

## 1948 as Jihad

By Benny Morris

Midway in the first Israeli-Arab war, in August 1948 Emil Ghoury, a member of the Arab Higher Committee, the “Cabinet” of the Palestinian Arab national movement, blamed the Arab states for creating the Palestinian refugee problem. He argued that the Arab states had pushed and cajoled the Arabs of Palestine into launching hostilities against the Jewish community in Palestine, then known as the Yishuv, in defiance of the United Nations partition resolution, while the Palestinians were disorganised and unprepared for war, and they themselves launched their invasion of Israel, in May 1948, while disunited and insufficiently prepared. The war had resulted in the creation of the refugee problem. He rejected a solution of the problem by way of repatriation arguing that the Jews “ would [then] hold them hostage and torture them severely ”. Ghoury assumed that a refugee return would be achieved through negotiations with Israel and an agreement so achieved would mark the beginning of Arab acquiescence in Israel’s existence. “We must inculcate in the heart of every Arab,” he said, “ hatred for the Jews ” and we must the renew “ the jihad against Israel”. The refugees, he concluded, would return to their places only after Palestine was reconquered.<sup>1</sup> Months earlier, in January 1948, just after the start of hostilities, Matiel Mughannam, head of the Arab Women’s Organisation, an female arm of the Arab Higher Committee, told an interviewer: “ The UN [partition] decision [of 29 November 1947] has united all Arabs, as they have never been united before, not even against the Crusaders ... [A Jewish state] has no chance to survive now that the ‘holy war’ has been declared. All the Jews will eventually be massacred ”.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Mughannam, it should be noted was a Lebanese Christian who had married a Palestinian Arab and moved to Jerusalem in the 1930s.

Following the pan-Arab invasion of Palestine in May 1948, the Saudi regime organised jihadi festivals around the kingdom, in the towns and oases, to mobilize volunteers for the war in Palestine. According to Madawi Al-Rasheed, an expert on Saudi Arabia and 1948, within two days 2,000 men were registered, and it was said that 200,000 were “ ready to perform jihad and sacrifice their lives ”. As it turned out, only several hundred were eventually dispatched to Palestine. The Saudi religious authorities, the ulama, played a major part in the mobilisation for jihad.<sup>3</sup> The call for jihad also vibrated throughout the Maghreb and thousands of Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian Muslims in the spring and summer of 1948 set off to fight in the hills of Palestine (though only hundreds actually reached the battlefields due to French, British and Egyptian interdiction along the way).

Historians of 1948 have tended to view the first Arab-Israeli war as a milestone and turning point in a national struggle between two peoples or ethnic groups, the Jewish-Zionist and Palestinian-Arab collectives, over a piece of territory called the Land of Israel or Palestine. A cull through the available documentation – essentially through Israeli and Western records – points to an additional and perhaps important aspect, and for some of

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<sup>1</sup> “Emil Ghoury’s Response to the Telegraph on the Matter of the Refugees”, August 1948, HA 105\102.

<sup>2</sup> Nadia Lourie, “interview with Mrs. Mogannam”, 10 January 1948, CZA S25-9005.

<sup>3</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Saudi Arabia and the 1948 Palestine War: Beyond Official History,” in Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., The War for Palestine (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 240.

the Arab participants in that war, a dominant aspect, namely the religious face of that war.

In light of the available records, it would appear that many of the Arab participants in the 1948 War saw that onslaught against the Yishuv\Israel as a holy war, jihad, against a foreign and infidel invader. It is possible that the opening of Arab state archives and a thorough troll through the press of the region stretching from Yemen to Iraq to Tangiers will only reinforce the impression that the political and military leaders of the Arab states and the “Street” in Cairo and Baghdad and Sana and Marakesh, and the soldiers who actually fought in the war, saw it as a holy war and not only, or perhaps even not mainly, as a nationalist war between two national movements.

Several methodological problems arise here. The first and most obvious is that the archives of the Arab states, of the main Arab political parties, royal courts, and armies are all closed - – all the Arab states are dictatorships of one sort or another and dictatorships, as is well known, do not open archives. This means that anyone interested in understanding the Arab side in the 1948 War is forced, in the main, to view it through the eyes and documentation of Western and Israeli diplomats, analysts, and intelligence officers.

