

Ya'acov Shimoni , *The Arabs and the Approaching War With Israel, 1945-1948,*” *HaMizrah HeHadash*, The New East Quarterly of the Israel Oriental Society, Vol. XII/ No. 3 (47), 1962, pp. 189-211.

Shimoni first goes back to the early years of the Second World War, when the Arab struggle against Zionism lapsed into dormancy. Among the Arabs of Palestine this was due to the lack of a recognized national leadership – hundreds of leaders were in Germany, deported or in jail; to more stringent measures by the British, readier for repression than before the war; and to the toll taken by government and Jewish punitive measures and above all by internecine terrorism. So exhausted were the Arabs of Palestine that they were unable to put to good effect the important political advantage conferred on them by the definitive limitation of Jewish immigration in the White Paper of May 1939. As for the Arab countries, these were for them years of wary neutrality, of awaiting the outcome of the world war.

The reassertion of Allied power in the Middle East and the defeat of the Axis in Africa changed the picture radically. After all, it was the Allies who would after the war lay down the law, rewarding their friends, and it was with them that a settlement had to be sought.

The renewal of the Arab struggle for Palestine was marked by the gradual passing of the leadership and the initiative from the Arabs of Palestine to the independent and semi-independent Arab countries. This process had its beginning in the intervention of the Arab kings in the Palestine disturbances in October, 1936; Britain recognized it officially by inviting the Arab countries to voice their views on the future of Palestine in February, 1939. From 1945 on the Arab states assumed a continually increasing share of responsibility in the Arab struggle for Palestine.

They were better equipped for it than the Arabs of Palestine. They had administrative staffs, diplomatic representations, budgets, means of political and economic pressure and, in the last resort, military forces. But they proved unable to exercise their responsibility for the Palestine struggle in a constructive manner, embarking instead on a course that was irrational and inconsistent. On the one hand they took up a stand that was so intransigent, unrealistic and out of proportion to the political and military strength of the Jewish position as to make a settlement impossible and a clash inevitable; on the other hand, they did not seriously prepare for such a clash.

This failure to seek a realistic compromise was primarily caused by the intransigence of the Palestinian Arab leaders; but a deeper cause should be sought in the division in Arab public life everywhere between the realm of stylized declarations to which everyone, swayed by the charm of language, symbolically subscribes, and the realm of action. Solemn undertakings were published – oil wells would be blown up,

forty million Arabs would come to the aid of Palestine, the Jews would be thrown into the sea – until the day of reckoning came and the Arab countries, having burned their bridges behind them by their declaration, plunged headlong into a war for which they had failed to prepare.

“In 1943, when the time came to jump on the Allied bandwagon, the Arabs of Palestine found themselves without accredited spokesmen. The coalition Higher Arab Committee of 1936 had long since disintegrated. The first initiative for reorganizing a representation came from economic circles, because these were the only nuclei of leadership that were left. They were gradually joined by local civic leaders with the exception of those closely identified with the Husainis. By 1944, however, the growing general interest in political issues and organization forced even the Husainis into renewed organized participation in public life.

This was also the year of deliberations on Arab unity which gave birth to the Arab League and at which the Arab states naturally wished the Palestinians to be represented. The latter, however, found it impossible to agree on a delegation, and in the end one man was sent, Musa al-Alami. The dissension among the Palestinians and their decreasing say in their own cause were reflected by the Charter of the League, which provided that Palestine Arab affairs would be dealt with by a representative appointed by the League. Soon controversy over Musa al’ Alami’s personality and activities in that capacity again split the Arabs of Palestine. All attempts to reach an agreement among them proving fruitless, a delegation of leaders from the Arab countries headed by Jamil Mardam of Syria, then Chairman of the League Council, took up the task and ultimately brought about the reconstitution of a coalition Supreme Arab Committee in November, 1945. Three months latter Jamal al-Husaini, back from Rhodesia, announced the ”enlargement” of the Committee in such a manner as to give him and his faction control of it. The Husainis’ opponents retorted by setting up a rival Committee. In June 1946, the League, unable to tolerate a split at the very time when the Anglo-American Commission on Palestine was conducting its deliberations, declared both the Supreme Arab Committee and its rival dissolved and appointed a new sac headed by Haj Amin al-Husaini who had meantime escaped from France. From then on the most intransigent faction among the Palestine Arabs was in control of the Committee, the Palestinians’ only political arm.

