destroying most of it, and Jews began to flee. Christians became the majority around 400 A.D. Muslims conquered Jerusalem by 638 A.D. from the hatred and danger they faced around the world.

In the time of the British mandate, Jews and Palestinians, and Western and Arab powers, made fundamental choices that set the groundwork for the suffering and irresolution of today. Along the way, there were many opportunities for events to play out differently. We asked a panel of historians — three Palestinians, two Israelis and a Canadian American — to talk about the decisive moments leading up to the founding of Israel and the displacement of Palestinians and whether a different outcome could have been possible.

The conversation among the panelists, which took place by video conference on Jan. 3, has been edited and condensed for clarity, with some material reordered or added from follow-up interviews.

PART I: WHAT WAS THE BRITISH MANDATE?



Palestinians harvesting oranges in Jaffa during the British mandate. Khalil Raad, via the Institute for Palestine Studies



Yaakov Ben Dov

Degania Aleph, the first kibbutz, in 1912.



Congress in 1920. Haj Amin al-Husseini, third from the right in the last row, became the grand mufti of Jerusalem. Institute for Palestine Studies

Delegates to the third Palestinian Arab



An anti-Zionist demonstration at Damascus Gate, Jerusalem, on March 8, 1920. Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress

For centuries, Palestine was an Ottoman province with no clear boundaries.²

²Palestine sometimes meant a narrow strip of coast occupied by the Philistines in the 12th century B.C. but at other times referred to a larger territory that included southern Syria.

Muslims were the majority, living alongside small Christian and Jewish communities. The Jews were almost entirely Sephardic and native to the region, with few nationalist aspirations.

The relationships among Muslims, Christians and Jews began to shift in the beginning of the 20th century as a group of young socialist revolutionaries — including founders of the future state of Israel, like David Ben-Gurion — immigrated in waves from Russia and Eastern

Europe. Fleeing ghettos, impoverishment and the violence of pogroms, they believed that the only answer to the global affliction of antisemitism was Zionism³



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Theodor Herzl, an Austro-Hungarian journalist,

founded the Zionist Organization in 1897. It held international meetings, published a newspaper and created a bank.

— the vision of a Jewish home in the land of the Hebrew Bible.

The Allied powers of the West defeated the Ottomans during World War I. Afterward, one of the first big tests for the [League of Nations, established by the Allies](#) as a worldwide body of governments, was to decide the future of Palestine. The league carved up⁴The new borders were the same as those drawn in

a secret deal the British and French made in 1916 called the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

the [former Ottoman lands](#), granting Britain two mandates to govern Palestine and Iraq and giving France one mandate for Syria and Lebanon. In the language of soft colonialism, the league's charter directed Britain and France to govern the territories for the well-being of their inhabitants “until such time as they are able to stand alone.”

The mandate for Palestine, written in 1920, stood out for its international commitment to “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

Emily Bazelon: Why is 1920 a good place to start the story of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians?

Leena Dallahseh: The British mandate was crucial in laying the grounds for the creation of the state of Israel and the prevention of the creation of a Palestinian state. Zionism was only able to take root in Palestine because the mandate recognized Zionist organizations as representative of the Jewish population and as self-

governing institutions, basically creating the structure of a quasi state. It did this by incorporating in its text the Balfour Declaration, which the British issued in 1917.⁵The Balfour Declaration provided no guarantees but said the British would “view with favor” establishing a

national home for Jews in Palestine. It was a response to lobbying by leaders like Chaim Weizmann, then president of the British Zionist Federation.

The mandate did not similarly recognize Palestinian organizations or representation. The majority, the Palestinians, were only mentioned in the negative, as “non-Jewish communities” given civil and religious rights. That meant the Palestinians were trapped, as the Columbia professor [Rashid Khalidi says](#), in an iron cage.

⁶In his book “The Iron Cage,” Khalidi argues that Palestinians felt they could not accept the mandate “without denying their own rights, their own national narrative and the evidence of their own eyes, which told them that Palestine was an Arab country and belonged to them, and to them alone.”

The structure of the mandate prevented them from being able to have national rights or sovereignty. And that set in motion the developments in 1948 and after.

Salim Tamari: The mandate period completely thwarted the possibility of a common notion of citizenship. There was a period, at the end of the Ottoman era, when the new Constitution was adopted in 1908, establishing equal citizenship for all Ottoman subjects, instead of dividing Muslims from non-Muslims. Language was a very important articulator of national identity. Arabic was not only the language of the Muslims and Christians but the language of the Jews — the language of the land. The British framework changed all of that, creating three official languages, English, Hebrew and Arabic.

Itamar Rabinovich: The British made a lot of contradictory promises during the war. To persuade the Arabs to rebel against the Ottomans, they promised Hussein ibn Ali, the sharif of Mecca, who was from an important Hashemite family, a very large kingdom.⁷



In 1921, the British made one son of the sharif, Faisal Al-Hashemi, king of Iraq. For another son, Abdullah, the British government created an emirate in 1921 in what was then called Transjordan (later, Jordan, with Abdullah as king).

But they also promised to divide up the land with France and issued the Balfour Declaration. At the end of war, they had to reckon with these contradictory promises.

It's the mandate that creates the political entity called Palestine. Before that, it was a geographic term. And the conflict between Zionism and Palestinian Arab

nationalism was over the question of what would be the nature of this entity — an Arab state, a Jewish state, a binational state or partition?

In 1920, we speak about Jews and Arabs. It's only in 1948 that the Arabs become Palestinians and the Jews become Israelis.

Dallasheh: I don't agree with that. The research has been quite extensive and shows that there is clear expression of Palestinian identity already by World War I, and definitely clear expressions of Palestinian nationalism in the 1920s.

In 1920, in fact, one of the first mass violent outbursts occurred during the Nebi Musa procession,⁸

⁸In April 1920, Muslim leaders made speeches denouncing the Balfour Declaration at an annual Muslim procession from Jerusalem to Nebi Musa, a shrine near Jericho. The event turned into a deadly riot, with five Jews and four Arabs killed. where Palestinian national leadership objected to Zionist plans in Palestine.

Nadim Bawalsa: The mandate period sets a precedent for how Palestine will be handled at the international level,

which is to say as an exception to the law. Britain started off as the military occupier of Palestine at the end of World War I and then unilaterally altered its own status to civil administrator, even though it didn't have the power to do so under international law. The League of Nations then left it to the British authorities to manage Palestine however they saw fit.