The second problem is that of trying to work out what the bulk of the Arabs, the masses – civilians and soldiers – actually thought in 1948. There were few if any opinion polls and again, we are talking about authoritarian state, not democracies, and states in which the vast majority of the populations were illiterate. For all intents and purposes, they masses were silent. Occasionally, a newspaper or leader will refer to what the “ Street ” thinks or to a slogan brandished in a street demonstration. But that is all. We have no records, or almost no records, about what the masses of peasants and urban poor and soldiery thought or felt, certainly not from their own pens or mouths. The problem of lack of free expression also pertains to the more literate numerically small middle and upper classes – we don’t really know what they thought or felt. And when an Arab leader – and I will get to them presently – describes the ongoing war in 1948 in terms of “ jihad ”, does that “prove ” that we are dealing with a “ jihad ” or even a jihadi mindset? Is it possible that the term was used insincerely by this or that prime minister or king attentive to the presumed will of the “ Street ” or to appease religious or political radicals. We do not have protocols of cabinet discussions, diaries of government ministers and kings, or the internal correspondence of the leaders, to tell us what was really in their minds.

A third problem arises from the political culture or the culture of discourse that characterized – and in some ways still characterizes – Arab governments and countries where there was and is no real separation between church and state. Often, the rhetoric of politicians – the description or explanation of this or that policy or practise - will be couched in religious, Islamic terminology. Does this necessarily signify real religious motive or zeal, or just a superficial patina born of tradition and discursive culture?

There is no simple solution to these problems. What we can say for now is that the historian must recognize that all his conclusions in this sphere must remain tentative, until the Arab archives are opened, and it is possible if that apocalyptic event ever takes place that we will still remain largely in the dark about the question I am dealing with, partly because the question itself is one of mindset rather than concrete fact and we are

speaking of the mindsets of many millions of people rather than those of a coterie of politicians.

All I can say for the present is that historians and students of the Arab world in 1948 should treat seriously what the available records are telling us about what certain people in the Arab world thought and said and not abruptly to dismiss their utterances just because they do not match the contemporary historian's or student's historical and political views, preferences or prejudices, and when 1948's Arab leaders – religious, military and political- tell us something, we should pay attention to what they are saying. Perhaps they are giving voice to a major truth.

The history of the Islamic world is chockful of holy wars against infidel peoples and polities. The rise of Islam was characterized by an enormous aggressive, jihadi wave, in the 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, which saw the Arab conquerors sweep over the Middle East and North Africa, as far as Spain and southern France. A second eruption of jihad, defensive in nature, occurred in the Middle Ages, when Muslim warriors contained and then drove back the Crusaders and destroyed their kingdoms in the Levant. A third, aggressive wave of jihad occurred in the Early Modern period, when Turkic armies, from the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, assaulted the Balkans and central Europe, reaching the gates of Budapest and Vienna. Today we are in the throes of the fourth wave of jihad – and there is a dispute in the West about whether to attribute it to Islam as a whole or just to radical Islam and Islamists – a wave directed against the West and its promontories around the world, stretching from the Philippines and Mumbai through East and West Africa and Darfur to London and Madrid and the Twin Towers in New York. At the center of this wave are the wars against infidels in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. One can view the current jihadi wave as aggressive or defensive – there are strong arguments for both positions. Be that as it may, it is possible that in several hundred years' time the war between the Arabs and the Jews in 1948 will be seen as the beginning of, or at least as a major milestone in, this wave that confronts the West in our time.

The Arabic word “jihad” means to “make an effort” and, in its religious connotation, has been defined as “a bloodless striving in missionary zeal for the spread of Islam”. Meaning, if you like, an effort at religious persuasion. There are analysts who focus on this meaning of the word “jihad”, and denude it of all political and military meaning.

And there are commentators who argue that the Islamic doctrine of jihad is essentially a defensive doctrine: The believers embark on jihad only in defense when assailed by infidels.

But a more honest and discerning look at the deeds of Mohammed and his successors and at the mainstream exegeses of Islamic scholars during the following centuries leave little room for doubt or evasion about the meaning of the word “jihad” and the doctrine of jihad.

In the Koran the believers are enjoined to fight the holy war against the infidel: “Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in Judgement day ... and who do not accept the true religion even if they be the Peoples of the Book, until they pay the jizya [poll tax] in submission, and feel themselves submissive.” (Koran, 29:9)

In most of the exegetic texts, there is an obligation, before doing battle, to call on the infidels to convert to Islam or at least to submit to Muslim rule. And only if the infidels reject the call are the believers bound to open hostilities. But the Muslims, individually and as a collective, are obliged to wage jihad against the infidel (as it says in the Koran: “ Battle is your duty, even if you do not like it ” (Koran, 216:2)).

Now it is true that the Koran is often vague and obtuse and one can find in it sentences sending the reader and believer in a variety of directions. But among the major Muslim theologians in the millenium following Mohammed’s death a more or less consensual mainstream emerged about the main pillars of the religion. This hold true also for the doctrine of jihad. Ibn Khaldum, the great Sunni philosopher and historiam of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, put it this way: “ In the Muslim community, jihad is a religious obligation, because of the universality of the [Muslim] mission and [the duty] to Islamize all [mankind] or through persuasion or through force ... other religious groups did not have a universal mission, and holy war was not a religious duty for them, save in self-defense ... [But] Islam, [on the contrary] is bound to rule over other peoples.”

In Shia Islam, jihad is seen in the same way: “ Islamic jihad against the belkievers in other religions, for example the Jews, is an obligation save if they convert to Islam or pay the Jizya ”, as Al-Amili, a prominent Persian theologian of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, put it.

The belief that jihad, in order to forcibly convert or at least vanquish the rest of humanity, is obligatory for the believers is based on the sentence: “ We have sent you out to all mankind ” (Koran 28: 34). And definitive, world peace is only attainable if the whole world accepts or bows to Islam. In the course of the struggle truces, even long-term ceasefires, are possible, but the fight against the infidels must be maintained until they are defeated.

In Western eyes, this posture is seen as aggressive or unjust. But in the etes of classical Islam, it appears self-evident and just – as the Truth is found only in Islam and the award of the Truth to others, also by way of the sword, is sensible and just.

It is possible that Muhammad’s wars against the Jewish and pagan tribes in Hijaz at the dawn of Islam are interpretable, by the believers, as defensive – the view being that without victory, Islam would be vanquished and they themselves would be put to the sword. But Muhammad’s successors, from the caliphs onwards, initiated wars of expansion and conquest against the Christian world with the aim converting the whole of humanity to Islam.

And this holds true for Christians and Jews as well as pagans. According to all Koranic texts, the aim of jihad against the Peoples of the Book is to convert them to Islam or obtain their submission to Islam and pay the jizya. And participation in jihad is the duty of all adult Muslim males unencumbered by physical or mental handicap. The believers were ordered not to kill “children, madmen, women, priests, impotent old men, the sick, the blind, the mentally infirm, so long as they do not take part in the battle”, as one 13<sup>th</sup> century exegesist, Ibn Qudama, put it.

According to Ibn Taimiya, a major 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century theologian, “ the obligation to participate in jihad appears innumerable time in the Koran and the Sunna. Therefore, that is the most important willed [religious] activity a man can undertake. All the sages agree that it is more important than the haj ... The prophet said ‘the supreme issue is Islam ... and its peak is the jihad’ ... jihad is obligatory both if we began it and if undertaken in

defense,” according to Ibn Taimiya. Indeed, one 12<sup>th</sup> century exegetist, Al-Ghazali, wrote that “one should undertake jihad at least once a year” (which sounds a bit tiring – but that’s what he wrote)

In the days after the UN General Assembly passed the partition resolution waves of rioters hit the streets of the large towns in the Arab world and attacked Jews and Europeans and their property. At the beginning of December 1947, there were pogroms in Aden, Bahrain and Aleppo in Syria and a variety of assaults on Jews in Cairo and Damascus. The rioters commonly shouted “*idbah al-yahud*” (kill the Jew) and, in most cases, the authorities failed to rein them in, certainly not expeditiously. Dozens of Jews were murdered and hundreds of houses were torched.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1947, three days after the UN vote, the ulama – the chief scholars of theology – of the University of Al-Azhar, in Cairo, perhaps the most important arbiters and authorities in the Sunni Muslim world, declared a “worldwide jihad in defense of Arab Palestine”.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the war, the Ulama of Al-Azhar periodically renewed the fatwa and call to jihad. “The liberation of Palestine [is] a religious duty for all Muslims without exception, great and small. The Islamic and Arab governments should without delay take effective and radical measures, military or otherwise,” pronounced the Ulama at the end of April 1948.<sup>5</sup> On the day of the Egyptian Army invasion of Palestine, 15 May, Muhammed Mamun Shinawi, the rector of Al-Azhar, declared: “The hour of “jihad” has struck ... A hundred of you will defeat a thousand of the infidels ... This is the hour in which ... Allah promised paradise ...”<sup>6</sup> And in December 1948, on the eve of the final bout of hostilities between the IDF and the Egyptians in the Negev and Sinai, the ulama of Al-Azhar renewed their call for jihad and cautioned the Arab kings – this was directed at Abdullah, King of Jordan, who was suspected of colluding with the Jews – against deviating from “the way of the believers.” Otherwise, they faced “damnation.”<sup>7</sup>

The jihadism of 1948 was accompanied by a strong dose of anti-Semitism. In 1947, well before the outbreak of the war, the ulama of Al-Azhar issued a fatwa prohibiting all commercial contact with “the Jews”, and defined anyone doing so as “a sinner and criminal ... who will be regarded as an apostate to Islam”.

Samir Rifa’u, the prime minister of Transjordan, told visitors in Amman that year that “the Jews are a people to be feared ... Give them another 25 years and they will be all over the Middle East, in our country and Syria and Lebanon, in Iraq and Egypt ... They were responsible for starting the two world wars ... Yes, I have read and studied, and I know they were behind Hitler at the beginning of his movement.”<sup>8</sup>

Rifa’i’s observations reflected beliefs that spread through the Middle East at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which added a “modern” stratum to the classic anti-Semitic utterances embedded in the Koran (where the Jews are designated, inter alia, as “a base people” and as “murderers of the prophets”<sup>9</sup>). There is “religious

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<sup>4</sup> “Partition of Palestine and Declaration of Jihad”, undated, PRO FO 371-61583.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell to FO, 1 May 1948 (no. 536), PRO FO 371-68371.

<sup>6</sup> Shai, “Report of Monitoring Arab Radio Stations for 15.5.1948”, HA 105\90.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell to FO, 13 December 1948, PRO FO 371-68644.

<sup>8</sup> “Off-the-Record Talks in Transjordan of Two British Correspondents,” unsigned, Amman, 21 October 1947, CZA S25-9038.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, Righteous Victims, 8-13.

hostility ... between the Moslems and the Jews from the beginning of Islam ... which arose from the treacherous conduct of the Jews towards Islam and Moslems and their prophet,” King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia explained to President Roosevelt in 1943.<sup>10</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood defied it thus: “ Jews are the historic enemies of Muslims and carry the greatest hatred for the nation of Muhammad. ”<sup>11</sup>

In April 1948 Sheikh Muhammad Mahawif, the mufti of Egypt, issued a fatwa calling on all Muslims to participate in the jihad in Palestine. His contention was that the Jews intend “ to take over ... all the lands of Islam ”.<sup>12</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that during the 1930s and 1940s the following hadith in different variants was quoted in Islamic tracts: “ The day of resurrection does not come until Muslims fight against Jews, until the Jews hide behind trees and stones and until the trees and stones shout out: ‘O Muslim, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him’ . ”<sup>13</sup>

Side by side with the traditional anti-Semitic message, the 1948 call to jihad had another historical pedigree. Before and during 1948, the Zionists were often compared by Arab spokesmen to the Crusaders – and almost always it was said that their end would be similar. As the secretary general of the Arab League, Abdul Rahman Azzam Pasha, put it in 1947, “you [the Jews] are a temporary phenomenon. Centuries ago, the crusaders established themselves in our midst against our will, and in 200 years we ejected them.”<sup>14</sup>

Shukri al-Quwatli, the president of Syria, said similar things the following year, on the eve of the pan-Arab invasion: “ Overcoming the Crusaders took a long time, but the result was victory. There is no doubt that history is repeating itself. ”<sup>15</sup> Riad al-Sulh, the prime minister of Lebanon, told a British diplomat in the course of the war that “ it had taken the Arabs over a century to expel the Crusader[s] but they had succeeded in the end ” .<sup>16</sup> Zaafer Dajani, the head of the Jaffa Chamber of Commerce, said similar things to a Jewish interlocutor in 1947.<sup>17</sup> The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood announced that the death of martyrs in Palestine conjured up “ the memories of the Battle of Badr ... as well as the early Islamic jihad for spreading Islam and Salah al-Din’s [Saladin’s] liberation of Palestine ” from the Crusaders.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps it is worth noting that the first Arab to publicly make the comparison was Shukri al Asali, the Ottoman governor of Nazareth, during the 1910-1911 struggle over the lands of Fula, an Arab village in the Jezreel Valley built around the ruins of a Crusader castle. The land had been bought by Zionist institutions and shortly after Kibbutz Merhavia was established on the site. Since then, Arab spokesmen have often

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<sup>10</sup> Ibn Saud to Roosevelt, 30 April 1943, PRO CO 733\443\18.

<sup>11</sup> El-Awaisi, Muslim Brothers, 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Al-Difa'a*, 8 April 1948, 2.

<sup>13</sup> El-Awaiso, Muslim Brothers, 15.