Thus while the Palestinians were no longer capable of leading the struggle on their own behalf, the Arab states, which had taken over, had delegated full freedom of action to Haj Amin and his associates without imposing on them any of the responsibilities of statesmanship to which they themselves were subjected. The Palestinian horse, with Haj Amin in the driver’s seat, was destined to run away with the cart of the Arab states and their regular armies and international policy.

In these last stages of the Arab struggle against Zionism increasing attention was devoted to economic issues – economic warfare on the one hand, bolstering Arab resources and the land base on the other.

Here an important role was played by the campaign against the sale of land to Jews. In 1943/44 a “National Fund” was set up to buy up land threatened with transfer to Jewish hands. In the four years of its existence the Fund, backed by bank loans and public contributions, collected some £P100,000 and purchased an estimated 1500 hectares. In relation to Jewish land purchases this was a limited achievement indeed, but the propaganda drive that accompanied it did a great deal to spread a consciousness that land sales to Jews were treason to the cause – though here again this consciousness was mainly outward and symbolic, and a number of the National Fund’s protagonists themselves sold land to Jews.

The Fund enjoyed mainly the support of one faction, the same group that had worked for the formation of a national leadership. While this faction’s opponents could not very well agitate against the principle of redeeming land from Zionism, they rallied round a competing program, published in 1945: Musa al-Alami’s “Constructive Scheme”. Land sales to Jews, al-Alami held, stemmed from rural destitution: village rehabilitation and development would cure the problem at its root, and were a more effective way of using funds. Al-Alami believed that £P 3,000 would be needed to put an average Palestinian village on its feet, and thought in terms of an annual budget of a million pounds to rehabilitate 30 villages per annum.

Backed by rival factions, the two programs competed for moral and financial support not only in Palestine but at the Arab League. In constructive social and economic endeavor as in politics, the Arabs of Palestine had been reduced to dependence on the Arab states. In 1946, the League Council, after examining both schemes, decided to west up an all Arab Land Bank with a capital of one million Egyptian pounds to be raised by floating shares among the public. A reserve fund of a quarter of a million pounds would be set up by the Arab governments, who would also guarantee a 5% dividend to shareholders for ten years. The bank was registered in Egypt in 1947, and most of its shares were taken up by big banks in the Arab countries. It was not able to begin its activities before the war.

The Iraqi government, which took the most active part in the Arab-Jewish struggle throughout this period, allocated a total of a quarter of a million pounds to al-Alami’s project in 1946 and 1947. They were used to set up a model village; the scheme was interrupted by the war, after which al-Alami devoted the rest of the funds to refugee rehabilitation.

All in all, the constructive long-range economic activities that were needed to back the Arabs' political struggle came too late. Even then they were handicapped by factionalism and the unwillingness to sacrifice private interests.

The Arabs' positive economic measures against the Jews of Palestine were accompanied by actual economic warfare: the boycott of "Zionist" goods and services, and theoretically the discontinuation of supplies to the Jewish population. But here too, as far as the Palestine Arabs were concerned, the boycott was very largely an empty word. Jewish goods had a good reputation on the Arab market; Jewish services, particularly in the medical field, but also in law, were something the Arabs were not prepared to do without; and the Jewish market was one of the foundations of the Arab national economy in Palestine. To observe the boycott, the Arabs would have had to give proof of a national discipline that transcended their normal economic life and interests as well as the habits they had formed; and of this they were incapable, even under the whip of terrorism.

In this field too, then, the initiative and the implementation passed to the other Arab Countries. They had the police, the customs and the courts, and above all they were not so intimately involved. At first there were loopholes in the boycott: Palestine Jewish goods could be disguised, transactions conducted through third countries, etc. But the boycott legislation was continually tightened, and gradually complete isolation was brought about between the Arab countries and Jewish Palestine. While inflicting heavy damage on both sides (the author quotes some estimates), the boycott did not strangle Israel; but it had incalculable psychological consequences. By creating an impenetrable barrier, it has mad strangers and foes of two brother peoples till so recently enmeshed in an intimate network of daily contacts.