Around the same time, local Muslim-Christian associations were springing up all over historic Palestine, in Haifa, Jaffa, Nablus, Jerusalem. They would convene regularly to draft [grievances and submit them to the British](#) authorities in Jerusalem.⁹ The local associations convened a

Palestine Arab Congress, which met between 1919 and 1928.

They always made the same demands: self-determination as part of an undivided Arab Syria and opposition to Jewish immigration and land acquisition.

So the British were very much aware of exactly what it was that the Arabs or the Palestinians wanted. But to

serve their own interests, they pitted the Palestinians against one another. Right after the Nebi Musa riots, they sacked the mayor of Jerusalem and appointed Raghid al-Nashashibi in his place. He was of the Palestinian nationalist elite who opposed Zionism, but he was more obedient and agreeable to British interests. The British also created the Supreme Muslim Council to oversee Islamic property, endowments, schools and courts and appointed Haj Amin al-Husseini, from a rival elite family, to head the council as the grand mufti of Jerusalem.



10 Al-Husseini was chosen for mufti by the British high commissioner of Palestine after he stated his “earnest desire to cooperate with the government and his belief in the good intentions of the British government towards the Arabs,” according to Rashid Khalidi. A mufti can issue rulings based on Islamic law.

He was seen as more of a people’s leader, but he also collaborated with the British. The point is that during the **Derek Penslar:** Many Zionists wanted to believe that they represented progress — they would come with their technology and electricity, with better farm machinery, and improve everyone’s lives. Ze’ev Jabotinsky, whose version of Zionism was the precursor to Likud, the party of Benjamin Netanyahu, had a more realistic vision. He said: Don’t

condescend to the Arabs. They have [every reason to oppose Zionism](#), and they will do so, until they are met with overwhelming force.



11 In his 1923 essay "The Iron Wall,"

Jabotinsky wrote, "As long as the Arabs feel that there is the least hope of getting rid of us, they will refuse to give up this hope in return for either kind words or for bread and butter, because they are not a rabble, but a living people."

Rabinovich: In 1923, the British offered to have a legislative council in which the Arabs would have had a larger share than the Jews, but they boycotted the elections for it. And this is a theme I think that we need

to follow all the way from 1920 to 1948 — the theme of missed opportunities, mostly by the Palestinians.

Dallasheh: This council 1920s and early '30s, Palestinian nationalists could oppose Zionism all they wanted so long as they didn't get in the way of Britain's goals.

And of course, all of this falls short of actually giving the Palestinians national and territorial rights.

¹²The British planned a council with 22 members, including 10 British officials and two Jewish and two Christian seats, according to the historian Nimrod Lin. The British proposed councils at future points in the mandate period. Jews asked for parity with Arabs rather than proportional representation, and no council was formed.

was [not supposed to be proportional](#) or truly representative. The Zionist movement was never willing to accept that because until 1948, any such voting body would have meant a decisive Palestinian majority.

PART II: REVOLT



Jewish families fleeing the Old City during the 1929 unrest. Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress

Jewish families fleeing the Old City



In 1929, Jews desecrated graves in the Nebi Akasha Mosque in Jerusalem. Sepia Times/Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

In 1929, Jews desecrated graves in the



In 1929, Arabs desecrated the Avraham Avinu Synagogue in Hebron. Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress



British troops marching in Jerusalem to quell the 1929 unrest. Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress



Arab revolt of 1936-39. Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress

A rally of Palestinians during the

In 1929, Palestinians rebelled. Violence first broke out over control of the holy sites in Jerusalem and spread to cities including Hebron and Safed, where Arabs massacred Jews. As Palestinian uprisings continued for a decade, the main sources of tension became the mandate policies that allowed for increasing Jewish immigration and land purchases. The mounting frustration among Palestinian farmers and laborers pressured elite

nationalist leaders to finally challenge British rule directly.

Amid the violence, Sephardic Jews, who had often been critical of Zionism for dividing Jews from Arabs, moved toward the Zionists, drawn by the need for self-defense against Arabs who had begun attacking them. As the Nazis took power, meanwhile, rising antisemitism in Europe spurred the mass flight of Jews and the Zionist call to gather them in Palestine. As Jewish immigration rose, so did Palestinian opposition to it.

Penslar: The historian [Hillel Cohen calls 1929 Year 0](#) in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This part of the story begins in Jerusalem and in particular the small area known as the Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif, with the al-Aqsa Mosque (the Dome of the Rock) and, below the Mount, the Western Wall. The 1929 disturbances began over a dispute in the previous year

over something that seemed small — whether Jews had rights to install a screen at the Western Wall to separate men and women praying.

But there were also rumors that Jews were attempting to buy up the Temple Mount and would even destroy it. This notion that al-Aqsa is in danger — a slogan we still hear — goes back to this time. For years, stories circulated about pictures of the Dome of the Rock with a menorah or a Star of David above it. Muslims thought this meant that the Jews were planning to take over the Temple Mount. It's true that there were attempts by Jews to purchase land in the Western Wall compound, though not to acquire the Temple Mount. The whole

thing failed. But the point is the combination of religious and nationalist sentiments. One cannot separate the two.

Tamari: The 1929 clashes were clashes over turf. They took the form of a religious conflict, but [behind that lurked](#) the land question.¹³Despite the Palestinian nationalist opposition to land sales,

landowners continued to sell to Zionist organizations for profit. "Oof, what can we do?" a journalist and activist, Akram Zu'itar, wrote in his diary, according to the book "Army of Shadows," by Hillel Cohen. "A member of the Supreme Muslim Council sells land to the Jews and remains a respected personage."

The Zionists also had a principle of hiring Hebrew labor, at the exclusion of Arab labor. The idea that Jews would work the land was central to a new Jewish identity different from the intellectual or businessman of the diaspora. The Zionists also didn't want to be the colonial masters of the Palestinians by employing them. In order

to “not exploit the Arabs,” they expelled them from the land, and that of course led to immediate clashes with the farmers.

Rabinovich: It’s also significant that Sephardic Jews in Hebron and other cities were killed by their Arab neighbors. They thought that they would be a bridge between Jews and Arabs. They ended up being victims in 1929.

Abigail Jacobson: The Jews from the Middle East, feeling connected to Arab culture and language, often sought to mediate between Zionist leaders and the Palestinians. For example, they were hired to teach Arabic and to write and translate articles from the Arabic press, about what was happening among the Arabs, for Hebrew-language newspapers.