<sup>14</sup> “Meeting: A. Eban and D. Horowitz – Abdul Rahman Azzam Pasha (London, 15 September 1947),” London, 19 September 1947, Political Documents of the Jewish Agency, Vol. II, January-November 1947, ed. Nana Sagi, 669-672.

<sup>15</sup> Sha’i, “In the Arab Public,” 5 May 1948, IDFA 1196\52\1.

<sup>16</sup> Trefor Evans to FO, 21 September 1948, PRO FO 371-68376.

<sup>17</sup> “E.L., “Talk with Zaafer Dajani, Chairman of the Jaffa Chamber of Commerce”, 26 November 1947, CZA S25-3300.

<sup>18</sup> El-Awaisi, Muslim Brothers, 15.

referred to the Zionists as “ the new Crusaders ” . In 1945 Azzam Pasha argued that the clash between the Arabs and Zionism might trigger a new war between the Christian and Muslim worlds, as did the Crusades.<sup>19</sup>

The banner of jihad was raised aloft, or at least mentioned, with regard to the Yishuv, already during the decades before 1948. In March 1936 the speaker of the Iraqi parliament, Said al-Haj Tabith, while on a visit to Palestine, called for jihad against the Zionists.<sup>20</sup> A decade earlier, Haj Muhammad Said al-Husseini, the mufti of Gaza, issued a fatwa against land sales to Jews arguing that, as a result of Zionism, the Jews had lost their status as dhimi or wards of Islam and any Muslim or Christian who helped them would be regarded as an apostate or infidel. In 1935 the first ulama or gathering of Muslim religious scholars issued a similar fatwa.<sup>21</sup>

During the Palestine Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 the discourse among the rebels, to judge by their publications, was often religious (as well as political-nationalist) and the struggle was seen at least in part as religious. Indeed, the 1936 announcement of the establishment of the Arab Highr Committee – the leadership body of the national movement that in effect orchestrated the revolt – included the following typical sentence: “ Because of the general feeling of danger that envelops this noble nation, there is a need for solidarity and unity and a focus on strengthening the holy national jihad movement.”<sup>22</sup> Preachers in the Nablus area were prominent among those mobilizing the population for combat.

Therefore, it was no surprise that when the Arab peoples launched their assault on the Yishuv in 1948, the campaign was regarded by many as a jihad and was reinforced with fatwas by the religious leaders embracing holy war. And it was to be expected that the Arab leaders would fall into step. Both King Farouk of Egypt and his foreign minister, Ahmed Muhammad Khashaba, said during the summer of 1948 that for “ the whole Arab world,” the struggle was a matter of religion; “ it was for them a matter of Jewish religion against their own religion ” . According to Farouk, the Arab masses were gripped by “ widespread religious fervour ... and men ... were keen to enter the fray – as the dhortest road to heaven.”<sup>23</sup> Even Abdullah King of Jordan, the most clear-headed and pragmatic of the Arab leaders, adopted the language of holy war when, on 14 May, he addressed his troops about to cross the Jordan into Palestine: “ He who will be killed will be a martyr; he who lives will be glad of fighting for Palestine ... I remind you of the Jihad and of the martyrdom of your great-grandfathers. ”<sup>24</sup>

The defeat of the Arab armies failed to reduce the fervour of their spiritual guides. In December 1948 the ulama of Al-Azhar renewed their call for jihad, addressing the Arab kings and presidents and opinion-makers. They reiterated the need to free Palestine from the Jewish gangs, proclaiming that the Arab armies “ had fought victoriously” in “ the conviction that they were fulfilling a sacred religious duty ” And those who failed to undertake jihad would be “ damned. ”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hurewitz, *Struggle for Palestine*, 229.

<sup>20</sup> Eppel, *Palestine Conflict*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, *Army of Shadows*, 46-49.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, *Army*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Campbell to Bevin, 17 April 1948, PRO FO 371-68370, and Campbell to FO, 19 May 1948, PRO FO 371-68506.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, *1948*, 209.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell to FO, 13 December 1948, PRO FO 371-68644.

Let me conclude by saying that all I am doing here is suggesting a lead. I have not thoroughly and fully studied and searched the records and what I am suggesting is not the fruit of systematic, thorough research. But perhaps what I have found will prompt others to look more thoroughly at the jihadi face of 1948. The Arab archives may be closed. But for a start, one might begin a thorough trawl through the Arab press, from Morocco to Egypt and Yemen. Such a trawl will help substantiate, or undermine, what I am suggesting here. In any event, it will be worth the effort.