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Grant P L Goral
Northern Illinois University, z1881562@students.niu.edu

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Israeli Democracy: Its Institutions and the Impact of the 1948 Palestine War

History 495 Introduction to Historical Research

Northern Illinois University

Grant Goral

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Introduction

Soaked in blood, surrounded in controversy, and suffering from ethnic and religious division, the founding of modern Israel was an historical event of great turmoil. Prior to Israel's independence, in 1947 the United Nations proposed a complex partition plan for the soon to be defunct British polity of Mandatory Palestine that was meant to appease the demands of both Jewish and Arab Palestinians.¹ Immediately after the release of the United Nations' plan though, the region descended into chaos and by the end of 1947, a violent civil war had begun. The majority of Palestinian Arabs in the region vehemently opposed this partition plan and a sizable number took up arms to counter the establishment of an Israeli state. Desperate to firmly establish a homeland that they believed the British promised them in 1917, the Yishuv (Jewish community of Mandatory Palestine) placed their support behind the United Nations plan. However, the Yishuv readied their forces to fight for independence once the prospect of a peaceful transition of power became untenable.² By the middle of 1948, the British Mandate expired, and upon its cessation, the State of Israel immediately declared its independence on May 14, 1948.³ Officially established as a parliamentary republic under a democratic framework, Israel was founded amidst a ferocious war. Following the end of the mandate and the establishment of Israel, the surrounding Arab nations invaded the Palestinian region to aid the Palestinian Arabs, who by this time were on the verge of collapse due to numerous military setbacks. By July of 1949, though, Israel through its new army, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF),

¹ Mandatory Palestine is the name given to the region of Palestine during the time of the British Mandate from 1920-1948. For more information on the British Mandate see: Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000); Naomi Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand: British Rule in Palestine: 1917-1948* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

² The Yishuv was the collective term for the Jewish population of Mandatory Palestine.

³ Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 487-503.

had staved off the Arab invasion and declared victory in their campaign to defend the territories that they believed comprised the State of Israel.⁴ Following these successes, Israel signed separate armistice agreements with the Arab states, and finally, out of the ashes of the 1948 Palestine War arose an Israeli state that defined itself as a democracy.

The founders of Israel chose to establish a democratic political infrastructure for their fledgling state, and that choice should be understood in the context of the 1948 Palestine War. How then, was their choice of a democratic system of government over other forms and political ideologies, such as authoritarianism and communism, affected by the violence of the 1948 Palestine War? Did early Israelis look to democracy as a way to secure the new Jewish state from future violence from its sizable minority of Arabs? Were the earliest institutions of Israeli democracy seen as ways to promote the buy-in by Israeli citizens in order to protect their new nation? These are complex questions. They have been answered by past historians, but only in a brief manner. This is because the current historiography on Israel's founding and the development of the democratic infrastructure of the state has generally taken for granted the idea that Israel became a democracy. These historians posit that Israeli democracy was an inevitable outcome but do not fully explain why. In contrast, this paper suggests that the Israeli state developed the way it did in response to the reality of violent conflict in its earliest years.

The founders of the modern Israeli state were the political elites of the Yishuv, and they led the push for a democratic Israel. It was through these political elites that Israeli democracy developed the way it did partly due to their experiences during the 1948 Palestine War. The most

⁴ Avi Shlaim, "Israel and the Arab Coalition in 1948," in *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, ed. Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 89-100.

influential political group in the Yishuv was known as Mapai or the Zionist Labor Party.⁵ It was the ideological home of elites like Golda Meir and led by David Ben-Gurion who would become Israel's first prime minister. Meir served as a critical fundraising advocate for the Israeli cause in the United States and as a close advisor to Ben-Gurion. She also served as the first Israeli ambassador to the Soviet Union, as minister of labor, and as prime minister.⁶ Mapam was the communist faction in Mandatory Palestine and early Israel, and their approach to government was seen as more dovish militarily and leaning farther left economically than the Labor Zionists.⁷ The Revisionists at the opposite end of the political spectrum represented right wing interests that sought to secure for Israel a territory much larger than what the UN Partition Plan had granted it.⁸ The General Zionists, for whom Chaim Weizmann was a central leader, backed away from the controversy of political polarization. Weizmann saw the Israeli cause as apolitical, and his influence loomed quite large in Israel leading to him being elected its first president.⁹ This substantial political influence that Weizmann possessed was important in the promotion of Israeli democracy as the state's new form of government.

Rather than the clean-cut monolith that the Yishuv was often seen as, it was anything but. For the main Yishuv leaders, often with Ben-Gurion and other Mapai figures at the forefront, the goal was to bring these rivals under one banner of democracy to fight the invading Arab armies as well as secure internal stability for Israel. These political elites saw democracy as a viable and

⁵ Zionism is a political ideology developed by political activist Theodor Herzl to describe the belief in the reestablishment, development, and protection of a Jewish nation in the land traditionally known as Eretz Yisrael or Land of Israel. For more information on Zionism see: Stephan E. C. Wendehorst, *British Jewry, Zionism, and the Jewish State, 1936-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶ Meron Medzini, *Golda Meir: A Political Biography* (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017), 175, 221, 443.

⁷ Gad Barzilai, "War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict: Israeli in a Comparative Perspective." *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 3 (Apr 1999): 323.

⁸ Itzhak Galnoor, "The Zionist Debates on Partition (1919-1947)," *Israel Studies* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 83-86.

⁹ T.G. Fraser, *Chaim Weizmann: The Zionist Dreamer* (London: Haus Publishing, 2009), 143-144.

unifying form of government for their politically, religiously, and ethnically diverse new nation. They believed that stability and unity were necessary for the beleaguered Jewish people to obtain their key objective: security. Without this security through solidarity in democracy, many of these Yishuv leaders believed Israel did not stand a fighting chance.