Often, we think about the history of the mandate through points of violence. It’s also important to remember that there were peaceful periods in between

those moments when people shopped together, sat in cafes, lived alongside each other.

Bazon: In the in-between times, what happens?

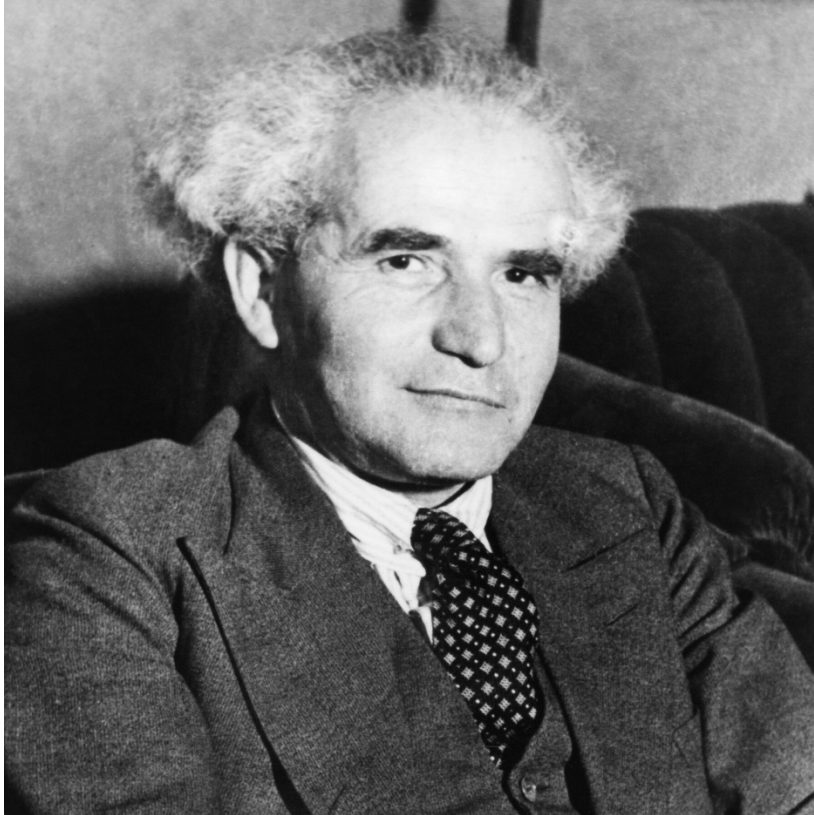
Rabinovich: One answer is about the power of building the institutions of a state. The Jewish community in Palestine did this very successfully in the 1920s and much more so in the '30s, as large waves ¹⁴Jewish immigration increased

from a high of 6,000 per year in the 1920s to as many as 60,000 annually between 1933 and 1936. Most of these immigrants fled instability in Poland. Others left Germany because of the rise of the Nazis. The Jewish share of the population in Palestine rose to about 30 percent of roughly 1.5 million in 1939 from about 10 percent of roughly 700,000 in 1920.

of [Jewish immigrants arrived](#) from Germany and Eastern Europe. They built an economic system, a health system and the Jewish Agency, which had practically the functions of a state in embryonic form. There is also the project of setting the boundaries of the state by building *kibbutzim* in the north, sensing that as you settle the land, you establish the facts that eventually would lead to statehood in a given territory.

There was always the issue of how explicit the Jewish leadership wanted to be about their ultimate goal. They

made efforts to negotiate with Arab leaders, not the mufti, but others, to see whether compromise was feasible.



¹⁵ In 1934, Ben-Gurion went to see Musa Alami, a politician with ties to the al-Husseini family and the British. Ben-Gurion said that when he tried to persuade Alami that Zionism would benefit Palestinians, Alami responded, "I would rather have Palestine remain poor and barren for even 100 more years, until we, the Arabs, have the power ourselves to make it bloom and develop." The Jewish side did not say, "We want a state over the whole country."

Dallasheh: To Palestinians, the problem is outsiders are coming in and saying, "We want to be the owners and leaders on land where Palestinians have been the majority for centuries." As a significant percentage of Palestinians become landless, the tension comes to a head in 1936 with a six-month strike.

Bawalsa: This is the first mass popular uprising of the Palestinian people — the first proper intifada. It was led not by the nationalist elite in Jerusalem but by the *fellahin*, the farmers, in the countryside, who were the ones suffering from loss of land. Then the elite nationalists, including the mufti, jumped on the bandwagon. The lead-up to the revolt is also when the first armed resistance groups formed — chiefly the Qassamites,¹⁶ They were named for Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a preacher in Haifa who urged Muslims that only their guns would save them from the British turning their land into a Jewish homeland. who played a big role in the uprising.

Rabinovich: The Palestinians were also responding to developments in the region. The French signed a treaty for gradual independence in Syria and Lebanon in 1936. That same year, the British signed a treaty with Egypt. The Palestinian Arabs said that they were being left behind. And that was part of the bitterness that led to the 1936 revolt.

Dallasheh: 1936 was a clear shift in terms of the public demands of the Palestinians, which very clearly said we are opposed to both the British colonial structure *and* Zionism. But the Palestinian strike ended

in October 1936 with the intervention of neighboring Arab countries — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Transjordan — which were still basically clients of the British colonial regime.

Penslar: By this point, the British were worrying about maintaining a strong relationship with the Arab world in the event of another world war. In 1936, the British sent the Peel Commission



17 In hearings held by the Peel Commission in November 1936, the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann testified about the six million Jews of Europe, “for whom the world is divided into places where they cannot live and places where they cannot enter.” Al-Husseini continued demanding an end to Jewish immigration to Palestine.

to Palestine to investigate the causes of the Arab revolt and suggest a solution. The next year, the commission [recommended partition](#), an idea the British had in mind from Ireland. Now it was officially on the table in Palestine. It was a complicated proposal: a Jewish state on 17 percent of the land, with Jerusalem and a zone to the sea remaining in British hands, and a Palestinian state on the rest of the territory, linked with Transjordan under King Abdullah, whom the British trusted much more than the mufti, al-Husseini.

The Zionists split over the proposal. Some said that a small state in part of Palestine would be constantly beleaguered and at war. More pragmatic Zionists accepted partition in principle but rejected the Peel Commission's proposed boundaries because they made the Jewish state so small.