Propaganda, carried on through a succession of missions, delegations and information bureaus in the world's capitals, had always been one of the Arabs' main weapon against Zionism. After the war, when a wave of sympathy swept the world for the Jewish victims of Nazism while at the same time the past collaboration of many Arab leaders with the Axis reduced the Arabs' standing in the councils of the victors, it was widely felt that this propaganda would have to be not only renewed but also overhauled – to represent the Palestine Arabs as progressive, moderate, democratic, cultured, full of understanding for the Jewish problem and ready for compromise and constructive solutions.

The initiative was again al-Alami's, and again the decision was up to the Arab League. In 1944 it decided in favor of setting up Palestine Arab propaganda centers which the Arab states would finance and generally supervise without being formally responsible for them. The bureaus were organized the following year by al-Alami in Jerusalem, London and Washington, and staffed by young intellectuals associated with him. In relation to the other bureaus and propaganda media maintained by the Arab states

and pro-Arab organizations in the West, their budgets were very limited. Iraq contributed the bulk of the allocations, and after the bureaus too had fallen prey to factionalism, the entire allocation.

Propaganda was also needed in the Arab world, where it was realized that the Palestine problem was of no immediate concern to the general population. The period of 1944 to 1947 saw the formation in most Arab capitals of committees, commissions, associations and bureaus for the defense of Arab Palestine, for the struggle against Zionism, etc. The issue occupied an increasing share in the press and radio, at meetings and congresses originally devoted to other questions. Palestinian Arab exiles played an important role in this respect (Communists used these “Committees for the Liberation of Palestine” as front organizations).

While propaganda abroad represented the Arabs as moderate and progressive, propaganda at home swung over to the other extreme (also doing the Arab cause a disservice by representing the Jews of Palestine as weaker than they actually were). Yet, the discrepancy between what the Arab argued at home and what they claimed of foreign purposes, could not be hidden for long – particularly since actual Arab policy did not reflect moderation or a constructive approach. Arab propaganda was not integrated or purposeful.

What program for Palestine stood behind this intense political and diplomatic activity, and what were the steps which the Arabs envisaged and actually carried out in order to achieve this plan? Actual plans and proposals can be found only in what was submitted to the foreign world – at home the issue was never clarified in a pragmatic manner, although there were serious differences of opinion within the Arab camp about the future of Palestine – while the tactical and practical moves contemplated emerge only from inside information such as the protocols of the secret sessions of the Arab League Council.

There was no single detailed plan for Palestine on which all the Arabs agreed, but the general idea was illustrated by the proposal submitted to the London conference of 1946. It provided for a Palestine independent or gradually becoming independent, in which the numerical status quo could be preserved: the Jews would be represented in the parliamentary and government institutions of the new state, their personal and civil rights would be guaranteed, but all further Jewish immigration and land settlement would stop.

This general scheme, which fell in with the White Paper of 1939 and to which Britain’s foreign policy of the day would gladly have subscribed, reappears with slight variations in dozens of resolutions and memoranda drawn up by the League and most Arab states. It was, however, destined to fail for two important reasons. In the first place, it was so far removed from the stand of the Jewish population of Palestine and of

enlightened would opinion as to be divorced from reality, and secondly, it could not even claim to have the backing of all the Arabs. On the one hand, Iraq and Trans-Jordan had their own schemes; on the other, the recognized leadership of the Arabs of Palestine, though appointed by the League, would never have abided by the London proposal of 1946.

For the Palestine leadership refused to concede even individual political rights to the Jews, or at least to those who had arrived in the country after the First World War, or those who had not been born in Palestine. The Supreme Arab Committee was also more extreme in matters of procedure: it refused to attend the 1946 London talks, or to testify before the U.N. Special Committee. Although the Palestine Arab leadership had no plan of its own, unless pushing the Jews into the sea could be described as a plan, it dissociated itself from the scheme submitted by the Arab states in London. Far from reining in such extremism, however, the League and the Arab statesmen threw the full weight of their prestige behind Haj Amin's group and repressed any hint of opposition to it, even when this opposition was more consistent with the League's official plan than was Haj Amin's intransigence.

