

How did it Start?

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SO HOW THE HELL did it all start?

Last week I tried to describe the 1948 war, starting from the shooting at a Jewish bus on the morrow of the UN partition resolution. Some readers dispute the timing. They insist that the war started on May 15, on the morrow of the founding of the State of Israel, when the armies of the neighboring Arab states entered the country.

I have seen this many times. Every serious debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict raises the question: “When did it start?” Each side has its own date, proving that the other side started it.

The Arabs started it, the Zionists assert. The conflict started with the “invasion” of the Arab armies.¹

The Jews started it, the Arabs assert. They began to drive the Arab population out, leading to the Naqba (“disaster”).

The Arabs started it, reply the Zionists. Why did we have to evict the Arab population? It was because you shot at our villages after the UN resolution of November 29, 1947.

The Jews started it, retort the Arabs. It all started with that atrocious resolution. The UN, consisting at the time mainly of Western and Communist states, gave a country that did not belong to them to the Jews, who did not belong to it.

Yes, say the Jews, but it really started with the White Paper issued by the British in May, 1939, which in effect closed the doors of Palestine to the Jews just when the Nazis were planning the Holocaust.

We had no choice, interject the British. In 1936 the Arabs started a revolt in which Jews and our soldiers were killed all over the country.

But why did we have to do so? cry out the Arabs. Because masses of German Jews were coming to Palestine after 1933, when Adolf Hitler assumed power in Germany. We had to stop it, even by violent means, to prevent Palestine from turning into a Jewish country.

Really, retort the Jews, but you started it long before, in 1929, when you organized riots all over the country, killing lots of Jews.

¹“Invasion” in quotation marks, since they entered the territories allotted by the UN to the Palestinian Arab state, though their declared aim was to crush the new Jewish state right at the beginning.

We had no choice, assert the Arabs. The British government of Palestine favored the Zionists and allowed them to settle all over.

That was our right, say the Jews, enshrined in the Mandate conferred by the League of Nations on the British.

Who gave the League of Nations the right to confer a Mandate on anybody? ask the Arabs. The land belonged to its inhabitants, almost all of whom were Arabs. That's how it all started.

But the Arabs attacked the Jews in 1919, showing how much the British were needed.

The British had no business being here, answer the Arabs. The whole mess really started in 1917 when the British published the Balfour Declaration, promising to establish a Jewish “national home” in Palestine, which belonged, at the time, to the (Muslim) Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire was dying, say the Jews, and the Zionist movement, which was founded in 1896, had already proclaimed its right to Palestine.

But at the same time the modern Arab national movement was born, which had an indisputable claim to Palestine and all the Arab countries.

God has promised. . .

Allah has ordained. . .

And so on.

I HAVE my own theory about when and how the conflict started.

In 1904 Theodor Herzl, the founding father of the Zionist movement, died. Herzl did not like Palestine very much, and started his ideological quest with the idea of founding a Jewish state in Patagonia, an Argentine territory which had recently been “pacified”.

Herzl did not like the Turks or the Arabs, but events convinced him that the Jews would go nowhere but Palestine. In his book “Der Judenstaat”, the Bible of Zionism, he declared that the Jews would serve in Palestine as an outpost of Western civilization against the barbarians of Asia—i.e. the Arabs.

One can argue that it was here that the conflict really started—right at the beginning of the Zionist idea. But I have in mind an even more precise moment.

A FEW years before World War I, the Ottoman Empire showed signs of breaking up. A modernizing movement, led by army officers, assumed power in 1908. They called themselves “the Young Turks”.

Among the restless Arab population, too, revolutionary groups emerged. They dared not yet talk about independence, but instead put forward a plan for the “decentralization” of the Ottoman Empire, giving its various nations some autonomy.

A group of Arab members of the Turkish parliament, led by Rukhi al-Halidi (member of a Jerusalem family even now prominent in Palestinian affairs) had a brilliant idea: why not approach the Zionists and offer them an alliance against the Turks in the fight for this idea?

The Zionist representative in Jerusalem hastened to submit this offer to Max Nordau, the new president of the Zionist organization. Nordau had inherited Herzl's post after the death of the founder.

This was a historic moment, one of those moments when history holds its breath. A totally new vista opened up: an alliance between Arabs and Jews! a joint liberation movement!

Nordau, a famous German-Jewish intellectual, did not dream of accepting this offer. He must have considered it crazy. The Turks were the masters of the country. They could give Palestine to the Jews. They could be bribed. The Arabs were powerless. They could give us nothing.

So the moment passed. Nordau mentioned the idea to the Zionist Congress in Hamburg, but nobody took any notice.

Few people know about this episode. It is described in the authoritative book by the late Aharon (“Aharonchik”) Cohen.

The possibility existed only in theory. History is made by real people, whose consciousness is formed by the realities of their time. For Europeans of the early 20th century, the idea of such an alliance with the natives against an imperial power was close to lunatic.

IN RETROSPECT, this idea could have changed history. We would have been born into a different world.

In the autumn of 1947, when I was just 24 years old, I published a booklet called (in Hebrew) “War or Peace in the Semitic Region”.

It was an almost exact repetition of the ideas in the Nordau incident— which I knew nothing about at the time. It opened with the words:

“When our fathers, the Zionists, decided to set up a 'safe haven' in this country, they had the choice between two paths:

”They could appear in West Asia as a European conqueror, who sees himself as the bridgehead of the 'white' race, a master of the 'natives', like the Spanish conquistadores and the Anglo-Saxon colonists in America. This is what the Crusaders at their time did in this country.

“The other path was to see themselves as an Asiatic people returning to its homeland— who sees himself as an heir of the political and cultural tradition of the Semitic race, and is ready to lead the people of the Semitic Region in the war of liberation against European exploitation.”

With the exception of the terminology, which belonged to its time, I subscribe to every word even today, almost 70 years later.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict began when the first Jewish colonist came to this country in 1882, even before the official founding of the Zionist movement. It began as a clash between two great national movements which were totally ignorant of each other. This ignorance persists, in large part, to this very day.

The past cannot be changed.

But perhaps, perhaps, we can learn from it and draw some conclusions.