Palestinians rejected partition out of hand as a theft of Palestinian land and demanded that Palestine as a whole become an Arab state.

Dallasheh: With the failure of the Peel Commission, the Arab revolt breaks out into a full-on insurgency, which the British brutally crushed.

Bawalsa: This kind of British oppression hadn't been seen before in Palestine. It included exiling nationalists and widespread detentions as well as torture and executions. British forces seized Palestinians' property and demolished entire villages.

Jacobson: A lot of the Palestinian leadership ended up either leaving or being exiled, including al-Husseini.¹⁸ He fled

a British arrest warrant in 1937 and went to Lebanon and then Iraq.

When the revolt ended in 1939, the Palestinians were in a very weak position, economically and politically, with many of the internal fractures in the society between

Muslims and Christians, and villagers and city dwellers, exposed.

Following the revolt, the Jews who were native to the Middle East went through a major shift, too. Some of the younger generation, for example, raised in the shadow of violence, now tried to position themselves as loyal to the Zionist movement and were recruited to do intelligence work for the Jewish paramilitary forces. They start using their common cultural identity and their language skills in Arabic for purposes of security.

Penstar: The Jewish defense forces grew between 1936 and 1939, with the Haganah as the primary militia. The Haganah collaborated with the British in suppressing the Palestinian revolt; this was important in strengthening the Haganah.

This process continued into the 1940s during the Second World War. The British, who have a long history

of getting colonials to do their fighting for them, were quite happy to accept Jews into the ranks of the British Armed Forces. There were a fair number of Palestinians who joined as well — between 9,000 and 12,000 Palestinians fought for the Allied forces in World War II. The number of Jews from Palestine was about 30,000. Many Jews became lower-level officers during World War II, and they brought their new military expertise to the 1948 war.

PART III: THE PATH TO PARTITION



A British soldier guarding Palestinian prisoners in Jerusalem in the late 1930s. Fox Photos/Getty Images



In 1946, the Irgun, a Zionist paramilitary group, bombed British headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress



A British police officer searching a Jewish man in Jerusalem as the threat of World War II loomed. Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress



Women plowing fields on a kibbutz in 1935. Hulton Archive/Getty Images

The threat of World War II scrambled the geopolitics of the Middle East. To bolster support in the Arab world for the campaign against the Nazis and their allies, the British largely closed the gates of Palestine to Jewish refugees in 1939, at a time when they were also being turned away from the United States and other countries. Britain's policy shift created an opportunity for leaders like al-Husseini to push for a representative legislative council, or an Arab Agency, like the Jewish Agency, that would provide an independent institution for their nationalist ambitions. But those leaders were weakened by British suppression 19More than 10 percent of Palestinian men were "killed, wounded, imprisoned or exiled" between 1936 and 1939,

according to Rashid Khalidi. He writes that supporters of the Nashashibi family rooted out supporters of the al-Husseini family and were then killed in retaliation. Then the Holocaust scrambled everything once again.

Penslar: As the world headed toward the Second World War, in May 1939, the British promulgated a white paper, which proclaimed that a single state, which will have an [Arab majority, will be established in Palestine.](#) This represented a major shift toward the Palestinians.

The white paper also effectively throttled Jewish immigration, which was always the single largest thorn of contention between Jews and Palestinians. If they ever agreed to joint administration of the land, who would decide yes or no on allowing Jewish immigration?

During the first couple of years of the war, the Jews of Palestine were absolutely terrified as the German forces marched across North Africa. We can't understand the period of the Holocaust in Europe without also understanding the Jews' sense of imminent destruction in Palestine. David Ben-Gurion, the chief Zionist leader in Palestine, said, "We shall fight in the [war against Hitler as if there were no white paper](#), but we shall fight the white paper as if there were no war."

In May 1942, Zionists held an emergency meeting in New York City at the Biltmore Hotel. A few months later,

the scale of the Nazi genocide became clear. The reaction was public mourning and despair.

Bazon: What were the Palestinian responses to World War II and the Holocaust?

Dallasheh: As Derek mentioned earlier, a significant number of Palestinians fought in the British Army against the Nazis. But the [mufti made a visit to Hitler](#), which is often used against the Palestinians.



20. Al-Husseini aided a pro-Nazi coup in Baghdad. When it failed, he fled to Berlin. His meeting in 1941 with Hitler was captured in a propaganda reel. Hitler told him that the “struggle against a Jewish homeland in Palestine” would be part of the Nazi campaign against the Jews.

He basically followed a simple yet morally and politically questionable philosophy: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

In siding with Hitler, the mufti was not representative of the Palestinian community. Many people rejected

Nazism. ²¹In his book "The Arabs and the Holocaust," Gilbert Achcar notes articles in the Arab press that denounced Nazi brutality and fascism.

Tamari: By allying with Hitler, the mufti completely undermined himself with the British and with the European states.

Rabinovich: At the end of the war, the question is, Whose side were you on? He made a bet on Hitler, and he lost. He could not go back to Palestine as a result, even though he remained the most important Palestinian leader. When you look at sources of strengths and weaknesses for Palestinians, the mufti at that point is a deficit.

Penslar: Counterintuitively, the Holocaust both justified and weakened the case for the creation of Israel. The whole purpose of Zionism, at least as it was presented

to the international community, was to establish a place for Jews who are refugees. Early in the war, the idea was that millions of Jews would survive in Europe, impoverished and persecuted, and they would need a place to go. At the end of the war, two-thirds of those Jews have been slaughtered. So where was the reservoir of Jewish humanity that would come to this future Jewish state?

There were still hundreds of thousands of Jewish Holocaust survivors in Europe who needed a home. But the focus also grew to include the persecution of Jews in Middle Eastern countries. There were about a million of them, and their situation was also precarious. In other words, the Zionists retooled.

