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World History

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Thesis Question: to what extent was the Arab Israeli War of 1948 a defensive war on the part of the Israelis?

### Section B

The Arab-Israeli War of 1948 was divided into two different parts: the “civil war” fought between the Jewish state and the Palestinian Arabs, and the second phase of the war fought between the Jewish state and other Arab nations. The first phase of the war began shortly after the United Nations (UN) General Assembly vote on Resolution 181 on 29 November 1947. The UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) worked from April to September of 1947 to research and identify a solution to the Jewish-Arab conflicts, and ultimately proposed the partition of the Palestinian territory to form two nations, one for the creation of a Jewish state and one for the Arab population<sup>1</sup>. The partition resolution (Resolution 181) conflicted with the demands from the Arab Higher Committee and the Arab League, both of which opposed the partition plan and instead called for a single Palestinian state<sup>2</sup>. The Arab Higher Committee furthered its demands by requesting that Jewish immigration into Palestine be severely limited. Despite the dissent from the various Arab representatives, and with the help of the Jewish Agency's far more diplomatic approach to the UNSCOP, the partition resolution passed. The next day, on November 30, Palestinian Arabs began perpetrating sporadic acts of violence in urban centers as well as Jewish settlements<sup>3</sup>. By December of 1947, acts of retaliation from both sides escalated the conflict into a civil war.

Before the start of the civil war, it was unclear whether the Arab Palestinians or the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine before the creation of Israel) had the upper hand in battle. The

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1 Ilan Pappé. *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-51* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1992), 22.

2 Ibid, 23.

3 Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 77.

Palestinians outnumbered the Yishuv by a factor of two (1.2 million Palestinians as compared to 630,000 Jews), and the Palestinians controlled far more land and more of the highland areas than did the Jewish community<sup>4</sup>. However, the Hagana, the Jewish military organization, was far better equipped, better trained, and had more military experience than the Palestinian Arab militias and the Arab Liberation Army (ALA) that fought in the war<sup>5</sup>. This question of military superiority caused other nations, including the United States, to abstain from supporting the creation of the Jewish state.

Initially, the war appeared to be going well for the Palestinians. Fawzi al-Qawqji, field commander in the ALA, led several successful operations against Jewish convoys in January of 1948, and attacks on Jewish kibbutzim by Arab militias were initially successful<sup>6</sup>. By fighting small, localized conflicts, the Palestinians (with outside Arab support) were able to win several battles, hold territory between Jewish urban centers and roads, and force the Jewish leadership to question their military strategy. The early success for Palestinians was short-lived, as new military policies effectively defended Jewish settlements and opened the roads for convoys to enter urban centers. However, the Hagana could not completely defeat the Arab forces, only defend against Arab attacks and issue orders of retaliation against Arab aggression.

By mid-March of 1948, the inconclusive civil war between the Palestinians and the imminent Arab threat by May 15<sup>th</sup> forced the Jewish leadership to adopt an entirely different strategy. David Ben Gurion, in accordance with members of the Hagana General Staff adopted a new plan, Plan Dalet, to transition to go on the offensive and prepare for the coming invasion of Arab troops. Plan Dalet called for the securement of all territory outlined in the UN partition for the Jewish state, as well as territories bordering the future belligerent Arab states and any “enemy bases” in the Palestinian territory<sup>7</sup>. By “enemy bases,” the plan implied any Palestinian villages that held Arab forces or that had been the base

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4 Shaul Bartal, "The Palestinian Refugee Problem Resolved." *Middle East Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2013), Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost), accessed November 16, 2014, 30.

5 Morris, 81.

6 Pappé, 79.

7 Walid Khalidi, trans., “Text of Plan Dalet (Plan D) 10 March 1948: General Section,” *MidEast Web Historical Documents*, accessed 18 November 2014, <<http://www.mideastweb.org/>>.

of a past enemy attack<sup>8</sup>. Before implementing the offensive plan, the Hagana waited until the number of British troops diminished further, so as to meet with less resistance with the new offensive. Furthermore, the Hagana received much needed Czech weapons and ammunition to fully implement Plan D<sup>9</sup>.

The first operation to implement Plan D was Operation Nahshon, in which Hagana troops went on the offensive from the Kibbutz Hulda to Jerusalem on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1948 in order to open the road to Jerusalem for supplies<sup>10</sup>. Within only a few days, members of the Irgun and Lehi, underground Jewish organizations that fought against the British mandate before 1948, led a massacre on April 9<sup>th</sup> in the Arab village of Deir Yassin in which 100 men, women, and children were killed<sup>11</sup>. Until May 15<sup>th</sup>, when the surrounding Arab nations invaded and the second phase of the war began, the Hagana continued offensive operations in accordance with Plan Dalet.

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<sup>8</sup> Morris, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>11</sup> "The Nabka, 65 Years of Dispossession and Apartheid," Institute For Middle East Understanding, last modified 8 May 2013, accessed 21 November 2014, <<http://imeu.org/>>.