Only two Arab statesmen had the courage, the wisdom and the immediate political interests to work out plans that were more practical than the official Arab scheme and that might have prevented the creation of the State of Israel or otherwise reduced it. They were Nuri Sa'id of Iraq and King "Abdullah of Trans-Jordan, whose plans for Palestine reveal characteristic similarities and differences.

Both statesmen grasped that the Jews of Palestine would never agree to an outright freezing of their numerical and political status and that in this they would have the backing of world public opinion. Nuri understood that the only choice was between a sovereign Jewish state in a partitioned Palestine and an autonomous Jewish entity in a federated Palestine, or even better in some larger unit. Jewish political rights could no longer be denied: they could be effectively limited only by subordinating them to a wider political unit in which the Jewish danger to Arab unity could be effectively neutralized, and perhaps done away with some day. Nuri probably hoped that in such a scheme, which would have to be associated with some sort of a Greater Syria or Fertile Crescent plan, he would even have the support of some sections of Jewish public opinion; and he must have expected it to win the favor of the West and world public opinion.

Nuri's scheme was part of a broader plan for the future of the Middle East on a basis of British-Arab cooperation which he submitted to the British Government in December, 1942. The other Arab states vigorously opposed the plan, which they considered a scheme for Hashemite expansionism, and harmony at League meetings and other Arab gatherings was maintained only by shelving such controversial ideas for radical changes in the *status quo*.

Abdullah favored roughly the same Greater Syria as Nuri, but while the Iraqi statesman had left open the question of how it would be governed, Abdullah wished to rule Syria himself, a return to the Hashemites' glorious Kingdom of Damascus of 1919-20. Abdullah understood full well the obstacles in the way to this target, and saw the extension of his domination over Western Palestine, or part of it, as a springboard to it. But Western Palestine was also a worthy prize in itself, and with time 'Abdullah appears to have become resigned to this more modest ambition.

In his desire to extend his rule over Palestine, it was clear that 'Abdullah was prepared to grant to the Jews, in return for their recognition of his sovereignty, far broader a measure of autonomy than Nuri had envisaged. If worst came to worst 'Abdullah was even willing to resign himself to a Jewish state in part of Western Palestine, provided he could have the rest. The details of 'Abdullah's plan, if he had a specific plan, are unknown; his declarations, while profuse, were always vague and ambiguous, and it is likely that, rather than work for too specific a goal, he preferred to rely on his pragmatic political sense to secure what could be secured. What the British offered 'Abdullah in connection with their withdrawal from Palestine seems also to have been ambiguous. Anyway, the Arabs charge that when he invaded Western Palestine in May, 1948, 'Abdullah did not intend to attack Israel but only to occupy, in collusion with the Jews, the Arab part of the country. There is supporting evidence of this in the 'Abdullah's forces fought the Jews mainly outside the territory awarded by the U.N. resolution to the Jewish state (e.g. in Jerusalem_ but hardly attacked the rest; in the speed with which the political and juridical steps annexing Arab Western Palestine and creating the Kingdom of Jordan were taken against the vociferous opposition of the other Arab states; and in the persistent reports of 'Abdullah's eagerness to make peace with Israel (some details and sources are quoted).

The resistance of the Jewish population of Palestine to the White Paper policy made it clear [already in 1938]to the [Arab leaders that in the last resort](#) they would need more than the political and economic measures described, and that even guerilla band warfare on the 1936-39 scale would not be enough. The turning point in this respect must have been reached sometime in 1946. The meeting of Arab heads of state at Inshas castle near Cairo in May of that year was still satisfied with general formulas about "taking all measures" to defend Palestine, giving its Arabs financial and other assistance in their struggle, and branding as "hostile" any country not accepting the Arab plans for Palestine; but in June, at its meeting in Bludan in Syria, the Arab League Council adopted, in addition to such stereotyped resolutions, a series of secret decisions whose general tenor was soon known and whose text has since been published. These provided that if the recommendations of the Anglo-American Committee were accepted, 1) the Arab states could not stop their peoples from volunteering to defend Palestine and from contributing "money, arms and manpower"; 2) no further (oil) concessions would be given to England

or America, their interests would no longer be supported and existing concessions might also be withdrawn. From then on the secret Bludan resolutions were constantly brandished by Arab spokesmen. After the war each Arab state accused the others of not having abided by them.