PART IV: THE U.N. PLAN



Jewish refugees in Haifa awaiting deportation to Cyprus by British authorities in 1947. Hans Pinn/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



The Palestinian militia leader Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini with officers on the day he was killed, April 8, 1948. Chalil Rissas



Jewish children rescued from
Auschwitz arriving in Haifa in 1945. Zoltan Kluger/GPO, via Getty Images



Palestinian bombers destroyed
buildings on Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem in March 1948. Hugo H. Mendelsohn/Agence France-Presse — Getty
Images



Refugees leaving Jenin, in the West Bank, in 1948. John Phillips/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Shutterstock

In the wake of World War II, it was the Zionists who took up arms against the British, who were intercepting ships filled with Jews displaced by the Holocaust. Zionist militias first blew up railways and bridges but escalated to killing British soldiers. To quell the violence, the British arrested more than 2,700 Jewish political leaders and fighters. But when [the attacks](#) became more deadly, the British planned to leave Palestine.²²In July 1946, bombs planted by the Irgun, a Zionist guerrilla group, killed 91 people at British headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Ben-Gurion and others condemned the attack, and the Irgun went underground.

In February 1947, the government announced that it wanted to end the mandate, submitting what it called [“the problem of Palestine” to the United Nations](#), established two years earlier as the successor to the League of Nations. The U.N. set up the Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), asking it to recommend a solution. The future of the land and its peoples — at this point, about 600,000 Jews and 1.2 million Palestinians — was back in international hands.

Bazon: In the summer of 1947, the UNSCOP delegates, who were from 11 countries, traveled to Palestine, held hearings and then recommended a [partition plan with two states](#), one Jewish and one Palestinian. The U.N. General Assembly adopted the plan by a vote of 33 to 13 with 10 abstentions in November. Why did partition gain support?

Rabinovich: If you ask yourself how the state of Israel was created, one answer is that it had a leader — Ben-

Gurion — who wanted statehood at any cost and knew how to get there. Another answer is that the world felt that it owed the Jewish people after the Holocaust. The basic argument of Zionism — that the Jews are not safe — was vindicated by the death of six million.

Dallasheh: I think there is a need to be very critical of this idea of the world owing Jews, because, yes, the world owed Jews. The Holocaust was a horrible massacre committed by Europeans and witnessed and not responded to by the U.S. and others. But I don't think the Palestinians figure that they will have to pay for it in 1946 and '47.

Yet the world sees this as an acceptable equation.

Orientalism and colonial ideology were very much at the heart of thinking that while we Europeans and the U.S. were part of this massive human tragedy, we are going to fix it at the expense of someone else. And the someone else is not important because they're Arabs, they're Palestinians and thus constructed as backward,

as not important, as people who do not have rights, as people whose catastrophe subsequently becomes insignificant.

It is important to highlight that this narrative is structured precisely by the rejection of Palestinian humanity that continues to be a part of the discourse in some circles today.



The United Nations partition plan, 1947. United Nations

Tamari: Sending the Jewish refugees to Palestine was a byproduct of European guilt, but a hypocritical kind of guilt because they did not want to bear the social and economic cost of absorbing the refugees themselves. The vast majority of Jewish refugees who came were not Zionists. They did not have a choice about where to go.

Penlar: It's true that European countries did not want Jews to come back, and those who returned to Poland were persecuted and even killed. The U.S. would only take a portion of them.

A small minority of Jews who left the displaced-persons camps for Israel tried very hard to get to the U.S. But the dominant sentiment of the refugees was in favor of the creation of a Jewish state. One did not have to be ideologically Zionist to feel this way. As one friend of mine who lost her parents in the Holocaust told me, after the war many Jewish survivors simply wanted to live with other Jews.

Bazon: Was the Holocaust the deciding factor in UNSCOP's recommendation of partition?

²³The Zionists made sure that the UNSCOP delegates would see for themselves the dilemma for Holocaust survivors by bringing members to witness the arrival in Haifa of the Exodus 1947, a ship carrying 4,515 Jewish refugees from Europe. British war boats surrounded the ship, and three people onboard were killed.

Penslar: The Holocaust was actually not in UNSCOP's brief. The delegates were specifically told: Here's the problem. There are two communities, Jewish and Arab, in Palestine, and they are at each other's throats. The British have thrown the Palestine question into the lap of the U.N. for that reason and also because Jewish guerrillas were killing their soldiers. Neither the British nor UNSCOP were thinking primarily about the Holocaust. They were thinking about what to do on the ground in Palestine.

There were two representatives from countries with large Muslim populations on UNSCOP: India and Iran. There were representatives who were sympathetic to Zionism and many who were not. When you read the [transcripts of the meetings](#) of this committee, you see that they were profoundly aware of the Palestinian as well as the Jewish viewpoint. Although the official Palestinian position was to boycott the committee, its

members spoke with Palestinians and representatives from throughout the Arab world. The committee members knew very well that the Palestinians thought they should not pay the price for the Europeans' outrageous antisemitism. The committee was faced with three choices: a unitary state in which the Jews would be dominated, a federated state or confederation, which is what India and Iran and Yugoslavia wanted, or partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The majority of the committee rejected the first option as unjust and the second option as unworkable. That left the third — partition.

²⁴The mufti instructed Palestinian nationalist leaders from Cairo, where he went after the war, not to cooperate with UNSCOP. He and other leaders saw the U.N. as an illegitimate institution, dominated by colonial powers.



²⁵ UNSCOP delegates, for example, privately met with the former mayor of Jerusalem, Hussein al-Khalidi (a relative of Rashid Khalidi, the historian).

UNSCOP considered it to be the least bad option. They did the best they could under terrible circumstances.

Rabinovich: To win votes in the U.N., there was a huge diplomatic effort by the Zionist movement, pre-state Israel, all the way from European countries to Latin America. They were very skillful at finding individuals who had relationships that could help them, like [Eddie Jacobson](#), an American Jew who owned a haberdashery store with President Truman years earlier and helped the Zionists make their case to his friend the president in 1948. There are streets in Israel named after the foreign minister in [Guatemala, Jorge García Granados](#), who organized a bloc of Latin American ambassadors to the U.N. to vote for partition.

Tamari: The Truman administration used very strong tactics to bring together many states. And by that time the Arabs were helpless to oppose this plan. Remember that the Palestinian militias and fighters who were involved in the rebellion in 1936 to '39 were substantially disarmed, and the leadership continued to be exiled in 1947 and '48.

The British were largely complicit in the Arab defeat. When the war started

26After the U.N. vote on partition in November 1947, in the months before British withdrawal in May 1948, civil war, in effect, broke out between Jews and Palestinians. at the end of 1947 between the Zionist forces and the Palestinians, the Arab Palestinians were not able to confront the new situation. It was an extremely unequal fight, and this is often forgotten in discussing the nature of the 1948 war.