Democracy is a broadly defined topic and what constitutes a democratic institution is continuously up for debate. The debate on what democracy means in the context of Israel is particularly contentious due to its pluralistic, liberal nature blended with that of its overarching religious and culturally Jewish character. This research defines early Israel as a democracy on the basis of institutions that both historians and political scientists agree are hallmarks of democratic states.¹⁰ The institutions established at the inception of Israeli democracy were those of (1) elected officials as central policymakers; (2) free and fair elections; (3) freedom of association; and (4) inclusive citizenship. These four institutions represent important aspects of a democracy that existed in the earliest months and years of the Israeli state. By examining these institutions, along with the concept of democracy as a whole, important insight can be gained about how the 1948 Palestine War shaped them. Specifically, this paper makes the case that the new Israeli state needed to develop these structures of democracy in a way that adapted them to the realities and problems of the already existing conflict that the emerging Israel faced.

By analyzing primary sources from prominent figures and political bodies of the Yishuv who contributed to Israel's founding, I aim to shed light on the realities of war and its impact on the founding of modern Israel. The goal is not to claim that the context of war was the sole

¹⁰ Robert A. Dahl, "What Political Institutions Does Large-Scale Democracy Require?," *Political Science Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 188-191; Gerardo L. Munck, "What is Democracy? A Reconceptualization of the Quality of Democracy," *Democratization* 23, no. 1 (2016): 3-11; Stefan Rummens, "Staging Deliberation: The Role of Representative Institutions in the Deliberative Democratic Process," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012): 23-25.

reason why Israeli democracy developed in the manner that it did. Neither does this paper claim that historians have outrightly denied the impact of war on Israel's founding altogether. Instead, the findings laid out here are meant to add to the historiography and build on the work of past scholars. The work involved is like piecing together a puzzle: the leaders of the Yishuv were not always clear about their intentions, and so, it is imperative to place side by side primary sources concerned with democracy next to those concerned with security to see this inextricable linkage. It is apparent that the violence experienced by the founders of Israel in the 1948 Palestine War motivated them to advance democracy as Israel's system of government in order to protect their new nation. These leading Israeli figures saw democracy and its institutions as the vehicle by which they could drive their country forward against the hostile enemies they faced both internally and abroad.

Historiographical Debates

The historical literature surrounding the origins of Israeli democracy has seen a great deal of controversy for the last seventy years. Firstly, a plethora of historians whose research focuses on Israeli democracy and the history of the modern State of Israel have avoided giving, whether intentionally or not, a larger understanding of the reason why Israel's founding members chose democracy. In particular, the investigation of democracy and its connection to Israel has primarily come in the form of historians attempting to answer questions about the trajectory of Israeli democracy in the aftermath of post-1948 conflicts and not about its origins. This literature has been critical to gaining a better understanding of the impact of conflict on post-1948 Palestine War Israeli democracy but has had little to say about how democracy was first instituted. Instead, past historians have looked to early Israeli democracy and answered only

specific parts of the question about how it came to be.¹¹ Rather than approach these origins and seeing them as an array of answers that exists, historians have often addressed it from one angle while discounting the possibility of other answers.

Closest of all to answering these origin questions as well as recognizing the importance of the 1948 Palestine War's impact on Israeli democracy is political scientist and historian Shlomo Avineri. In his work, "The Historical Roots of Israeli Democracy", Avineri spends the first few pages emphasizing that a democratic state in modern Israel was not guaranteed stating, "We take it for granted that Israel is a democracy... this was not inevitable."¹² Avineri does mention in several paragraphs the harshness of the war and the threats that Israel faced from Arabs, both those outside its borders and those who lived within the new nation of Israel. But instead of focusing on this impact from the violence of war, Avineri turns his sights to the kehilas, or synagogue assemblies of the centuries prior to the founding of Israel, as the origin-point of Israeli democracy.¹³ While this paper does not deny the impact of the kehilas of many Eastern European synagogues on Israeli democracy, it does suggest that past historians like Avineri have failed to see how violence itself could be a factor in the selection of democracy as Israel's form of government. Avineri discusses the war but then shies away from it as he moves further into his article.

Historian and political scientist Alan Dowty is another example of this and has written extensively on Israeli history. One of his most important works, *The Jewish State: A Century Later*, looks to examine the state of Israeli democracy over a fifty-year period since its founding.

¹¹ Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim, preface to *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, ed. Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xvii-xxiii.

¹² Shlomo Avineri, "The Historical Roots of Israeli Democracy," *Shofar* 6, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 1-2.

¹³ Avineri, "The Historical Roots," 3-7.

His arguments though, explain little of the origins of the democratic state in Israel and instead focus on the status of Israeli democracy at other contentious periods of regional conflict.¹⁴ He also briefly dives into the Polish and Russian kehilas like Avineri and posits them as a point of origin to trace Israeli democracy back to.¹⁵ Any idea that other factors may have impacted this choice is absent from his work. Dowty is right to mention the kehilas as a precursor to Israeli democracy, but by looking to the kehilas as a singular answer to these origins is counterintuitive. It is perfectly possible to take the kehilas as a part of this origin story while also considering whether democracy could in part have been a response to the impact of violence from the 1948 Palestine War.