After the report of the U.N. Committee of Palestine, in the fall of 1947, the League organs decided to apply the sanctions of the Bludan resolutions if the report was approved. Now, however, the question of resort to military force came to the foreground. Syria and Iraq favored the speedy intervention of the Arab states' regular armies; Egypt was against. Abdullah took no part in the debate – he had already announced to the League that Trans-Jordan was retaining freedom of action with regard to the Bludan resolutions.

It cannot, of course, be established whether the Iraqis' call for the use of regular armies was sincere, or whether, knowing in advance that it would be rejected, they were simply preparing a case for themselves as the real defenders of the Arab cause. Some light on this may be shed by Arab action on the second point of the secret Bludan resolutions: the oil concessions. Time and again Iraq announced that it was ready to withdraw them and discontinue oil production, despite the tremendous sacrifice which this entailed, if only Saudi Arabia would do the same; and time and again Saudi Arabia announced the same, if only Iraq undertook to do so too. Never, however, did the two states agree on a way of implementing these statements.

The question of resort to military force was settled by a compromise suggested by League Secretary-General 'Abdul-Rahman 'Azzam: the regular Arab armies would be stationed on the frontiers of Palestine, while actual military operations, if the U.N. resolved to partition Palestine and to set up a Jewish state, would be carried only by Palestine guerilla units with the help of "volunteers" from other Arab countries, assisted, financed, equipped and armed by their governments with an initial grant of a million pounds sterling. This assistance was to be organized by a supervisory military commission headed by an Iraqi officer, Brigadier Isma'il Safwat; in the event, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon were the only states that sent representatives to this commission.

After the Palestine defeat, the Arab states were destined to adopt one of two possible ways of explaining their military failure. Egypt's officers claimed that they had consistently opposed committing any regular forces, which they knew were not sufficiently prepared, to the fighting in Palestine, and that the ill-fated decision had been imposed on them by King Farouk, the politicians, Premier Nuqrashi Pasha or the British, as the case might be; corruption, faulty equipment and lack of arms had doomed the Arab armies. The Iraqis, on the other hand, claimed the regular forces should have been committed more fully and preparations for this made earlier, as they themselves had advocated.

Even after the U.N. had adopted its Palestine resolution, the heads of the Arab states again endorsed, in December, 1947, the Egyptian-sponsored strategy of maintaining their regular forces on the borders and leaving the fighting to irregular units. In addition they decided to allot to the Palestine campaign 19,000 rifles and another million pounds. Quotas were set for each state. Brigadier Safwat was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the volunteer units.

When military operations in Palestine began, the Palestine units were drawn mainly from two sources: the para-military rival formations of al-Futuwwa and an-Najada, reluctantly combined into one force by resolution of the Supreme Arab Committee in the fall of 1947 and more suitable for policing and civil defense than for actual fighting; and the traditional type of guerrilla bands that had been the core of the disturbances of 1936-39. These were formed mainly through local initiative, and throughout the spring of 1948 Haj Amin and the Supreme Committee attempted to assert their control over them and forge them into one organization.

The volunteer "Liberation Army", whose first units crossed into Palestine in January, 1948, consolidated its positions in the succeeding two months in the Arab population areas of Galilee and the Jenin-Nablus-Tulkarm triangle without being disturbed by the British security forces. Its two main attacks on Jewish settlements, on February 16 and in mid-April, were repelled with heavy casualties. In April it consisted of 6000-8000 men, mainly Syrians, Palestinians and Iraqis. Its men were volunteers; officers and NCO's were "on leave" from regular Arab armies. It was supposed to operate in conjunction with local units, but full coordination was never established.