Bazelon: Ben-Gurion accepted the 1947 partition plan on behalf of the Jewish community. [Palestinian](#)

[leaders](#) rejected it.27According to the 2019 documentary “Tangled Roots,” Zalman Shazar, a Zionist author who became president of Israel, said of partition that “a nation that aspires to a life chooses independence and compromises on territory.” Al-Husseini, by contrast, said that “a nation that aspires to a life does not accept the partition of its homeland.”

Why?

Jacobson: It’s often argued against the Palestinians, How come you didn’t accept partition? But it’s important not to read history retrospectively. When you look at the demographic realities of 1947 and the division of the land, it was 55 percent for the Jewish state and 45 percent for the Palestinian state even though there were double the number of Palestinians as Jews at that point. If you were a Palestinian in 1947, would you accept this offer? One needs to remember, of course, that the Palestinian national movement was ready to accept the Jews as a minority within an Arab state.

Tamari: Partition was certainly rejected by much of the Palestinian leadership, but there was no plebiscite for the people. They were not asked whether they wanted to have their own state, two states or no state. And within the Palestinian community there were two important forces, constituting at least half the Palestinian political class, which were leaning in favor of the partition. The Defense Party, headed by the Nashashibi family, saw partition as the least-bad option. The Palestinian federation of labor, which was a social democratic organization comprising the bulk of the labor movement, had two wings. One was allied with the British Labor Party and the second with the Communist Party, which followed the Soviet position in favor of partition.

Bazon: At the end of 1947, as fighting escalated, Palestinians streamed across the partition borders, leaving the Jewish state. For decades, the Zionist narrative was that Palestinians left their homes at the

urging of Arab governments, which promised they could return after a successful invasion. Arab scholars said this was false. Since 1988, Israeli academics have also written a lot about the flight and forced expulsion of the Nakba, as it's called. How did it happen?²⁸

The Israeli historian Benny Morris showed that the evidence suggested Israel bore responsibility for expulsions and mass flight as a result of the war. Other so-called New Historians have contributed revisionist scholarship about 1947 and 1948.

Bawalsa: Maybe it would be helpful if I shared my family's story of fleeing Jerusalem in December 1947. In any war, you do your best to avoid putting yourself and your children in harm's way. My mother's family from Jerusalem left their home in Talbiya, in what is today West Jerusalem, and went to Cairo where they had family. They went just thinking that they would wait it out.

But in the early months of 1948, Zionist forces terrorized Palestinians. They massacred more than a hundred people in the village of Deir Yassin.

²⁹In April 1948, Jewish paramilitary groups killed more than a hundred of the roughly 600 residents of the village Deir Yassin, including whole families.

They destroyed Qatamon, an affluent Palestinian neighborhood near Talbiya, where many friends of my grandparents lived. There were very intense intimidation campaigns. A couple of months ago, my mother heard on the news that some of the radical Israeli settlers in the West Bank were dropping fliers in Palestinian villages and towns telling people to leave, to go to Jordan or face another Nakba. She was shaken because it reminded her of stories her parents told about Zionists using the radio or loudspeakers to threaten Palestinians to leave Jerusalem or their fate would be [similar to Deir Yassin](#).

My grandparents didn't expect to stay in Cairo. But since December 1947, no one in my family has entered our home in Jerusalem. My grandparents were able to briefly return to Palestine with their children to live with my grandmother's family in Ramallah during the period of Jordanian rule until 1967, but they were not allowed to go to the west side of Jerusalem. Following 1967, we've only been able to go back as U.S. citizens — tourists.³⁰From the end of the 1948 war to 1967, Jordan controlled East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Dallasheh: Deir Yassin becomes a focal point. A few survivors were put on a truck and paraded around

Jerusalem, and the terror factor is significant in causing people to flee.

Plan Dalet in 1948 is also one of the most controversial aspects of the war. It was a military plan that mentioned expelling the population of Palestinian towns and villages along roads that the Haganah, the Jewish defense force, was trying to control. It's the one document that offers a kind of blueprint for expulsion, and people argue over whether it was in fact a blueprint. But to me, it's only one factor among many that leads to the conclusion that Israel caused the crisis of Palestinian refugees, including

preventing their return.³¹The Haganah finalized this plan in March 1948 to take control of Palestinian towns and villages within the territory of the Jewish state as defined by the U.N. partition plan. If Palestinians resisted, they were to be expelled outside the proposed borders, the plan said.

Rabinovich: Atrocities were perpetrated on both sides,³²In

April 1948, for example, Palestinian militia forces attacked a convoy of ambulances and supply trucks headed to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, shooting to death nearly 80 of the passengers, who were doctors, nurses, medical students and professors. just to remember that.

Penslar: Public memory is still not resolved about the nature of the Palestinian flight and dispossession. The Haganah itself, at the end of June 1948, produced a document saying that the most important reason for [the flight was Israeli military action](#). They didn't hide this. The document is available online in Hebrew and in English.

This question really shouldn't be a subject of ongoing debates. But it is because for many people who are attached to Israel, it's hard to confront the fact that **Palestinians were forcibly dispossessed.**³³ Issues like these have been

especially divisive at some U.S. universities since the Hamas attack on Israel of Oct. 7. Three critics of Harvard since then — the former Harvard president Larry Summers, the hedge fund manager Bill Ackman and Representative Elise Stefanik — [criticized](#) the university's choice of Penslar to co-chair a Presidential Task Force on Combating Anti-Semitism. Summers said that he "publicly minimized Harvard's anti-Semitism problem." In response, the Association for Israel Studies and the American Academy for Jewish Research expressed [support](#) for Penslar, and more than 400 scholars of Jewish, Israel, antisemitism and Holocaust studies have signed a [letter](#) praising Penslar as "perfectly suited" to lead the task force.