Other historians though, have approached the origins of Israeli democracy in an even more cursory manner than Avineri or Dowty. For instance, historian Michael J. Cohen approached Israeli history by examining the interactions between the constituent groups of Mandatory Palestine and international powers. In his work, *Palestine and the Great Powers, 1945-1948*, Cohen posits that the post-World War II superpowers engaged directly in finding a solution to the end of the British Mandate in Palestine. Directly, he claims that in shaping the future of Israel, these powers directed how the modern State of Israel would develop and argues that their respective governments held great sway over the Mandate's succession plan.¹⁶ Cohen gives little credence to the autonomy of the Yishuv and the choices that the founders of the Israeli state made. This assertion is incorrect: in fact, the Yishuv did have the proper autonomy to choose for itself the new Israeli system of government. While the choice of democracy went along with what the international system expected of Israel, that does not correlate to

¹⁴ Alan Dowty, *The Jewish State: A Century Later* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xiii-xviii.

¹⁵ Dowty, *The Jewish State*, 20-24.

¹⁶ Michael J. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers, 1945-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 6-8.

international expectations being the sole reason for the origins of Israeli democracy. In a much more recent work titled *Britain's Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives, 1917-1948*, Cohen further documents the close cooperation over the entirety of the Mandate between Britain and the United States in shaping modern Israel.¹⁷ While the analysis of the British Mandate in both of Cohen's works provides peripheral evidence about why Israel chose democracy, greater focus is placed on the overall history of the Mandate and the importance of foreign involvement. Even though part of Cohen's goals in these works is to understand the origins of the modern Israeli state, he does too little to truly explain where the state received its structure from and denied the ability of the Yishuv's political elites to act without the consent of superpowers.

In the same manner as Dowty and Cohen, historian Nir Kedar in his work, *David Ben-Gurion and the Foundation of Israeli Democracy* makes the assertion that democracy was an inevitability for the future Israeli state. Specifically, Kedar states that because of the democratic past of the Yishuv and the World Zionist Organization, the democratic future of Israel was guaranteed.¹⁸ It is with this point that Kedar draws upon a questionable claim that is taken as an immutable fact. Kedar, while providing intricate detail as to how Ben-Gurion developed the institutions of Israeli democracy, nevertheless glosses over the important understanding of why Ben-Gurion supported a democratic system in the first place. If Kedar's assumption is to be believed, history must still support this claim and provide evidence for why Israeli political elites so heartily embraced democracy. Kedar does go further by seeking to understand the origins of the institutions but like the preceding historians, he leaves little room to move outside his preset boundaries. The findings of Shlomo Avineri, Alan Dowty, Michael J. Cohen, and Nir Kedar are

¹⁷ Michael J. Cohen, *Britain's Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives, 1917-1948* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 4, 19, 23, 187.

¹⁸ Nir Kedar, *David Ben-Gurion and the Foundation of Israeli Democracy*, trans. Haim Watzman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 13.

important and add to the overall historiography on Israeli democracy. Yet, these historians have left certain questions unanswered in their work. To attempt to answer these questions, it is critical to look to the impact of violence on these democratic origins as a result of the 1948 Palestine War.

Methodology

In order to properly frame this paper and the primary sources used to build the arguments, it is important to explain the methodology utilized to gather these sources. Due to the controversial nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the primary sources used here were chosen based on a standard created to help build a solid set of sources. Each primary source needed to adhere to these points: (1) it was created between 1947 and 1967; (2) its creator was a member of the Yishuv who lived in Israel prior to the 1948 Palestine War's beginning and who remained there afterward; and (3) its creator went on to serve in the Israeli government within three years of the founding of the state. This standard is also applicable to those documents produced by the legislative bodies that existed in the Yishuv and immediately after the establishment of the State of Israel. It is worth understanding that this standard was not reverse-engineered to limit the sources used in this paper to those that best supported its arguments. Rather, because of the large number of writings on democracy, security, and Zionism, this standard objectively set parameters for the documents in use.

The first point stated that any primary source being used must have been created between 1947-1967. This time frame represented a period from the beginning of the 1948 Palestine War to the beginning of the Six-Day War. Documents earlier than 1947 were not relevant here as the arguments presented derive from sources impacted by violence from the 1948 Palestine War and

not earlier conflict. Ending this time frame before the Six-Day War in 1967 allowed any primary sources included to not be influenced by the increase in propaganda from that conflict.

The second point ensured that any primary source used came from someone who had been a member of the Yishuv. This parameter was chosen because the arguments of this paper focus on the impact the war had on the founders of Israel and their choice of democracy in forming their country. In order to be considered a founder of Israel, a person needed to have lived in the country prior to its founding and then have continued to live in Israel after its founding. This is important for those primary sources that were created after the end of the 1948 Palestine War and provide a post-war account of why democracy was chosen. These documents were equally as important as those created during the war but in order to ensure that they were not influenced by external factors, the creator of the source needed to have been a Yishuv member and then an Israeli citizen at the time of producing their source.

Finally, the last qualification a primary source needed to meet was that its creator became a member of the Israeli government within three years of the founding of the State of Israel. The goal of this paper is to see the impact of the violence of war on the choice of democracy as Israel's system of government and the utilization of its democratic institutions to meet the reasoning behind that choice. It is logical, then, that those who built these institutions and took advantage of their functions would have been members of the Israeli government. Along with this, the three-year time frame is commonly held to be the period of time in which it took to establish the main democratic infrastructure of the Israeli government. This meant that those in government at the time developed the state into the democracy they had chosen to pursue, and that therefore, the paper can explore the extent to which they did so in response to the violence of war.