Even before this Liberation Army suffered its military reverses, it had become clear that it was not the instrument through which the Arab states could hope to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state without becoming involved in a full-scale war. Safwat never actually took command, and neither he nor the League ever exercised control over the activities of the commander in the field, the Syrian Fawzi al-Qawuqji. Within the Liberation Army itself there was no coordination either, and Qawuqji's lieutenants frequently acted on their own. This held doubly for the local guerilla bands, whether or not they were formally subject to Haj Amin and the Supreme Committee. The situation was not improved by the League's appointment of 'Abdul-Qader al-Hussaini as the commander of local forces –as a concession to Haj Amin. The "Liberation Army" was woefully ill-equipped: Syria had been the only country to supply its modest quota of rifles, and the financial allocations decided on by the League had not be implemented either.

The regular session of the League Council in February 1948 was again marked by an Iraqi demand to field the regular armies and Haj Amin's opposing claim that he be

accorded a more important role in the leadership of the struggle. Nothing was done, and the old stand was reiterated. By April it had become crystal-clear that the Jews were proceeding with their preparations to set up a state despite the Arab threats and the hesitations that were again becoming evident at the U.N.; that the Arabs of Palestine had completely disintegrated in terms of morale and as a fighting force; and that the volunteer units were no match for the Jews. Yet throughout the month the Arab statesmen persisted in their resolve not to have their regular armies intervene. ‘Azzam Pasha himself testified that while he had expected ‘Abdullah’s Arab Legion to move in view of the King’s determination to play a lone hand, the invasion of the other Arab armies was “a surprise” to him. As late as May 14th ‘Azzam was explaining to ‘Abdullah and to Syria’s President why the Arab armies should not march.

At the end of April the Arab statesmen called a joint meeting of their Chiefs of Staff in order to establish the prospects of a combined invasion of Palestine by their regular armies. The Chiefs of Staff pronounced that such a step, to be successful, would presuppose the participation of a minimum of five divisions and six air squadrons, all acting under a joint command. Since such a force could not be assembled, this amounted to a ruling that an invasion would be suicidal.

The decision to mount such an invasion just the same, which was presumably taken at the Damascus meeting of the Political Committee of the League on May 11-14, (unless one assumes that Egypt jumped the gun on May 15th and the other states followed nilly-willy) was imposed on the Arab Chiefs of Staff against their better judgment. They were told to make do with what forces they had. An Iraqi officer, General Nur-ud-Din Mahmud, was appointed joint Commander-in-Chief of all Arab forces, regular and irregular, although a few days later the post had to be given to King ‘Abdullah and General Mahmud was demoted to Deputy Commander-in-Chief. The joint command was a fiction in any case; the various armies moved without coordination or even consultation with each other.

This fateful sudden reversal of the Arab strategy in the very last days before May 15th will not be fully explained until all the relevant historical documents come to light, but four basic considerations may be assumed to have been decisive:

1. The irregular Palestine Arab forces and the volunteer units had failed in the first four months of 1948, while at the same time the victories of the Jewish forces had not been so overwhelming as to allow the Arab statesmen to suppose that they could crush the regular armies too;
2. The Arab leaders underestimated the determination of the Jews to hold out even if hopelessly outnumbered, and deluded themselves by their own statements about “forty million Arabs” and “fighting to the last drop of blood”;

3. Washington's wavering and the formal withdrawal of its support of Partition, in March, led the Arab statesmen to think that world public opinion could still be deterred from trying to implement the U.N. resolutions, and that an all-out invasion would persuade the powers to desist from action.

4. 'Abdullah's announced determination to march in, and the suspicion that he would prefer to obtain his share of Western Palestine through a deal with the Jews, alarmed Egypt, for a division of Palestine between the Jews and 'Abdullah, be it by war or by agreement, would deal a death-blow to the inter-Arab balance of power on which Egypt's Arab policy rested, to Cairo's aspirations for hegemony and to its prestige in the Arab and Muslim world. The desire to prevent unilateral action by 'Abdullah was unquestionably one of Egypt's foremost war aims. This ties in with the subsequent statements of Egyptian officers seeking to clear themselves from the onus of the decision to send the regular army to Palestine, and leads to the hypothesis that the leading role in the Arab states' last-minute decision to change their strategy in Palestine was played by Egypt's political leaders, and perhaps more specifically by King Farouk.