PART V: THE LEGACY OF 1948



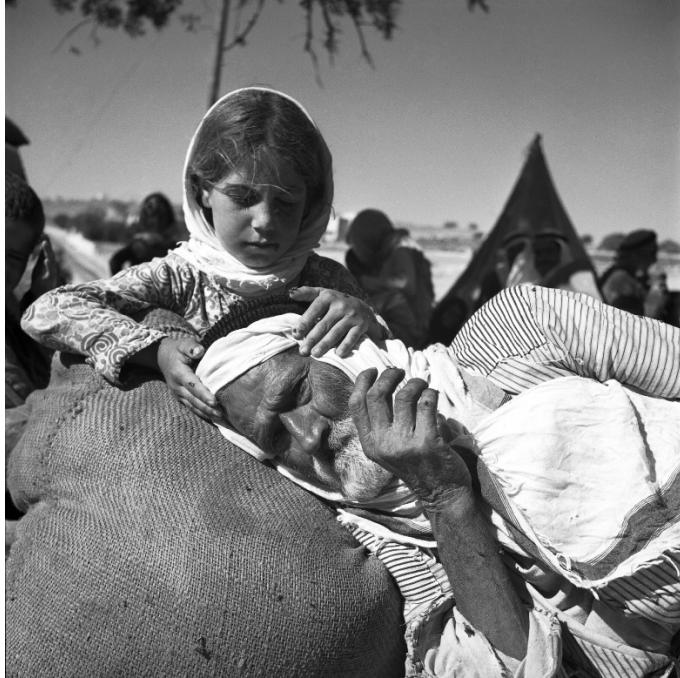
Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion (foreground, second from left) seeing off the last British troops in July 1948. Bettmann/Getty Images



A Palestinian refugee cut off from her home by the border established after the 1948 war. United Nations



Jewish refugees from Iraq arriving at Tel Aviv's Lod Airport in 1951. Ruth Orkin



Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in 1949. United

Nations



A kindergarten protected by sandbags in 1953, in Kibbutz Eyal in northern Israel. David Seymour/Magnum Photos



In 1952, an estimated 6,000 Palestinian refugees lived in the Nahr el Bared camp in Lebanon. S. Madver/UNRWA

On May 14, 1948, Israel declared itself a state. The next day, the British began leaving, and Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq attacked the new state, later joined by Jordan. The internal battle between Israelis and Palestinians became a regional war. Israel fought for its survival, and the Arab countries said they were fighting to liberate Palestine. But they did not effectively deliver on their promises of military and economic support to the Palestinians.

Bazon: How did the Israeli military win the war?

Tamari: I think the Arab defeat was almost a foregone conclusion. The neighboring Arab states were still semi-protectorates under British or French control. The only real fighting forces at the time within Palestine were under the command of Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini



³⁴ He was from the same family as the mufti and had broad appeal among Palestinians. His death in battle in April 1948 was a major blow to the Palestinians.

and a small militia in Jaffa called al-Najjadah. The volunteers who came from Syria and Lebanon, the Arab Liberation Army, were confined to the Galilee. They were easily crushed by the Zionist forces despite heavy resistance.

Penslar: There are a couple of mythological narratives. One is the old narrative: The Zionists were badly armed, poorly trained, and it was just miraculous that they were able to defeat the Palestinians and then the Arab armies. But then there's a counternarrative, which I think is also mythological, which we've heard a little bit today, which is that the Zionists crushed the Palestinians and the Arab armies, and it was inevitable that they would win. But in fact, nobody fought well in 1948. The Arab states, for the most part, could not field effective armies. Jordan had a good army, but that was about it. The Zionist forces were not well armed. They were not that well trained.

Early in the war, the Palestinians actually had the upper hand. In the winter of 1948, they controlled the roads and rural areas. All the more so when the Arab-state armies invaded in May. The first month of fighting was very difficult for Israel, and it wasn't clear they were going to survive.

It was only when the Zionist forces were extremely aggressive in the spring of 1948, and began dispossessing the Palestinians in earnest, that the Jewish defense forces gained the upper hand.

35 The Israeli Army destroyed about 400 to 500 Palestinian villages. All told, more than 700,000 people fled or were expelled in 1947 and 1948.

The rest of the war was very much in Israel's hands. But there's a difference between understanding how Israel was able to win the war and arguing that that victory was inevitable. It wasn't.

Jacobson: We should remember that the Arab countries that invaded Palestine had their own interests as well.

They were not there genuinely out of an interest to help and secure and support the Palestinians only.

Rabinovich: By now you have a system of Arab states, and it has a number of dividing lines. The most important one was the rivalry between the two Hashemite kingdoms — the ones created in the early 1920s in Iraq and Transjordan or Jordan — and the Egyptian-Saudi axis. When you look at the pattern of the war, you see how it plays out. King Abdullah of Jordan was the archenemy of the mufti, and in 1948 he played a dual role, pushing for war while in practice accepting the U.N. partition plan.³⁶ In his 1988 book "Collusion Across the Jordan," the historian Avi Shlaim writes

about secret negotiations in 1947 over partition between King Abdullah and Zionist representatives.

But when war broke out in 1948, he saw his chance to occupy Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank so he could extend his emirate in the desert into a real kingdom.

The Egyptians were determined to deny that. At some point, an Egyptian military column moves north from Egypt through the Gaza Strip to 30 kilometers south of Tel Aviv in Ashdod. In military terms, they should have proceeded toward Tel Aviv. Instead, they take a right and go in the direction of Jerusalem, because they are worried that Abdullah, their rival in Arab politics, could take over. When you analyze the reasons for the Israeli success and the Palestinian Arab failure in the war, inter-Arab politics played a major role.

Bazon: Before the war, there were around 500,000 Jews and 450,000 Palestinians on the 55 percent of the land that the U.N. designated for a Jewish state. When the war ended in July 1949, Israel controlled 78 percent of the territory, and the population was mostly Jewish, with only 155,000 Palestinians. Around this time, hundreds of thousands of Jews came to Israel from countries with Muslim majorities, including Iraq, Yemen

and Libya, some voluntarily and some because they were pushed out.

In other words, war, flights and expulsions transformed the demographics of Israel. What were the arguments about a Palestinian right to return after the war?

Penslar: As the war wore on, the Israeli government issued a decree not to allow the refugees to return. They did this for a variety of reasons, including fear that there would be militants among them and fear that the Palestinians would constitute a fifth column — civilians who would undermine national security.

Dallasheh: The Israeli authorities passed a law appropriating the property of people who left, destroyed their homes so they couldn't return and used the stones to build new settlements. This was done with complete disregard for U.N. Resolution 194, which

provided for the right of return in 1948 to Palestinians who wished to go back, and in order to circumvent this possibility.³⁷ The resolution, passed by the U.N. General Assembly in December 1948, said that “the refugees

wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date.” It also said compensation should be paid for the loss or damage of property.

Bazon: What other choices did the new government of Israel led by Ben-Gurion make that have an impact today? Were there other, perhaps better, alternatives?