The Coming of War

Just prior to the beginning of the Civil War in Palestine in November of 1947, the idea of an independent Israeli state had already become a realistic possibility. In February of 1947, this reality became clear when the British government stated their intention of leaving Mandatory Palestine and relegating its fate to the United Nations.¹⁹ With the possibility of attaining a homeland that the Yishuv felt was promised to them by the British in the Balfour Declaration, many of the prominent Jewish leaders in Palestine began to see the security needs of their people differently.²⁰ This, added to the prospect of greater conflict on the horizon with Palestinian Arabs only forced the problem of security further onto the agenda of Yishuv leaders. So much so, that by the summer of that year, the plans for a Jewish state had been drawn up and those leaders testifying before the United Nations (UN) Commission in Lake Success, NY confirmed this. David Ben-Gurion went as far as to state, “We conceive a democratic State as a State where all citizens are absolutely here [*sic*], I can use the word ‘absolute’ because either it is equality or it is not.”²¹ It is here that the Jewish delegation for the Yishuv, led by Ben Gurion, made clear that a democratic state was a must for the Jewish people. All this even prior to civil war breaking out in November. Yet, even while the Jewish leaders pushed for a state for their people, the outbreak of civil war in Palestine changed the way that these political elites viewed democracy and the institutions that would follow.

¹⁹ Segev, *One Palestine*, Complete, 495-496.

²⁰ For more on the Balfour Declaration see: Robbie Sabbel, *International Law and the Arab Israeli Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Random House, 2010).

²¹ United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, *Hearing for the Jewish Agency (Weizmann)* (Lake Success, NY: United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, 1947).

On 29 November 1947, the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) voted to partition Palestine and officially provided for the creation of a Jewish state. This partition plan aimed to split Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab States with a neutral, UN controlled Jerusalem.²² A plan for a lasting peace this was not and on the same day, Palestinian Arab militias mobilized their forces. Thus, the first half of the 1948 Palestine War began with a civil war pitting Jews against Arabs while the British Mandate was still in effect. The idea of partition, while requiring the two new states that would come from this agreement to be democratic, was itself not a democratic measure. Muslims greatly outnumbered Jews in the region, yet partition nearly split Mandatory Palestine in half geographically.²³ These events brought on by partition set the stage for the impact of violence to make its way into the minds of those who became the early leaders of Israel. In fact, historians have even posited that the development of Israel as a whole cannot be disconnected from the security issues which faced the Jewish people at the earliest stages of statehood and beyond.²⁴ Indeed, security represented the greatest concern for Jewish leaders who now needed to develop their nation amidst a violent conflict. For those of the Yishuv, the UN agreement that would give rise to a Jewish state was what a majority of Palestinian Jews wanted and what most leaders of the Jewish people championed as their cause.²⁵ This was just the beginning of the war, though, and the concern for

²² Naomi Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand: British Rule in Palestine: 1917-1948* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 231-233.

²³ Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, 496.

²⁴ Itzhak Galnoor, *Israeli Democracy in Transition*, in *Israel: State and Society, 1948-1988*, ed. by Peter Y. Medding, vol. 5 of *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989), distributed by Oxford University Press, 127-128.

²⁵ Golda Meir (speech, Council of Jewish Federations, Chicago, IL, January 2, 1948), <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/speech-that-made-possible-a-jewish-state-jan-2-1948/#:~:text=Golda%20Meir,-January%202%2C%201948&text=I%20have%20had%20the%20privilege,political%20obstacles%20and%20Arab%20riots>.

what the future Israeli government would look like can be understood by looking at the concept of Israeli democracy in relation to the conflict that surrounded it.

At the outset of the war in 1947, it became clear that Jewish leaders had already connected the goal of creating a future Israel with the need to protect those who would comprise the citizenry of this new country. Particularly, there was a need to protect the people of the Yishuv from attacks both within and outside of the borders of Jewish lands in Mandatory Palestine. According to Ben-Gurion, this need to provide for the defense of Jewish lands was clear: "...[S]ecurity comes unarguably first."²⁶ This civil war was different than other conflicts that the people of the Yishuv had experienced. This time, the war was aimed at preventing any Israeli autonomy in Palestine and so the leaders of the Yishuv set out to create a country that utilized democracy as a way to collectively engage the Jewish people in the defense of their people and lands.

Democracy and Security

The first important topic to examine then, is how Jewish political leaders connected democracy to the violence around them. This is a complicated question to analyze because often, these Jewish leaders did not explicitly state their belief in this connection. Rather, statements from important Mapai figures such as David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir draw on the reality of the struggle that the Jewish people faced. Then, these statements can be connected with their other comments on democracy and the creation of the government of Israel. For instance, in

²⁶ David Ben-Gurion, "Statement to the Elected Assembly of Palestine Jewry" (speech, Elected Assembly of Palestine Jewry, Jerusalem, Mandatory Palestine, October 2, 1947), <https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/General/statement-to-the-elected-assembly-of-palestine-jewry-by-mr-david-ben-gurion>.

January 1948, Meir gave a speech to the Council of Jewish Federations in Chicago, Illinois stating, “Today we have reached a point when the nations of the world have given us their decision - the establishment of a Jewish state in a part of Palestine. Now in Palestine we are fighting to make this resolution of the United Nations a reality...”²⁷ This connection is critical to understanding Meir’s belief that the survival of the political entity of the Jewish state, a democratic state, was necessary for allowing a future for the Jews. While she may not expressly link democracy and the security of Israel in one sentence, this was a clear endorsement of the UN Partition Plan which Israeli political elites used to push democracy to the forefront of the conversation.

