

Haganah began to attack British targets as well. In the first stage of the Arab-Israeli war (November 1947-May 1948), the three organizations were on working terms and occasionally coordinated attacks. By June 1948, however, once the Haganah had transformed into the Israel Defense Forces, its leaders insisted that Irgun and Lehi units disband. When the Irgun refused to give over a weapons ship-

British, who believed that American goodwill and finances would prove vital in the coming Cold War. They avoid Medad's claim for methodological reasons as well. One of the most difficult tasks of historians who attempt to situate their work between myth and counter-myth is to refrain from engaging in the very speculation that supports political mythmaking in the first place. At its best, the historical enterprise relies solely upon evidence, rather than imagination.

Medad's essay sits uneasily between history and mythmaking for yet another reason. Not unlike the Labor Zionist political mythmakers he critiques, Medad is using historical evidence, above and beyond all else, to justify and sanctify political attitudes and behaviors of the past. As Medad himself points out at the end of his essay, the purpose of his historical inquiry is to "justify the armed resistance of the Irgun and Lehi as a war for liberation from foreign rule" and, in so doing, to reject claims that the Irgun and Lehi were terrorist organizations. This goal influences the framework of the essay to the point that crucial features of the historical record are omitted. By focusing on the British, Medad echoes the attempts of the Irgun and Lehi to frame acts of violence as a battle for national liberation against an imperial ruler. This model casts Jews as the local "native" population, and conveniently ignores Palestine's Arab population, which as late as 1948, constituted the country's majority. Nor does the essay ever expand upon why the Irgun and Lehi were considered terrorist organizations in the first place. Arab civilians, not British military personnel, were the chief victims of the Irgun and Lehi. These attacks consisted primarily of setting off bombs in buses, restaurants, markets, and other public spaces. The question of how the Irgun, Lehi, and Haganah saw the role of violence against Arabs in the creation of the Jewish state — a question that loomed over Zionist leaders during the 1930s and beyond — remains, deliberately, untouched. 

Yisrael Medad responds on shma.com.

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ment from France on the ship the Altalena, the IDF opened fire; nineteen men — of which sixteen were Irgun members — were killed, and Irgun cells were dispersed among IDF units.

It is against this backdrop that leaders of the Israeli left and right fought for decades over the legacies of their respective underground movements. Recent scholarship supports Medad's claim that Labor Zionist politicians, as well as historians sympathetic to them, wrote the Irgun and Lehi out of the historical narrative. Ultimately, however, the Lehi and Irgun gradually became integrated into Israel's public culture of commemoration and in turn, gained public recognition and legitimacy.

Historians by and large agree with Medad's claim that the methods of the Irgun and Lehi played a decisive role in Britain's withdrawal from Palestine. Few, however, argue, as Medad does, that without armed attacks against the British, the State of Israel would never have come into being. They point to a host of other factors that played significant roles in leading the British to give up the mandate. These factors include the worldwide surge of sympathy for the Zionist cause in the wake of the Holocaust; the abysmal financial state of the British government, which was also dismantling other imperial holdings; and the pressure of Washington on the

What Kind of Jewish State? The Formative Decisions at Israel's Birth

D O V W A X M A N

Many states are born in the midst of violence and political turmoil, but the circumstances of Israel's birth were exceptionally tumultuous. In the space of just three years, from 1947 to 1949, the United Nations vot-

ed in favor of partitioning Palestine, a brutal civil war broke out between Jews and Palestinians, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians became refugees, the British Mandate ended, the establishment of the State of Israel was officially

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declared, and the new state was attacked by the armies of five of its neighbors. It is little wonder, then, that so many Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora see Israel's creation as a modern-day miracle, a story of triumph against overwhelming odds. Regardless of the historical accuracy of this view — Israeli revisionist historians have by now debunked the myths of this period — what is generally left out of this dramatic story of Israel's founding are some critical decisions made at the time by the Jewish leadership that have had major repercussions until today.

Two decisions have been particularly consequential for shaping the kind of state Israel has become: the decision to give the Orthodox chief rabbinate control over personal status issues for all Jews, as well as over the standards for kosher food and Shabbat observance, and other concessions; and the decision to place the state's Arab minority under military rule. Both of these decisions, the former made in the so-called Status Quo Agreement of 1947 and the latter made in 1948 by the government of the new state, have turned out to be hugely consequential, shaping the nature of the state itself and the relations among its citizens. Decisions driven at the time by short-term expediency have had long-term consequences that have been a source of constant social tension and political conflict.

The Status Quo Agreement that David Ben-Gurion (then the leader of the Jewish Agency in Palestine) reached with the Orthodox Agudat Yisrael party sketched out the basic relationship between the future state and the Jewish religion. It promised that the Jewish Sabbath would be the official day of rest; that the state would serve only kosher food in its institutions; and that the Orthodox religious establishment would have exclusive authority over all Jewish marriages, divorces, and burials. This meant that no civil marriages or divorces would be allowed and only individuals considered "Jewish" by Orthodox standards could be buried in Jewish state cemeteries.¹ The agreement also granted exemption from military service for yeshiva students (then numbering just a few hundred, now around 80,000-90,000).

Although this agreement has governed religious affairs in Israel over the past 60-plus years, Israel's rapidly growing ultra-Orthodox population protests any decisions it sees as infringing on the religious status quo and uses its political power to extend control over other issues (such as the recognition of Jewish conversions carried out abroad). Secular Israeli Jews, at the other

end of the spectrum, also complain; as they see it, Jewish religious law governs so many aspects of public life in Israel that it amounts to "religious coercion" and an undemocratic limit on their personal freedoms. Thus, rather than resolving the question of Judaism's status in a Jewish state, the Status Quo Agreement has made it into a perennial and polarizing political issue. It has helped fuel religious-secular tensions, not ease them.

Even more divisive in the long run was the decision to impose a military government over Arab-inhabited areas of the country (the legal basis for this was the Emergency Defense Regulations initially imposed by the British Mandate Authorities and subsequently adopted, and maintained to this day, by the Israeli state). The military government, which lasted from 1948 to 1966, essentially gave the state total control over all aspects of Arab life. Unlike Jewish citizens of the state, the vast majority of Israel's Arab citizens effectively lived under an authoritarian regime that severely restricted many aspects of their daily lives (such as their ability to travel out of their towns and villages and to establish businesses). While the official rationale for martial law was the potential security threat that Arabs posed to the state, it also enabled the state to monitor and control the political activities of the Arab minority and to expropriate much of its land.

Justified or not, the military government had a profound impact on the relations between the state and the Arab minority and between Jewish and Arab citizens. Instead of trying to integrate Arabs into Israeli society and demonstrate to them that they would be treated fairly and equally by a Jewish state, the state looked upon and dealt with the Arab minority primarily as a security threat, real or potential. Little has really changed since then in terms of how the Israeli state views its Arab citizens. Much of the Arab minority, in turn, has regarded the state not as its own, but as an alien and hostile entity, one that is fundamentally geared toward serving Jewish interests only. For Israel's Jewish majority, the military government had far-reaching psychological consequences. It clearly marked the Arab minority as a hostile population not to be trusted, and by keeping the two populations apart, it increased the social distance between them, a distance that remains very wide to this day. In this respect, although it ended more than four decades ago, the military government is at least partly responsible for the negative relationship that continues to prevail between Jews and

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. What roles do historical myths play in building a nation's narrative?
2. How might we think critically about history while also honoring the stories that have come to define who we are?
3. The year 1948 is a pivotal one in Jewish history. How has your understanding of it deepened over the past years?
4. How might we revitalize the celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut?

¹ See Daniel Gordis, Yehiel Poupko, and Mark Washofsky essays in *Sh'ma*, March 2011

Arabs in Israel.

Two separate decisions around the time of Israel's birth, each made under great pressure and addressing immediate challenges, have resulted in unforeseen consequences for the country and its people. Were it not for these decisions, Israel may have become a very different kind of state: one where different streams of Judaism flourished, where secular Jews were free to marry whomever they loved, where Jewish converts did not have to satisfy ultra-Orthodox rabbis, where non-Jews could be buried beside their Jewish partners, and where Haredi Jews had the same obligations as non-Haredi Jews. It could even have become a country where Israeli citizens, of whatever ethnicity or faith, were truly equal, where Jews and Arabs regarded each other as fellow citizens first and foremost rather than as national rivals, and where Arabs felt a greater sense of belonging. That such possibilities seem today

almost utopian only goes to show how much the Israeli reality departs from this vision.

It is of course easy with the benefit of hindsight to cast a critical light on difficult decisions made under difficult circumstances. I am not trying to blame Israel's early leaders — Ben-Gurion, foremost among them — for these decisions. Instead, by emphasizing the long-term impact that two key decisions have had upon Israel's development, my aim is to point out how a different kind of Jewish state could have been created. Today, more than 60 years later, such a state is still possible. It requires now, as it did then, different decisions to be made — to fully integrate Israel's Arab citizens politically, economically, and socially, and to end the Orthodox rabbinate's monopoly over marriages and conversions. These are politically difficult decisions to be sure, but ones that can, and for the future of the country, must be made.



Celebrating Israel Independence Day: A Roundtable

Most holiday celebrations offer opportunities to reflect on the themes of the day, the passing of time — momentous events and regrets. Observing Yom Ha'atzmaut, or Israel Independence Day, provides the same opportunities. Sh'ma invited a rabbi, a publisher, an academic, and an activist to speak about how they personally observe the day and how we might re-envision the holiday for contemporary times.

Susan Berrin: *To celebrate Israel means more than simply supporting it. For so long, what we celebrated about Israel were its political achievements: its establishment as a country, and its David and Goliath-like wars, especially in 1967. For many Jews today, including many who remain deeply committed to Israel, the news is overwhelmingly gloomy. There is a Netanyahu government that has not found a way to keep meaningful peace talks moving forward; a foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, who proposed a bill that Israelis take a loyalty oath or lose their right to vote; and a letter signed by some 50 Israeli rabbis urging Israeli landowners not to rent to Arabs or other non-Jews — among other things. Does this leave an impact on the ability of Jews not only to support Israel, but also to celebrate it on Yom Ha'atzmaut?*

Gary Rosenblatt: We are celebrating more than the current events or the most recent headlines — we're celebrating the transformation of Israel from a prayer and an idea into a reality, and all the good and bad that goes with a real state, a real army, and a real government. We don't want to lose sight of what many consider to be a

miracle — the creation of the Jewish state.

Ariel Beery: There is a flawed assumption that the celebration of Israel should exist in one way or another. Celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut might mirror how parents celebrate the birthdays of their children. As time goes on, we often don't remember our 19th or 23rd birthdays. And as Israel becomes more of an integrated part of our lives, celebrating its birthday becomes less special.

Jarah Greenfield: In the Diaspora, we're so geographically distant from Israel and yet often so close to the issues of justice in the state. It is much more important to establish a celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut based on connections between people — Diaspora Jews, Israeli citizens who cover the spectrum of political belief, and Israel's non-citizen population, including the Palestinians — than it is to celebrate a day that reinforces a feeling of love for the state. By developing loving — if complicated — relationships, we come to better understand and challenge one another, emerging from those exchanges with a deeper understanding of the complexities that remain alive for us in Ameri-

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