

How do you explain Israel's victory over the
Arabs between 1947 and 1949?

Introduction

The War of 1947-49 was a war fought between Jewish Zionists seeking to found the state of Israel, and Arabs seeking to prevent this from happening. The war took part in two phases, the second of which was further sub-divided by three UN truces. The first phase was a civil war, beginning on 29th November 1947 and ending with the beginning of the second phase on 14th-15th May 1948. It was a war of guerrilla raids, ambushes, bombings and acts of terrorism between Palestinian Arabs and those soon to become Israelis. The second phase was an international war, triggered by the proclamation of the state of Israel, 14th May 1948. Six Arab states: Egypt, Transjordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia either had troops in Israel or were beginning to send them by the following day. Israel took a much more offensive role during this latter phase, particularly after the first truce when she was better prepared. By the 7th of January 1949 hostilities had ceased and Israel was in control of almost all of former Palestine. The major power's pre-war assessment of a swift and certain Arab victory proved incorrect.

The topic is complex. Not only are the facts disputed, but conclusions on the factors which determined Israel's victory differ too. Israel has now opened her archives for scholarly study but it remains difficult to access Arab archives. Gelvin believes "it is

still not possible to pull together a definitive narrative of events”¹(2005,129). This has resulted in the emergence of three distinct interpretations of the war: the traditional Israeli account; the traditional Arab account and the ‘New Historian’/‘Revisionist’ account from modern historians who emerged in the 1980s. These differing accounts form a key theme throughout the essay.

Israel’s victory in this war cannot be explained by any one factor alone as there were numerous reasons for her success. However it is beyond the depth of this study to incorporate all. The role of international actors shall not be analysed as it did not play a crucial role. Focus shall be given to the most important factors: the capabilities of the participating armed forces in terms of their training, arms and equipment; their preparation and planning; their cohesion, unity and leadership; and the goals and motivation of individual participants i.e. soldiers and civilians. I shall address each of these factors alone in order to assess their significance as a determinate factor of Israel’s victory, comparing them in order to address relative significance.

Capabilities of the Armed Forces

Israeli ‘Old historians’ are often keen to state Arab superiority in numbers, weaponry, training and equipment. Chaim Herzog, an Israeli soldier in the conflict, makes a point of emphasising this. “Well equipped by 1948 standards with small-arms, artillery, armoured and air elements, and well-organised in conventional modern military terms, they nevertheless made a striking contrast to the Israeli forces – a proportion of which had only small-arms, and in which no artillery, armour or air

¹ Gelvin, James L. 2005. *The Israel-Palestine Conflict, One Hundred Years of War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.129.

units of any consequence existed whatsoever.”²(2005,23-4). Other traditional Israeli historians e.g. Karsh, also support this view. While this statement was true at the outset of war however, Israel soon improved her capabilities. Israel had superior numbers, weaponry and equipment at several points during the war. It is true that when the international war began Israel lacked much of the heavy weaponry that Arab armies had. But she improved her armoury through importations and weapons built in her own superior weapons industry. Every month Israel effectively gained 10,000 potential soldiers through immigration. At the beginning of April 1948, Israel signed an arms deal with Czechoslovakia. She received 4700 rifles, 240 machine guns and five million rounds of ammunition. By mid May, shortly after the international phase of conflict began, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) fielded over 35,000 troops in comparison to the collective Arab force which fell under 25, 000. Israel now had more troops; her soldiers had gained more experience than Arab soldiers who entered the war in May; she was arming her troops at a much higher rate; and generally had higher military capabilities than her enemies. Israel’s troops were also more effectively trained in the majority of cases. Many had trained and fought in Europe in World War Two, and Israeli training regimes were generally more effective than Arab equivalents. The interpretation of events put forward by traditional Israeli accounts is therefore not entirely accurate. “It is not history in the proper sense of the word.”³(Shlaim:1995,288). It exaggerates Arab capabilities, under-values Israeli capabilities, and appears to have political rather than academic goals.

² Herzog, Chaim, updated by Shlomo Gazit. 2005. *The Arab-Israeli Wars, War and peace in the Middle East*. London: Greenhill Books. P. 23-4.

³ Shlaim, Avi. 1995. ‘The Debate About 1948’. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3. P.288.

Many traditional Arab (e.g. Nasser) and ‘New Historian’ accounts (e.g. Shlaim, Morris, Flapan and Pappe) agree that Israeli numbers, arms, training and equipment were for the most part superior to that of the Arab forces, and that this was one of the determinants of success. After talking about the Palestinian’s population advantage and the support of the surrounding Arab states, Morris goes on to say “the Yishuv enjoyed basic advantages in all other indices of strength – “national” organisation for war, trained manpower, weaponry, weapons production, morale and motivation, and, above all, command and control. Moreover, the Yishuv enjoyed a demographic advantage in army-age males.”⁴(Morris:2001,192). Avi Shlaim also agrees, saying “that throughout the conflict Israel had the military edge over its Arab adversaries”⁵(Shlaim:2001,80). He cites Israel’s higher numbers, better equipment and better military hardware as significant determinants of Israeli success. The accounts of the ‘New Historians’ are largely held, outside of the Middle East, to be the most neutral and informed accounts. With few exceptions, the ‘New Historians’ undertook large amounts of field research prior to writing, and as they have been writing since the 1980s, had access to Israeli and Western archives. These accounts can therefore be held to be reliable and accurate. For the most part Israel did have superior military capabilities and this did affect the outcome of the war.

When Israel had inferior weaponry and failed to outnumber her enemy she suffered setbacks and defeats. Israel was effectively losing in the early months of the Civil War. This was partly due to the lack of sophisticated weaponry and high troop numbers. It limited Israeli tactics and strategy to the defensive, enabling Palestinian forces to cut

⁴ Morris, Benny. 2001. *Righteous Victims, A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*. New York: Vintage Books. P. 192.

⁵ Shlaim, Avi, in Rogan, Eugene. L and Shlaim, Avi. (eds.) 2001. *The War For Palestine, Rewriting the History of 1948*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 80.

off the entire Negev desert (land given to Israel according to the UN partition plan). But as Israel gathered more arms, Haganah (the main Israeli defence organisation prior to the foundation of the IDF) switched to the offensive and “the enemy’s weaknesses came to the fore [...] its military formations fell apart.”⁶(Morris:1999,205). The superiority of Israeli military capabilities and the effect this had can also be seen when looking at casualty ratios. Arab casualties nearly always exceeded Israeli casualties in even battles.

On the Arab side “only the 7, 400 troops of Transjordan’s King Abdullah, trained and equipped by the British, performed with military competence”⁷(Gartner:2001,393). However due to an Israeli-Transjordanian agreement partitioning Palestine, this army had little impact on the outcome of the war. Superior military capabilities were a significant factor in determining Israel’s victories. It enabled Israel to pursue offensive tactics which played to her strengths, and meant that Arab successes usually came with high casualty rates. However Israel’s strong capabilities and the Arab’s poorer abilities owed largely to preparation, and she would not have been able to utilise these strengths were it not for other factors. For this reason, and the fact that victories also occurred at times when military capabilities were roughly equal, military capabilities were significant but not the most significant factor.

⁶ Morris, Benny. 2001. *Righteous Victims, A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*. New York: Vintage Books. P. 205.

⁷ Gartner, Lloyd. P. 2001. *History of the Jews in Modern Times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 393.

Preparation

Israel's preparation was superior to that of nearly all her Arab enemies throughout the entire conflict. From the moment Ben-Gurion assumed Defence portfolio of Israel in 1946 he began to prepare Israel for conflict. Herzog, a Zionist 'Old Historian', emphasizes the import of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion: "The spirit that animated the people and the courage it reflected [which he cites as almost the sole reason for Israel's victory] were the function of a rare form of determined and inspiring leadership"⁸(2005,106) in the way of Ben-Gurion. He cites Ben-Gurion as one of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century. In fact, due to errors of judgement Ben-Gurion caused many problems, but he did have a profound impact on Israel's preparation and provided superior leadership to that of the Arabs. This preparation was crucial to Israel's war efforts. By June 1947 Ben-Gurion had created military districts or commands astride possible Arab invasion routes and established brigades on a territorial basis, making Israel's mobilisation much more effective. Israel not only had a high level of preparation during the war however, she maintained and even improved upon preparation during the war. During each truce Israel rearmed, recruited, reorganised and retrained much more effectively and to a greater degree than any Arab force could. Morris, Gelvin, Pappe and Bregman all support the fact that Israel's preparation was superior to Arab preparations and that this was a partial determinant of Israel's victory. "The Arab states did an abysmal job of preparing for and waging war."⁹(Gelvin:2005,130). The use of words might make the account appear biased but Arab preparations for war were abysmal in comparison to Israel's.

⁸ Herzog, Chaim, updated by Shlomo Gazit. 2005. *The Arab-Israeli Wars, War and peace in the Middle East*. London: Greenhill Books. P. 106.

⁹ Gelvin, James L. 2005. *The Israel-Palestine Conflict, One Hundred Years of War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 130.

Ilan Pappé, when talking about the Palestinian war effort also agrees: “compared with the systematic Jewish preparations these efforts were ineffectual and risible”¹⁰(Pappé:2004,129). Although Pappé is often considered to be politically motivated and anti-Zionist Bregman, who fought in the Israeli army, also agrees on the import of preparation. “The Egyptian army, for example, which was considered the most powerful of all Arab regular armies, had less than two weeks to prepare itself for war and everything had to be improvised.”¹¹(Bregman:2000,27) There is a wide consensus that Israel’s preparation for and during the war of 1947-49 was superior to that of the Arabs. Israel’s superior military and political preparation allowed effective plans to be drawn up e.g. Plan Dalet and Israel’s offensive toward the end of the Civil War. This allowed for improved military capabilities and resources. Israel had been stockpiling weapons in preparation for conflict for the previous twenty years.

Historians from all view points tend to agree that Arab preparation for improvement of their military capabilities was deficient and Israel’s strong. Israel’s political preparation allowed one collective defence force to be organised, whereas any Arab preparations for such unity occurred too late and were hampered by other factors. As these preparations were only indirect causes of Israel’s victory however, they were not as significant as the differing levels of cohesion.

¹⁰ Pappé, Ilan. 2004. *A History of Modern Palestine, One Land, Two Peoples*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 129.

¹¹ Bregman, Ahron. 2000. *Israel’s Wars, A History since 1947, 2nd edition*. London: Routledge P.27.

Cohesion and unity

Historians of all groups seem largely to agree that Arab disunity and lack of cohesion, for whatever reason, gives the most significant explanation for Israel's victory. Some traditional Arab accounts seeking to justify their own performance disagree. For example a semi-official booklet published in Egypt after the war stresses Egypt's full co-operation with other armies. But accounts such as this were solely for use as propaganda and are therefore not reliable.

Israel's armed forces were all united in their pursuit of an Israeli state. After the forced union of the IDF on the 28th of May 1948 Israel's armed forces were completely united under the political leadership of Ben Gurion and military leadership of the IDF's high command. Arab forces however, failed to either unite under one leadership, or even co-ordinate their separate efforts. During the first phase of the war multiple Palestinian forces refused to unite. During the second international phase six Arab state armies and several Palestinian forces existed separately of each other, pursuing different goals. During the limited preparation prior to war the Arab League had prepared a plan and given King Abdullah of Transjordan leadership. However Abdullah's leadership was neither respected nor trusted. The plan was not adhered to. This caused many individual incidents, as well as severely harming Arab pursuits of victory. For example when the Egyptian army was suffering defeats later in the war Transjordan could have come to their aid but chose not too as their aims conflicted. Each pursued territorial goals rather than the aid of Palestinians.

The traditional Zionist account, as advanced by Bregman and Herzog, say that Israel's excellent fighting spirit and the Arab's lack of coordination were responsible for Israel's victory. "Although Israel suffered war on three fronts, she fought in effect separate enemies among whom there was little coordination."¹²(Bregman:2001,27). Shlaim, Rogan and Morris strongly stress this view. "The absence of coordination was probably the most important factor in the eventual Palestinian defeat and the relative ease with which this was accomplished by the Haganah."¹³(Morris:2001,196). Gelvin agrees, but places greater emphasis on the lack of unity and cohesion within Arab state armies during the second phase of the war.¹⁴(Gelvin:2005,131). Indeed, there was not even unity within each individual Arab state army. The Syrian Government distrusted its own officers, "fearing that they supported 'Abdullah's Greater Syria scheme – which, indeed, many did."¹⁵(Gelvin:2005,131). Even more significance was attributed to this factor by Israel's full knowledge and exploitation of Arab disunity. It allowed Israel to utilise internal lines, focus greater military capabilities on part of the enemy force, and ultimately, to force her enemies to negotiate armistice separately.

After the first truce Israel fielded one cohesive armed force. Whereas the Arabs never managed to fight effectively as one force, or even to make combined efforts. This was undoubtedly one of the most significant determinants of Israel's victory for it allowed Israel to confront her enemies one at a time, and avoid the most effective force the Arabs could wield, Transjordan's Arab Legion.

¹² Bregman, Ahron. 2000. *Israel's Wars, A History since 1947*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge P.27.

¹³ Morris, Benny. 2001. *Righteous Victims, A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*. New York: Vintage Books. P. 196.

¹⁴ Gelvin, James L. 2005. *The Israel-Palestine Conflict, One Hundred Years of War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 131.

¹⁵ Ibid. P.131.

Goals, motivation and cohesion at troop level

Comparable levels of cohesion and unity was a significant determinant. However this explanation focuses predominantly on leadership. It fails to give focus to the differing levels of goals and motivations among the individual combatants. This was a huge determinant of Israeli victory.

Israeli soldiers were collectively motivated by the goal of an Israeli state, safety for their families and the prospect of being free to pursue happiness. Israelis were typically better educated than Arab soldiers and knew that they must fight to save the Jewish state. Palestinian soldiers however, were typically unaware of the problems that could face them. Palestinian culture was less evolved than Zionist culture, and the typical Palestinian soldier aimed not to fight for Palestine but for his family, village and clan. Hence Palestinians remained divided, seeking to defend their village, not their state. By the time Israelis reached local centres of resistance Palestinians had been demoralised by a list of losses and were badly supplied. They stood little chance against enemies motivated enough to unite their collective capabilities and march where commanded, away from their homes. Arab soldiers from the surrounding Arab states also lacked motivation. Soldiers not motivated by Arab nationalism were not motivated by the Palestinian cause, and there seemed little else to motivate them for their country and family was not in danger.

Traditional Zionist accounts do indeed place emphasis on this, attributing high morale and fighting spirit as one of the main causes of Israeli victory. "Israel's victory was the result of the self-sacrifice and determination of a people to fight for its

existence.”¹⁶(Herzog:2005,106). As presented however, this argument is neither academic nor neutral. The traditional Israeli account fails to address the goals and motivations of Arab people and is generally accepted to have ulterior political motives by ‘New Historians’. Traditional Arab historians tend to completely neglect the overall motivations and goals of combatants. Though ‘New Historians’ such as Morris¹⁷(Morris:2001,192) do occasionally address it, there exists no adequate evaluation of motivations that led individual people to war and kept them fighting.

Conclusion

The first Arab-Israeli War of 1947-49 was not a war between ‘David and Goliath’ as traditional Zionist historians often preach. It was a civil war in which Arab states intervened on the Palestinian side and lost. Although the differences between scholars writing on the war are well-known, there are several distinct similarities on the determining factors of Israeli victory. A predominant number focus on the differing levels of cohesion and unity within the relative forces. Yet this view focuses on leadership, neglecting soldiers at ground level.

A multitude of factors explain Israel’s victory. Chief among these however was that a strongly united force, both at troop and leadership levels, faced a disunited enemy split in motivations, organisations and aims. It meant that Israeli combatants were more highly motivated, better led, and able to defeat their enemies piecemeal. Nearly

¹⁶ Herzog, Chaim, updated by Shlomo Gazit. 2005. *The Arab-Israeli Wars, War and peace in the Middle East*. London: Greenhill Books. P. 106.

¹⁷ Morris, Benny. 2001. *Righteous Victims, A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*. New York: Vintage Books. P. 192.

all traditional Zionist and 'New Historian' accounts agree that this was a significant factor, at least at leadership level. Traditional Arab accounts are very split in their opinion, reflecting the fact that Arabs are still disunited. Yet some of these accounts would also agree, if solely because it allows blame to be placed on armies from other states. Chief among other factors are the superior military capabilities and preparations of Israel. These affected the tactics and strategies that could be utilised in particular. All factors affected at least one other. Each factor is inter-related and so holds at least some import. Yet the superior cohesion of Israel was the most significant explanation of her victory.

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