By this time as well, Yishuv leaders such as David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann also spoke on this connection, although, Ben-Gurion was more prolific on the topic. Plainly, Yishuv leaders saw democracy and its entailing institutions as a way to actively involve the whole of Israel in the defense of their nation. Ben-Gurion believed that “If we [the Jewish People] are not a unified people, if we do not plow our wastes, we shall have no security. Our security is a problem different from any other nation’s, and not only because we are few, but because we are not yet fully a nation and have no real country.”²⁸ For leaders like Ben-Gurion, democracy meant that each citizen of Israel, regardless of whether they were Jewish or not, should feel invested in the place they inhabit. These citizens needed to “plow” or become a part of the land that they inhabited so as to build an identity for the land of this new nation. Democracy, through the ideas of civic and political responsibility, represented the most prominent idea for Yishuv leaders to engage the people of the Yishuv and the newly created

²⁷ Golda Meir (speech, Council of Jewish Federations, Chicago, IL, January 2, 1948).

²⁸ David Ben-Gurion, *Rebirth and Destiny of Israel*, trans. by Mordekahi Nurock (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 349.

Israel: “We must draw them into new social and political orbits and attach them to our past and to our vision of sovereignty, in self-government, in liberty, in Jewish unity, in brotherhood, in mutual aid and collective responsibility.”²⁹ While these words by Ben-Gurion do not explicitly state that democracy and the security of Israel were connected, Yishuv leaders like him, through vocalization of the importance of this investment made that clear enough. The message to the people of the Yishuv was forceful: take part in your new nation for your engagement will save the Jewish people from destruction.

To this point, the discussion of Israeli democracy has been monolithic in the sense that it has not differentiated between various Israeli leaders’ understandings of democracy. To the contrary, the idea of Israeli democracy for those leading the Yishuv ranged widely. Though, prominent figures such as Chaim Weizmann as well as influential Mapai leader often guided the debate through their prevailing views. Weizmann’s stated position in 1949, was that: “The war years had knit the community into a powerful, self-conscious organism, and the great war effort, out of all proportion to the numerical strength of the Yishuv, had given the Jews of Palestine a heightened self-reliance, a justified sense of merit and achievement, a renewed claim on the democratic world.”³⁰ For the leaders of the Yishuv, the 1948 Palestine War meant that in order to achieve these goals of a democratic Israel, there needed to be a way to instill a new democratic, political behavior in the Jewish people of the Yishuv. This way of thinking meant that the political elites had to proposition the people of the Yishuv to see political participation as a way not just to run their nation but to protect it. In turn, rather than seeing democracy in an American sense, where democracy was meant to preserve individual liberties, the perspective of

²⁹ Ben-Gurion, *Rebirth and Destiny of Israel*, 401.

³⁰ Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 438-439.

Jewish political elites in the Yishuv was to see democracy as a safeguard for the collectivity of people. This pre-state notion of democracy as a collective good (as opposed to an individual one) was critical to understanding the impact of the war because it was this violence against the Jewish people as a whole that pushed Jewish leaders to hope that the future Israeli body politic would be anything but fractured.

Complementary to this hope was the reality that the Yishuv was not a singular group of people but rather one of many origins, religious expressions, ethnicities, and even languages. It was clear from the outset of the possibility of an Israeli state that the Yishuv leaders wanted to unite the Jewish people towards a common goal of a Jewish state. These efforts became even more important to the Yishuv leaders when war came in 1947. Democracy, then, was a way to patch up these cracks in order to unite the Jewish populations of the Yishuv and allow them to have their grievances heard. Ben-Gurion at a sitting of the People's Council in May 1948 said of the debate over the Israeli Declaration of Independence that, "...the document will have internal validity and will serve as an expression of unity, the members will vote in favor of it while reserving the right to make statements."³¹ In this early war period, the many different political parties such as Mapai, Mapam, and the Revisionists each had their own dissenting members who held staunch beliefs that challenged parts of this declaration. Yet, for Ben-Gurion and other Mapai leaders, getting each political group on board through the democratic process and ensuring them that their dissent would be heard could secure Israel through this political unity.

These fractures in ideology did not remain merely political, and it was also an objective of Yishuv leaders to bring into this new democratic fold the various paramilitary groups

³¹ The People's Council, "Sitting 3 of the People's Council," in *People's Council and Provisional Council of State 1948-1949* vol. 1 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 44-57.

defending the Yishuv. Dating back to the early 1920s in Mandatory Palestine, the Yishuv had established the Haganah as the primary defensive organization for the Jewish people against Palestinian Arab attacks. Like Yishuv itself, the Haganah was prone to fracture and by the late 1930s, two new paramilitary groups separated themselves from the Haganah.³² It was the goal of these two new organizations, the Irgun and the Lehi, to support the goals of their respective political leaders (in the Revisionists led by Menachem Begin). Once war broke out though, the leaders of the Yishuv, especially Ben-Gurion, attempted through their new democracy to bring the parties and their paramilitaries into the fold of the Yishuv to set their targets on protecting the Jewish people. In order to do this, there needed to be support for the government, a government that they could view as legitimate. Ben-Gurion posited:

If we can cooperate under a single authority and a unified Army, at least for the duration of the war, we will bring salvation to Israel for many generations to come, It is necessary, therefore that the entire Council unite in support of the Government's struggle against the dissidents, and give its full approval to the action which prevented disaster. The Council must reinforce the Government's aspiration to ensure one Army, one discipline and one authority.³³

The importance of democracy here and its response to the violence of the war should not go unnoticed. It was clear from Ben-Gurion's statement that having multiple armed groups within the new Israeli borders only hampered the strengthening of the state. The political elites of the Yishuv believed that only a united military front brought about by uniting these groups democratically through an elected coalition government could achieve that.

³² Dana Blander and Itzhak Galnoor, *The Handbook of Israel's Political System*, trans. by Gila Svirsky and Ira Moskowitz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 16-17.

³³ The Provisional Council of State, "Sitting 5 of the Provisional Council of State," in *People's Council and Provisional Council of State 1948-1949* vol. 1 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 166-167.

After the official founding of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948, one of the first actions that the original government took was establishing the Israeli Defense Force. Yishuv leaders recognized that a fractured military could not withstand the attacks they faced from Palestinian Arabs and their Arab allies.³⁴ For these Jewish leaders, the goal was to unite these groups under the banner of democracy, and they created the IDF as the official defenders of that democracy. The system of authoritarianism that many of the Revisionists had espoused could never have achieved full superiority over both their Arab enemies and internal political foes. Similarly, the communists in their dovish foreign and military policy confronted these paramilitary organizations on starkly different ideological terms which may have failed to bring them to heel. A democratic society, though, promised these paramilitary groups and their politicians a voice in the new Israeli state and this promise in fact worked. Mordechai Shattner, a high ranking Mapai political leader at a sitting of the Provisional Council of State mentioned:

The public is also relieved to know that the Government has disbanded the dissident military organizations, This constitutes a substantial internal victory and has prevented civil war. Now that the dissident organizations have joined the Defense Forces there is one Israeli Army which fights the state's war. If I feel secure in anticipation of the important, test we face, it is due to the discovery of a uniting force amongst us. This strength is manifested in our consolidated Defense Force and, I might add, in the composition of the group assembled here.³⁵

This “group” that Shattner referenced is the Provisional Council which was comprised of the political arms of the various dissident paramilitary groups he said united into one Israeli army. It became clear in that moment that the various political groups believed in and affirmed the

³⁴ Blander and Galnoor, *The Handbook of Israel's Political System*, 13-14.

³⁵ The Provisional Council of State, “Sitting 3 of the Provisional Council of State,” in *People's Council and Provisional Council of State 1948-1949* vol. 1 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 99.

legitimacy of the new government to lay down their arms against the Haganah and take up collective arms in support of the new Israel.

With the signing of the Israeli Declaration of Independence in May 1948, Israeli leaders celebrated this event. Nevertheless, the festivities that surrounded this declaration did not last long as the expiration of the British Mandate coincided with the beginning of the second half of the 1948 Palestine War. Within days of the establishment of the State of Israel, the surrounding Arab nations of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria invaded the former Palestinian land and sought to aid the Palestinians Arabs.³⁶ This founding event in Israeli history was a critical one, and the declaration itself provides deep insight into the minds of those Israeli leaders who had written and consented to it in the face of the aforementioned conflict. Also important to note, is the impact of the war on this document and the need to protect and incorporate the people that would now fall within the borders of Israel. One important group that the Israeli declaration names is the Israeli Arabs who were now legally citizens of this new state.³⁷ At the outset of partition, the borders drawn for the Jewish state contained roughly 450,000 Arabs compared to 500,000 Jews. By the wars end, Israeli forces had conquered even greater swaths of land containing more than 750,000 Arabs, many of whom would flee the new state for Arab controlled lands.³⁸ For the leaders of the Yishuv, they recognized that the war they fought against many Arabs within their borders and the Arab nations surrounding them was an extraordinary one, and it forced Jewish leaders to take action to prevent further violence on both fronts.

³⁶ Morris, Benny, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 207-218.

³⁷ The First Knesset, "Sitting 7 of the First Knesset," in *The Constituent Assembly-First Knesset 1949-1951* vol. 2 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 372-376.

³⁸ Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, 496.

In order to protect this new state and the Jews inside of it, Jewish Israeli leaders asked the new Arab citizens of Israel to participate in Israeli democracy as full citizens. What made this decision to create a multinational state so complex was that at the core of that new state was the Jewish people and their identity.³⁹ While Jewish leaders wanted Israel to be a state comprised of many peoples, it was impossible to separate this Jewish identity from the state. Yet, it was also necessary to incorporate Arabs into that political entity. For the founders of Israel though, they believed that those Arabs within these borders should be able to participate in the democratic process:

The People's Council and National Administration constitute neither a parliament nor a government. We hope that there will soon be a, free parliament in the State of Israel, based on democratic elections by all its Jewish citizens and those Arab citizens who choose to stay here. The government which will be elected then will be responsible to the democratic State of Israel. The People's Council and National Administration meet the needs of the moment, enabling us to defend our borders and prevent the chaos which the Mandatory government has wantonly bequeathed this country, contrary to the U.N. resolution.⁴⁰

This inclusion of Arabs into Israel aimed to dampen any internal chaos so as to secure the new state as it faced the Arab invasions on its external borders. By establishing order and a democratic process internally, Israel could better manage the conflict with those Arab citizens within its borders. In conjunction with this, the full inclusion of Israeli Arabs into the political life of the new Israeli state created a potential avenue for them to voice their dissent through a non-violent political process.

³⁹ Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 226-237.

⁴⁰ The People's Council, "Sitting 1 of the People's Council," in *People's Council and Provisional Council of State 1948-1949* vol. 1 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 40.

The Institutions of Israeli Democracy

Not only did the 1948 Palestine War influence the choice of democracy as Israel's system of government, but this conflict also shaped the institutions that were created and developed during the war. The four key institutions that define a representative democracy are reflected in the Israeli declaration of independence and political elites like Ben-Gurion and Weizmann built them into the new state after its founding.⁴¹ Unlike many other democracies that established the institutions of their nations in a time of peace after a war, Israel's democratic institutions were formed in the midst of war. The evidence that follows will show the fact that while the war was ongoing these institutions rooted themselves in Israeli democracy and were influenced by the conflict. It is because of this that the institutions of Israeli democracy did not originally look like those of other fledgling democracies: they could not merely focus on the governmental aspects of a peacetime nation. Rather, at their outset, Israeli leaders took on the problems of external and internal conflict by conforming their democratic institutional structures to solve these challenges.

The first institution that finds its origins in the 1948 Palestine War was that of the elected officials whose offices were established with the creation of the state. As war raged on during 1948, the political leaders of the Yishuv recognized that in order to properly lead Israel, its leaders needed to be responsive to the various factions that existed within the state of Israel. The only way to do this was to have elected officials who could represent those groups. Ben-Gurion's Mapai won a plurality of seats in the first general election in February 1949 stating,

We are now on the threshold of a sovereign, orderly and democratic life, and matters will be disposed not by appointed and provisional institutions, which were a temporary necessity, but by institutions which have been elected by the nation in general elections,

⁴¹ Provisional Government of Israel, Declaration of Independence, Tel Aviv, May 14, 1948, <https://m.knesset.gov.il/en/about/pages/declaration.aspx>.

regardless of the individual's sex, religion or race. They will impose their laws upon us and show us their way.⁴²

It was through the election of civilian leaders for the new Israeli state that Ben-Gurion wanted these elected bodies to be the seat of power over both political and military policy.⁴³ Here, the elites of the most influential political party clearly endorsed elections and saw them as adding to the security of the state. Unambiguously, developing the idea of elections as a part of the fabric of the political nature of the state was a critical goal for Ben-Gurion: “The first condition is so to strengthen the State in its economy and political values that no enemy can harbor fond notions of its collapse.”⁴⁴ For the leaders of the Yishuv, it was imperative that there exist elected policymakers who could lead the fledgling Israeli government to secure the new state because of the war the state was engaged in from its inception. Evolving alongside the need for elected officials leading a central government was also the need to have those elections be free and fair.

Because many ideological and religious groups vied to have their voices heard in the political forums of the new Israeli state, there was a need to ensure that the elections of the officials who would lead the new central government had the faith and support of a wide range of political groups.⁴⁵ To have elections that the people could not trust would have put this young nation in a precarious position that not only might have forced the government to focus its energies on protecting itself from external military enemies but also internal political ones.

⁴² The Provisional Council of State, “Sitting 20 of the Provisional Council of State,” in *People’s Council and Provisional Council of State 1948-1949* vol. 1 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 332.

⁴³ The Provisional Council of State, “Sitting 20 of the Provisional Council of State,” in *People’s Council and Provisional Council of State 1948-1949* vol. 1 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 270-277.

⁴⁴ Ben-Gurion, *Rebirth and Destiny of Israel*, 398.

⁴⁵ The Constituent Assembly, “Sitting 4 of the Constituent Assembly,” in *The Constituent Assembly-First Knesset 1949-1951* vol. 2 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 349-367.

Gaining the support of groups such as Mapam, the Revisionists, and Muslims was key for the new state according to Ben-Gurion:

Finally, during this period of emergency we held democratic elections for the Constituent Assembly, maintaining order, self-respect and moral and political maturity which are the equal of those in any well run country. I am not referring to the results of the elections—there may be differences of opinion in this regard—but to the fact that there was a large turn-out, that the electors behaved honorably, and that Jews, Moslems and Christians participated.⁴⁶

While the views of these groups did not triumph, giving them a seat at the table via elected party members was necessary to secure the stability of the burgeoning country they had just founded.

This freedom to contest elections in a fair manner also looked to incorporate the significant minority of Arabs that resided within the new borders of Israel. It became clear in the discussions of the early provisional government of Israel that the largest party, Mapai, and thus the controller of the direction of the government made it a priority to encourage this political satisfaction amongst Zionist opposition parties and the minority Arabs. Ben-Gurion cheered this after the first Knesset elections, saying “This is an exceptional event on an internal level too. For the first time the entire spectrum of Jewish public life is meeting here, representatives of every political party and stream who are as remote from one another as east is from west on the issues of religion, policy, social views, everything.”⁴⁷ This success of the election and bringing together of the various political groups allowed for a united Israel in the ongoing war effort. The possibility of these various ideological groups trusting the new system of democratic government

⁴⁶ The Provisional Council of State, “Sitting 40 of the Provisional Council of State,” in *People’s Council and Provisional Council of State 1948-1949* vol. 1 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 332.

⁴⁷ The First Knesset, “Sitting 8 of the First Knesset,” in *The Constituent Assembly-First Knesset 1949-1951* vol. 2 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 434.

in Israel was made possible by the new government's guarantee that these various political groups could freely associate with each other in the state of Israel.

In order to even contest elections, the various political organizations of Israel needed to be able to associate with their specific ideologies and privately do so. One of the few explicit freedoms laid out in the Israeli declaration of independence is the ability of the citizens of Israel to possess the freedom of thought: "it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture."⁴⁸ While the freedom to associate does not lie solely with the impact of the 1948 Palestine War, the leaders of the Yishuv in their formation of Israel as well as the succeeding provisional government realized the necessity of this freedom if Israel was going to survive the war. This freedom represented not just a difference in political thought but also religious belief, in that Israel was established as a democracy not a theocracy. Here, the freedom of conscience not only reflected an ability for the multitude of Zionist parties to freely hold their beliefs on the direction of the new Israeli state, but it also looked to send an olive branch to the new Israeli Arab citizens of Israel who would have full rights in their new country.⁴⁹ For the Jewish leaders of this new, Jewish state which possessed a significant non-Jewish minority, it was critical that the state court this minority to bring them into the political life of Israel. Rather than strike their views down, the Israeli declaration of independence stated: "We appeal- in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Provisional Government of Israel, Declaration of Independence, Tel Aviv, May 14, 1948.