Rabinovich: I wrote a book called “The Road Not Taken.” It deals with the question of why the war did not end in a peace agreement. I would say Ben-Gurion’s logic, and I’m not justifying or denouncing it, but his logic was there was a partition plan. We accepted it, they rejected it, they fought against us. The Arab states invaded us. We barely survived. And therefore, at the end of the war we want more territory and fewer Arabs.

Jacobson: Following partition, there were different paths that could have been taken. The Palestinian Communists were a very small group, but visionary.

Together with the Jewish Communist Party, they did accept the partition plan.

The 155,000 Palestinian citizens who remained in Israel following the war were granted citizenship but also placed under military rule

³⁸ Palestinians in Israel had a right to vote beginning in 1949. But military rule subjected them to curfews and restricted them from moving freely or holding political meetings. They could be detained or deported for breaking the rules. until December 1966.

This was an extremely traumatic period for the Palestinians, given the restrictions on their civil and political rights, and it is still very much present in the national memory of Palestinian citizens in Israel. In the Jewish Israelis' memory, on the other hand, this period was pretty much erased. The exception is the Kafr Qasim massacre of October 1956, which exposed the Israeli public to the realities of military rule.

³⁹ On the eve of a military campaign in the Sinai Peninsula, the Israeli authorities imposed a 5 p.m. curfew on Palestinian villages near the Jordanian border. People who worked out of town did not receive notice of the curfew. Nearly 50 Palestinians were shot to death on their way home to the village Kafr Qasim.

Dallasheh: Historians refuse to accept inevitability.

History develops as a result of human agency. But I think a lot of alternatives were foreclosed in the aftermath of the Nakba, in the aftermath of the violence,

in the aftermath of the Israeli insistence not only on preventing the return of the refugees but on dispossessing Palestinians all the way through the mid-1960s. Not only did the Israeli authorities continue expelling Palestinians, they also confiscated the vast majority of Palestinians' lands. ⁴⁰ In 1950, Israel forced nearly 2,500 Palestinian

residents of the city al-Majdal, in southern Israel, into Gaza.

Penslar: I know people like to talk about alternative histories, but I would focus on a different point of view. We can look at the story of Israel/Palestine from within, but if we look at it from without, we see just how dependent all of these players are on the great powers and on the international community. I mean, in 1947 and '48, things could not have turned out the way they did without the support of the Truman administration or the Soviet Union. In May of 1947, the Soviets suddenly adopted a pro-Zionist position and approved of the creation of a Jewish state. And where the Soviet Union went, the Soviet bloc states were

bound to follow. The Soviets also authorized the Czech government to sell to Israel a vast amount of newly manufactured weaponry. Without that materiel, it would have been much harder for Israel to win the 1948 war.

41Soviet Communists denounced Zionism as a form of bourgeois nationalism (rather than class-based solidarity). But in 1947, the Soviet Union supported the establishment of Israel to diminish British influence in the Middle East and in hopes that the new state would be socialist.

There's a similar dynamic now in the war in Gaza, on both sides. Israel depends on the United States, and Hamas is funded by Qatar and Iran. To the extent that we can imagine roads not taken or roads to take in the future, we have to think of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict much more globally and less regionally.

Rabinovich: I want to speak about the destructive power of nationalism. What we have here is the collision between two national movements that were born at about the same time. In 1905, the Lebanese intellectual Najib Azoury published a book in which he said these

two national movements would have a destructive effect on the whole region. At the end of World War I, three multinational empires collapsed, the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian. None of them was great at that point. But look at what they were replaced by — mostly ethnic conflicts and the collision between national movements in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Levant.

Dallasheh: It is important to remember the role the U.S. has played by giving almost unwavering support to the Israeli side at the expense of the Palestinian national project. If history is helpful, it's to make us more aware of how these dynamics work.

Jacobson: It is also important to understand that this is a national conflict with religious elements fused into it. And that history is not dichotomous and binary. It's much more complicated than just "us against them."

Tamari: The Palestinians were not able to rely on the U.S., Europe or the Soviet Union to stop the impending

catastrophe in 1948, and that is also true for the current war in Gaza. There are important differences, however. World public opinion and significant political parties have shifted in favor of the Palestinians, despite early sympathies with Israel following the Hamas attack of Oct. 7. There is continued international support for a two-state solution, but the current Israeli government insists on maintaining control over the West Bank under the guise of security. In the short run, this prolongs the life of that regime, but in the long run it will bring its own undoing.

Bawalsa: Any real discussion of what is going on today has to start with a century ago, with World War I, when Western powers redrew the Middle East for their own interests. We who live here are known as Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians, Lebanese and Israelis because of the war. And in so many other ways, we continue to feel its effects.

The Panelists:

Nadim Bawalsa is a historian of modern Palestine and the author of the 2022 book “Transnational Palestine: Migration and the Right of Return Before 1948.” He is the associate editor for The Journal of Palestine Studies.

Leena Dallahseh is a historian of Palestine and Israel who has held academic positions at Columbia University, New York University and Rice University. She is working on a book about the city of Nazareth in the 1940s and 1950s.

Abigail Jacobson is a historian in the department of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her latest book, written with Moshe Naor, is “Oriental Neighbors: Middle Eastern Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine.”

Derek Penslar is a professor of Jewish history and the director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University. His latest book is “Zionism: An Emotional State.”

Itamar Rabinovich is a history professor and emeritus president at Tel Aviv University. His books include “The Road Not Taken: Early Arab-Israeli Negotiations.” He was the Israeli ambassador to the United States from 1993 to 1996.

Salim Tamari is a sociologist at Birzeit University in the West Bank and a research associate at the Institute for Palestine Studies. His latest book is “The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine.”

Emily Bazelon, a staff writer for The New York Times Magazine, moderated the discussion.

ANNOTATION PHOTOGRAPHS: Herzl: Ullstein Bild, via Getty Images; Faisal Al-Hashemi: James Russell & Sons/Bain Collection/Library of Congress; al-Husseini: Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress; Jabotinsky: National Photo Collection of Israel/GPO; Ben-Gurion: Abraham Pisarek/Ullstein Bild, via Getty Images; Weizmann: General Photographic Agency/Getty Images; Hitler and al-Husseini: Heinrich Hoffmann/Ullstein Bild, via Getty Images; al-Khalidi: Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress; Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs.