

# Our Last Best Chance

The Pursuit of Peace in a Time of Peril

**King Abdullah II**

VIKING



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THIS BOOK IS FOR THE PEOPLE OF JORDAN.

## PREFACE

Two years ago, when I started writing this book, I hoped it would reveal the inner workings of how, against great odds, the United States, Israel, and the Arab and Muslim world had brokered peace in the Middle East. As I write these words, however, I can only say that this is a story about how peace has continued to elude our grasp. And yet, in my region, where optimism is even more precious than water, we cannot afford to give up hope.

Why would a head of state want to write a book? There are countless reasons why doing so may be ill-advised. Running a country, after all, even a small one, is a full-time job. Added to that is the requirement of getting along with neighbors—many of whom could easily be offended by an honest presentation of the facts as viewed from another nation’s perspective. And then there are those who will want their actions either to go unmentioned or to be praised beyond their worth.

I have decided to put aside these arguments and write this book because the Middle East, the very tough neighborhood in which I live, is facing a moment of real crisis. I believe we still have one last chance to achieve peace. But the window is rapidly closing. If we do not seize the opportunity presented by the now almost unanimous international consensus on the solution, I am certain we will see another war in our region—most likely worse than those that have gone before and with more disastrous consequences.

People around here have long memories. They readily remember previous failed attempts to bring together the parties to the conflict. Many of the same players are still on the stage, and likely will remain so for years to come. This could be seen as a compelling reason not to speak publicly about sensitive issues, but I believe the world must know the risks of doing nothing.

My father’s generation reeled from the blast of war about once a decade. Following the war triggered by the creation of Israel in 1948, there was Suez in 1956, the disastrous 1967 war, when Israel seized the West Bank, the Sinai, and the Golan Heights, and the war of 1973, when Egypt and Syria tried and failed to win back the territory they had lost in 1967. These were followed by the Iran-Iraq War and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the 1980s, and the Gulf War in 1991. The periods in between could be called “peace” only in the loosest of senses. In the eleven years since I became King of Jordan, I have seen five conflicts: the Al Aqsa intifada in 2000, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, and the Israeli attack on Gaza in 2008-9. Every two or three years, it seems, another conflict besets our troubled region. As I look forward, my greatest fear is that we will soon see another war between Israel and its neighbors, triggered by a yet unknown flashpoint, that will escalate in terrifying ways.

The conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians goes back to the early years of the twentieth century, but the impact of their struggle is felt very much in the present. Since the breakdown of the peace process in 2000, about a thousand Israelis and over sixty-five hundred Palestinians have been killed, and many thousands more injured.

Today the whole Middle East faces the critical challenge of resolving a conflict that has almost defined the modern history of the region. If we succeed, I believe we will strike at one of the main roots of violence and instability in the Middle East.

Many in the West, when they look at our region, view it as a series of separate challenges: Iranian expansionism, radical terrorism, sectarian tensions in Iraq and Lebanon, and a long-festering conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. But the truth is that all of these are interconnected. The thread that links them is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For Muslims, the Arab-Israeli conflict is qualitatively different from any other in which they are involved. Contrary to what some like to say, it is not a religious struggle. It is a political conflict over rights and land. In 1900 there were around 60,000 Jews and 510,000 Arabs in the land of historic Palestine. Following a century of mass immigration, there are now over 6 million Jews and only 5 million Arabs. Many Jewish immigrants came during the persecution by the Nazi regime that culminated in one of the greatest tragedies in history—the Holocaust. Many more came later, when Israel opened its doors to Jews from all over the world. The 1948 war resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, most of whom have never been allowed to return to their homes. The 1967 war put many more—especially those living in the West Bank, which had been part of Jordan—under Israeli occupation. Millions of Palestinians live today under Israeli occupation, and Israeli actions are threatening the identity of Jerusalem, one of three holy cities in Islam. The importance of Jerusalem in part explains the centrality of the Palestinian issue to Arabs and Muslims the world over.

A point not well understood in the West is that this is a global issue. When I go to Indonesia or China and meet with Muslims, they want to talk about Jerusalem. When I went to New Delhi in 2006 and met with the Muslim community of India, I was asked: When are the Arabs going to solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem? When Pakistanis list their grievances, right after India comes Israel. The Palestinian issue is a cause that resonates among all the world's 1.5 billion Muslims.

This explains (but does not justify) why radical groups like Al Qaeda, claiming to want to “liberate” Jerusalem, can manipulate the cause and draw others to commit acts of terrorism in the name of defending Islam and the Palestinians. It also explains why groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, although very different from Al Qaeda in mandate and ideology, arm themselves against Israel, and why calls for resistance are embraced by a growing number of Arabs and Muslims. This call for armed struggle against the occupation gains more credibility as efforts by Arab countries like Jordan, Egypt, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to achieve a negotiated peace fail to deliver.

But if Israel could make peace with the Palestinians, then what moral justification would any government or resistance group have for continuing the struggle? If Jerusalem were a shared city, with East Jerusalem as the capital of a viable, sovereign, and independent Palestinian state, what possible rationale could the government of Iran, for example, have for its anti-Israeli rhetoric and actions?

One of the best weapons against violent extremists is to undercut their rallying cries. Solving the Muslim world's most emotional problem by establishing a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 boundaries, with East Jerusalem as its capital, would help remove one of the biggest reasons for conflict in the Muslim world. Achieving a just

and lasting peace is one of our most powerful tools against extremism. It won't stop every fanatic, but it will radically transform the playing field. As such, it should be an American priority as well as an Arab one.

Another often misunderstood aspect of the conflict is its impact on the Christian community and holy sites in Jerusalem. Before the 1967 war, Jordan administered the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and it remains the legal and political guardian of all the holy sites in the Old City, Christian and Muslim alike. So when Israelis attempt to consolidate their illegal occupation of East Jerusalem by building more settlements, Jordan is a staunch defender of the rights of the Christian and Muslim communities. Today there are only about eight thousand Christians left in Jerusalem, compared to some thirty thousand in 1945. Israeli policies and social and economic pressures have forced the majority of Christians to leave. Most native Christians in Jerusalem are Arabs, and while Israel welcomes foreign Christians who come to visit Jerusalem, it makes life very difficult for Christian Jerusalemites. This is ironic, since the Arab Christian community is the oldest Christian community in the world, and its presence in Jerusalem dates back to the time of Jesus Christ. Palestinian Christians and Palestinian Muslims have suffered equally under the occupation, and they share the same aspirations for freedom and the Kingdom of statehood.

The prevailing approach in past peace efforts has been for all sides to take incremental steps, to work on small issues and leave the tough ones, like the final status of Jerusalem, to a later date. The problem is that we will never get to the end if we keep kicking the big problems down the road. We need to resolve immediately the final status issues: Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and security. At this point, it is our only hope of rescuing the two-state solution. There is no other option.

I have been highly critical at times of Israel's behavior and intransigence, but it goes without saying that there is plenty of blame to go around on both sides for the failure of the peace process. Arabs and Israelis need to recognize each other's respective needs. A two-state solution is predicated on the recognition by Israelis of the rights of the Palestinians to freedom and statehood and the recognition by Palestinians and the rest of the Muslim world of Israel's right to security. We have no choice but to live together. Both sides have a moral responsibility to strive for peace. They also have a very compelling pragmatic imperative to do so: the alternative is more conflict and violence.

Geography, history, and international law all dictate that Jordan should be involved in the process of finding a solution to the conflict. We are home to over 1.9 million Palestinian refugees, the most of any country, and have friendly relations with Israel's Arab neighbors and the United States. We are also one of only two Arab countries to have a peace treaty with Israel.

Resolution of the Palestinian conflict is the key to normalizing relations between Israel and the entire Muslim world. My father, in the last years of his reign, developed a proposal offering Israel a comprehensive peace with all twenty-two Arab countries in return for full Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab land and the establishment of a Palestinian state. Unfortunately, his proposal did not gain momentum, and it stalled with his death. On becoming king, I revived my father's plan and had our government

discuss it with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Eventually the Saudis developed the idea and took it one step further, when Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud presented it to the Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002. The summit collectively adopted the Saudi proposal, which came to be known as the Arab Peace Initiative.

The initiative called for full Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territories occupied since 1967, a negotiated settlement of the issue of Palestinian refugees, and the establishment of a sovereign, independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. In return, all twenty-two Arab countries said they would “consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region.” In addition, they stated, they would “establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace.” I was surprised that the Israelis, and even some members of the American administration, shot down the initiative out of hand. My later discussions with many of them showed that they had not even read it. On the issues of refugees, for example, the initiative proposed “the achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly resolution 194.” The operative words here are “agreed upon”; when I would mention that to the Israelis, they would say “oh,” and some would admit they had never bothered to look at the text. The Arab Peace Initiative was subsequently approved by all fifty-seven member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Unfortunately, Israel never took it seriously and never acknowledged it for the unprecedented opportunity it represented. We are still stuck in the old ways, negotiating lower-priority issues and putting off the difficult decisions. Israel seems to feel it has all the time in the world. But its delays, reversals, and stalling tactics have come at a price.

The events of the last eleven years have destroyed confidence on both sides. Today the credibility of the peace process is in tatters. And once trust has vanished completely between the two sides, it may prove impossible to rebuild. All friends of Israel should encourage it to engage fully and expeditiously to make peace. And the United States, as an old, true friend of Israel, should not hesitate to push, aggressively if needed, to get both sides to the negotiating table and to reach a final settlement.

The American president, Barack Obama, with his willingness to listen and to offer an outstretched hand to the Muslim and Arab world, opened up a brief window of hope. But Arabs and Palestinians are frustrated that so little concrete progress has been made. President Obama has been criticized for pressing Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to freeze settlements, and American prestige in the region was hurt by Israel’s intransigence. But it would be a terrible mistake for Obama to pull back. If America does not exert its moral and political strength now to broker a two-state solution, we may never see another such chance. The window is closing, and if we do not act soon, future generations will condemn our failure to seize this last chance for peace.

Peace for its own sake would be prize enough. But in my mind, I see benefits that far outweigh that precious commodity. There can be little doubt that terrorist organizations exploit the injustice resulting from the continuation of occupation. Resolving this conflict would deprive these organizations of their appeal. Many will argue that the hatred sown and nurtured by extremist factions on both sides in the Holy Land cannot be overcome. But history has shown that peace can prevail even among

the fiercest of enemies. Not long ago observers might have thought that tensions across the Berlin Wall or between the factions in Northern Ireland would never be eased—and yet those struggles are now mostly memories. Why not aim to do the same in the Middle East?

Bringing peace is not the only struggle we face. Among our greatest challenges are political reform and the improvement of our economies. We need to learn to make things the rest of the world wants to buy, and to raise the living standards for all our people. Providing proper education and good jobs for young people is one of the most effective defenses against the siren call of the extremists. We cannot afford to have so many unemployed young men. And we must let women play a greater role in our economies. The impulse to hold women back for so-called religious or cultural reasons, to keep them out of the workforce, comes from a deep insecurity. It is unacceptable for half of society to be denied their rights and for half the workforce to stay at home.

Think of a world where the managerial expertise of the Israelis, the professionalism of the Jordanians, Lebanese entrepreneurship, and the education of the Palestinians could be combined effectively. I see the association of these potential partners as producing a regional economic powerhouse—a Middle Eastern Benelux. All this can be achieved. But the situation on the ground is rapidly getting away from us, rendering this outcome more and more unlikely. If current trends are not reversed soon, there will be no land left to swap for peace—no reason for Palestinians to cast their lot with moderate leaders rather than with the extremists. Our future will be doomed to war and conflict.

There is a tendency in life and in politics to default to the status quo. But in this case the seeming stability is misleading. I hear the mounting frustration and anger, and I fear it will soon eclipse all dreams of peace and reconciliation. I do not think most Americans and Europeans recognize the urgency of the situation. It is because of this sense of urgency that I have decided to write this book. In the eleven years since I succeeded my father, I have seen and learned a great deal. I am determined to share my story openly and honestly, in the hope that it can help make a difference.

In my region, we live history, for better and for worse. What may seem abstract and intangible at a distance is part of the fabric of our everyday lives. I have decided that the best and most persuasive way to tell this story is through the story of my own life—by sharing what I have seen, what I have done—to show how the personal and the political are often intertwined.

I never intended to hold the position I am now entrusted with, and expected instead that I would spend my life in the army. Part of my story is about that military experience and what it taught me about Jordan and about leadership more generally. I have tried to tell my story simply, using the straightforward language and imagery of a military man rather than the long-winded phrases and vocabulary beloved by politicians.

I hope in this book to challenge some of the false ideas about the region in which I live. Too often, when people in the West hear the words “Arab,” “Muslim,” or “Middle East” they think of terrorism, suicide bombers, and wild-eyed fanatics hiding in caves.

But I want them to associate our region with multimillion-dollar IT start-ups in Jordan, Nobel literature prize winners in Egypt, and the historic architecture of Damascus.

One of the most dangerous ideas to have emerged in recent years is the suggestion that the West and the Muslim world are two separate blocs, heading inevitably on a collision course with each other. This concept is ill-informed, inflammatory, and wrong. For over a thousand years Muslims, Jews, and Christians have lived together peacefully, enriching one another's cultures. For sure, there have been conflicts, such as the Crusades or the European colonization of many Middle Eastern countries after World War I. But these are political, rooted in the motivations of a certain time and context, rather than manifestations of an eternal cultural hostility.

After my military education at Sandhurst, I served for a year in Britain's 13th/18th Hussars, a proud regiment that traces its history back to almost six decades before the battle of Waterloo. The regiment also fought bravely in the Crimean War in the nineteenth century. In that conflict, made famous by Alfred Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade," Britain and France fought alongside the Ottoman Empire to protect it from invasion by the Russians. More than half of the Ottoman Empire's thirty million subjects were Christian, with many serving in the Ottoman army. And Muslim soldiers fought bravely on both sides of the conflict, including in the French and Russian armies.

This pernicious idea of a clash of cultures bleeds into the modern political arena, giving strength to extremists on all sides and empowering those who wish to set men and armies against each other. If an Algerian, an Afghan, or a Jordanian carries out a terrorist attack, he is inevitably described in the West as a "Muslim terrorist." But if a similar attack is carried out by an Irishman or a Sri Lankan, they are rarely called a "Christian terrorist" or a "Hindu terrorist." Rather, they are described according to the political motivations of their group, as an Irish Republican Army activist or a Tamil separatist.

People with a narrow view of history assume that the way things are now is the way they have always been. But the economic and technological ascendancy of the West is relatively recent, born out of an amazing flourishing of innovation in Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To those who take a longer view, things can look quite different. In the Middle Ages, when Washington, D.C., was just a swamp, the great cities of Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Damascus were the world's leading centers of learning and knowledge. Over the centuries, the pendulum of history swung toward the West, and by the twentieth century the Arab world had fallen far behind.

My family, the Hashemites, are descended from the Prophet Mohammad, and for generations have been leaders and rulers in our region. In the sixth century, my ancestor Qusai was the first ruler of Mecca. My heritage is one of tolerance and acceptance of different cultures and faiths. The Holy Quran says:

God Almighty said: "Mankind! We created you from a pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other." (Al Hujurat: 13)

I have never felt that interacting with Western culture comes at the expense of my identity as an Arab or a Muslim. As somebody born in the East but educated in the West, I feel a deep affinity for both cultures. My hope is that this book can, in a small

way, act as a bridge between them. All too often extremists on both sides frame the discussion and dominate the debate. All too often the voices of moderate Arabs are drowned out by those who shout the loudest. I will not shout, but I do want my message to be heard. I want to tell the world that while there are great problems in our region, there is also cause for hope.

# **PART I**

## ***Chapter 1***

### **The Conflict Begins**

One constant in my life ever since I was a small child has been the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Some people in the West and Israel like to portray this as the continuation of a centuriesold struggle. They are wrong. It is a relatively recent conflict, rooted in Jewish immigration into Palestine in the early twentieth century. In the Middle East, perhaps more than any other place, history matters, though far too many people use historical grievances as an excuse for not dealing with current problems. If you want to understand where you are going, it helps to know where you have come from. So before I try to explain the situation we find ourselves in today, and offer some suggestions on how to get out of the current stalemate, I would like to say a few words about the distance we have come.

As the Ottoman Empire, which extended over much of the Middle East from the early sixteenth century, was taking its last breath toward the end of World War I, the Arabs began to follow new nationalist leaders. One of these was my great-great-grandfather, Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the sharif of Mecca. A member of the Hashemite family, which had ruled Mecca since the tenth century, Sharif Hussein was an outspoken supporter of Arab nationalism. He was believed by other Arab nationalists to have the religious status and political experience to lead the Arab nationalist movement and the planned revolt against Ottoman rule, and to represent his people in negotiations with the British to secure an independent Arab state. His role was formalized by the Charter of Damascus in 1915. Negotiations between Sharif Hussein and the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, resulted in the secret Hussein-McMahon correspondence of 1915-16 in which Sharif Hussein was promised support for a united and independent Arab kingdom under his rule. The agreement with McMahon was later subject to differing interpretations by the British and Arabs.

In June 1916, Sharif Hussein launched the Great Arab Revolt, initiating the revolutionary push for a single independent unified Arab state, and was declared King of the Arabs. His vision was to establish a new Arab country that would stretch from Palestine to Yemen. He believed that the Arab peoples could be united based on their shared culture and Islamic ideals, and he embraced a tradition of tolerance and respect for minorities. He hoped to bring about an Arab Renaissance. His four sons, Princes Ali, Faisal, Abdullah, and Zeid, led the Arab armies against the Ottoman forces. They were eventually victorious and succeeded in driving the Turks from Arabia in 1918. Faisal became king of Syria and then Iraq, and Abdullah became emir of Transjordan. Following Sharif Hussein's abdication in 1924, Ali became king of the Hijaz (later part of modern Saudi Arabia). Zeid worked with Faisal in Iraq, and served as Iraq's ambassador to Turkey, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

The Arab Revolt brought to prominence a young British officer who went by the name of T. E. Lawrence. He was later immortalized as “Lawrence of Arabia,” played onscreen by Peter O’Toole in the 1962 film, parts of which were shot in Jordan. My great-great-uncle Prince Faisal was played in the film by Alec Guinness.

My mother briefly worked on the production of the film, but she left to marry my father in the summer of 1961. A few months later, she took him back to visit the set. The director was filming the scene in which Prince Faisal’s camp is bombed by Turkish airplanes while his forces are en route to Damascus. My mother and father watched from a hill overlooking the set. When the word spread that my father was there, the bedouin extras left the camp and rushed up to him, shouting out their loyalty and admiration. Once things had settled down, the crew prepared to film the scene again. As the airplanes flew overhead, one of my father’s retainers, a very tall old Nigerian man, turned to my father and said, “Sir, that’s not the way it happened.” My father asked him how he knew this. “Well,” he replied, “I was a child in that camp at the time, and the planes came from the other direction.” After their visit, the production crew politely asked my father not to visit the set again.

The film was tremendously popular in the West, less so in Jordan, where it is viewed by many people as a partial and inaccurate retelling of history. And although Lawrence is seen today by many in the West as a romantic hero who played a key role in leading the Arab people to freedom, the view in my family of the historical record is considerably more measured. My great-grandfather King Abdullah I regarded Lawrence as a “strange character,” eager to mold people to suit his interests. In his memoir he wrote:

His intrigues went as far as an attempt to influence me against my own father on the pretext that my father was obstinate. I sent his messenger back with this reply: “Tell your friend that my father is my lord and king. I shall be content with this relationship to the end of my days.” In fact Lawrence rendered the Arabs the greatest service by reiterating that my father was determined in his aims. Lawrence appeared only to require people who had no views of their own, that he might impress his personal ideas upon them.

At the end of World War I, the fate of the Arabs was complicated by Great Power rivalries, since Britain had made secret promises not only to the sharif of Mecca but also to the French. Under the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, modern-day Syria and Lebanon would fall under a French sphere of influence and modern-day Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, and what is now western Saudi Arabia into a British sphere. The San Remo Conference of 1920 formalized the new regional map as the French and British claimed responsibility for League of Nations mandates over these territories. On November 2, 1917, contravening promises made to the Arabs, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour had publicly stated his government’s support for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

Sharif Hussein felt that he could not in good conscience consent either to the British Mandate over Palestine or to the Balfour Declaration, as both represented a betrayal of the Arab Revolt. These pledges and arrangements would fuel the cause of Arab nationalism for several decades.

The new regional order was in part determined by Britain’s colonial secretary,

Winston Churchill. My great-grandfather Abdullah had a much higher opinion of Churchill than of Lawrence, describing him as “unique among the men Great Britain has produced in recent times.” In 1921, Abdullah became the emir of Transjordan, which encompassed the lands to the east of the Jordan River. All the lands to the west of the Jordan, comprising modern-day Israel, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, remained under British control as the British Mandate of Palestine.

Many thousands of Jewish immigrants began to arrive in Palestine, their movement encouraged and facilitated by the Balfour Declaration. At that time the Arabs accounted for some 90 percent of the population of Palestine. In 1897, the Zionist movement, at its first Congress in Basle, had defined its purpose as establishing “a home for the Jewish people in Palestine.” By 1947, the number of Jews in Palestine had grown to about 600,000, the increase encouraged by the Zionist movement and reinforced by persecution in Europe. The large influx created tensions with the 1.2 million Muslim and Christian Palestinians. For the first time, America stepped into the arena, insisting that Palestine open its doors to 100,000 Jewish immigrants.

In a prophetic article written in the now defunct *American* magazine in 1947, six months before the first Arab-Israeli war, my great-grandfather warned of the dangers of unchecked immigration:

No people on earth have been less “anti-Semitic” than the Arabs. The persecution of the Jews has been confined almost entirely to the Christian nations of the West. Jews, themselves, will admit that never since the Great Dispersion did Jews develop so freely and reach such importance as in Spain when it was an Arab possession. With very minor exceptions, Jews have lived for many centuries in the Middle East, in complete peace and friendliness with their Arab neighbors. . . .

I have the impression that many Americans believe the trouble in Palestine is very remote from them, that America had little to do with it, and that your only interest now is that of a humane bystander.

I believe that you do not realize how directly you are, as a nation, responsible in general for the whole Zionist move and specifically for the present terrorism. I call this to your attention because I am certain that if you realize your responsibility you will act fairly to admit it and assume it.

The present catastrophe may be laid almost entirely at your door. Your government, almost alone in the world, is insisting on the immediate admission of 100,000 more Jews into Palestine—to be followed by countless additional ones. This will have the most frightful consequences in bloody chaos beyond anything ever hinted at in Palestine before.

I have the most complete confidence in the fair-mindedness and generosity of the American public. We Arabs ask no favors. We ask only that you know the full truth, not half of it. We ask only that when you judge the Palestine question, you put yourselves in our place. What would your answer be if some outside agency told you that you must accept in America many millions of utter strangers in your midst—enough to dominate your country—merely because they insisted on going to America, and because their forefathers had once lived there some 2,000 years ago?

Our answer is the same.

And what would be your action if, in spite of your refusal, this outside agency

began forcing them on you?

Ours will be the same.

From the beginning, the conflict in Palestine has been a struggle between Jewish immigrants and the existing Arab Palestinian people, not, as it is often portrayed, the continuation of ancient hatreds between Jews and Arabs.

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s the British tried to limit the number of Jewish immigrants pouring into Palestine. Zionist organizations such as Haganah, the Irgun, and Lohamei Herut Israel (also known as the Stern Gang) conducted assassinations, planted bombs, and engaged in other acts of terrorism and sabotage to scare Palestinians from their land, force the British to leave Palestine, and impose a Jewish state.

In November 1944, the Stern Gang assassinated the British minister of state for the Middle East, Lord Moyne, in Cairo. Two years later, members of the Irgun planted a bomb in Jerusalem's King David Hotel, which housed the British Mandate secretariat and British military intelligence headquarters. Ninety-one people were killed. And in August 1947, in retaliation for the execution of three Jewish terrorists, the Irgun kidnapped two British sergeants and hanged them from eucalyptus trees in a forest south of the coastal town of Netanya. They booby-trapped the bodies, so that when British troops tried to cut them down a bomb exploded and injured another officer. This barbaric incident was widely condemned. The leader of the Irgun, Menachem Begin, would later go on to found the right-wing Herut Movement and become prime minister of Israel.

The British announced on September 23, 1947, that they would terminate their Mandate in Palestine by May 15, 1948. They had decided to hand over the problem of who should rule Palestine to the new United Nations, set up in 1945. Interestingly, the UN came up with a two-state solution. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into two states, one Arab and one Jewish, with Jerusalem designated as an international city under UN control. Under Resolution 181 half the territory, including the valuable coastline, was given to the Jews, who at the time controlled only 6 percent of the land. Conflict was inevitable.

Even before the formal outbreak of hostilities in May 1948, there were bloody clashes between Jewish and Arab communities. On April 9, 1948, Jewish terrorists from the Stern Gang and the Irgun attacked the village of Deir Yassin, several miles to the west of Jerusalem, and massacred 250 people, mostly women and children. To protect the Palestinians from such atrocities, my great-grandfather, King Abdullah I, began in late April to move Arab Legion forces across the River Jordan. At the same time, the Jewish leaders began to marshal their forces, including their nascent army, the Haganah, the Irgun, and the Stern Gang.

On May 14, 1948, the day the British Mandate ended, the Jewish People's Council declared the establishment of the state of Israel. Eleven minutes later, this new entity was recognized by U.S. president Harry Truman, followed by the Soviet Union. The tensions between Jews and Arabs did not take long to escalate into armed conflict. On the night Israel declared its independence, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq sent troops into Palestine to try to protect the rights of Arab Palestinians. The new Israeli army outnumbered Arab troops and slowly gained the upper hand, profiting from a lack of