⁴⁹ The Provisional Council of State, "Sitting 1 of the Provisional Council of State," in *People's Council and Provisional Council of State 1948-1949* vol. 1 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 63-78.

⁵⁰ Provisional Government of Israel, Declaration of Independence, Tel Aviv, May 14, 1948.

This appeal for these Israeli Arabs to support their new nation as opposed to the Arab armies that engaged in war with Israel was in service of a goal of long term security for the state. Again, because the institutions of Israeli democracy were forced to adapt to the state of war that existed at the country's inception, these institutions did so in a way that reflected the needs of the new nation at that time.

Most notable of all the elements of a representative democracy and often one that most democracies fail to achieve the quickest is that of inclusive citizenship. While the previously listed institutions of democracy can be acted upon by those deemed citizens, it was a possibility in Israel that not all those living within the border of the new state would be able to exercise all of those rights of a citizen. Yet, in Israel, the idea of inclusive citizenship became a bedrock of the new state and the declaration of independence explicitly grants this to the Arab minority that lived within these new borders.⁵¹ Like with the other political rights guaranteed to Jewish Israelis, those same rights were guaranteed to Israeli Arabs whom the provisional Jewish government sought to incorporate into the nation. Ben-Gurion leading the cabinet in 1949 was vocal about Arab citizens being given the same rights as Jewish citizens:

First, they [Arabs] have completely equal rights and obligations in everything—work, salaries and suffrage as well as all other social and political rights—and second, we aspire to raise the Arabs' standard of living to equal our own. This is not something that can be done overnight, but we intend to act constructively and gradually until it is achieved.⁵²

As these words suggested, Ben-Gurion, leading the political elites of Israel genuinely believed in these rights for Israeli Arabs. Although these normative statements did not come to fruition for a

⁵¹ Provisional Government of Israel, Declaration of Independence, Tel Aviv, May 14, 1948.

⁵² The First Knesset, "Sitting 8 of the First Knesset," in *The Constituent Assembly-First Knesset 1949-1951* vol. 2 in *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981*, ed. by Netanel Lorch, trans. by Dorothea Vanson-Shefer (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 435.

majority of Arabs who lived under discriminatory laws and practices, these words did have meaning in this time and those political leaders who espoused them did see this incorporation of Arabs into the state as a means of stability and security. As a nation born in war, any situation that avoided conflict equaled security. In this case, that security was through democratic practices and the intention of bringing inclusive citizenship to these Israeli Arabs.

Political scientists often posit that this democratic institution of an inclusive citizenship usually arrives last relative to all of the other democratic freedoms. This is because an inclusive citizenship can many times reflect a ruling group's willingness to compromise with those groups that ideological hardliners deemed as outgroups.⁵³ In Israel, though, the situation of the 1948 Palestine War meant that the structures of Israeli democracy did not develop in the same manner as those of other nations. Jewish political leaders like Golda Meir understood the realities that war brought to the new state of Israel and, similar to Ben-Gurion, asked for Arabs to support the state in which they now found themselves: "We know that the Arabs will remain in the country. We know that there will be many Arab citizens of the Jewish state. We are anxious, they should be anxious, many of them are, to settle down to build."⁵⁴ For political leaders like Meir, security and peace for Israel would come through this acceptance of a Jewish state by having its citizens, both Jewish and Arab build that state. Again, stability through democratic citizenship meant security.

⁵³ Robert A. Dahl, "What Political Institutions Does Large-Scale Democracy Require?," *Political Science Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 190-191.

⁵⁴ Golda Meir, *This Is Our Strength*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962), 46-47.

Conclusion

More than just inference, the idea that the violence of the 1948 Palestine War impacted the founding of Israel as a democracy and the institutions that extend from it revealed a complex understanding of Israel's earliest years and days. When all of this evidence is taken into account, there clearly existed a pattern of how the leaders of the Yishuv and then leaders of the State of Israel reacted to the violence of the war that confronted them. By understanding the choice of democracy as one of security and not weakness, the Jewish political leaders that debated the foundations of Israel's government chose for their people a system of government meant to defend them from enemies both within and outside their borders. This pattern also extended to how the various institutions of Israel's democratic society formed due to the nature of the war that Israel had to manage from the moment of its independence. Unlike the various nations of the world that had the opportunity to build their democracies out of the victory of war, there was only continued bloodshed for the founders of Israel. While some historians and political scientists have grazed the answer to this question and others have completely bypassed it, these findings contribute to the greater historiography on this subject. Hopefully the resources and the methods applied here can be carried forth even further into the field by examining the Arab-Israeli conflict in retrospect. Critical aspects of Israel's government developed amidst the 1948 Palestine War, and therefore, studies that examine later conflicts, such as the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars, should look back to this time to underscore their arguments. Likewise, contemporary historians and political scientists who examine the relationship between conflict and democracy should utilize the events and analysis of the creation of the Israeli state as a part of a foundation in their studies.

Further research might also look to examine Israel's democratic institutions with a wider perspective. With the Israeli Defense Force being an integral piece of Israel and with its inception brought about through a democratic process, does the IDF carry a larger meaning in Israeli democracy? Should the IDF be considered as an institution of Israeli democracy? These possible questions can be answered by building on the research put forth here as well as that of other scholars. Instead of seeing democracy as being linked with the instability of a state, there should be a wider examination of how democracy contributes to the strength and security of a sovereign nation in the face of conflict.

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