

# Azzam's Genocidal Threat

by David Barnett and Efraim Karsh

Of the countless threats of violence made by Arab and Palestinian leaders in the run up to and in the wake of the November 29, 1947 partition resolution, none has resonated more widely than the warning by Abdul Rahman Azzam, the Arab League's first secretary-general, that the establishment of a Jewish state would lead to "a war of extermination and momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacre and the Crusades."

This threat is generally believed to have been made during a briefing to the Egyptian press on May 15, 1948, shortly after the pan-Arab invasion of the newly-proclaimed state of Israel. Some scholars trace it to a May 16 *New York Times* report, citing the Egyptian daily *al-Ahram*.<sup>1</sup> Yet this *New York Times* edition contains no such item whereas the original *al-Ahram* report has yet to surface. Others cite a BBC broadcast as their source,<sup>2</sup> yet a comprehensive examination, completed by Efraim Karsh, of the corporation's archives in Reading, England, has found no evidence of this broadcast. Others, like the renowned American journalist, I. F. Stone, who covered the saga of Israel's birth as it unfolded, simply noted the threat without proper attribution.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, failure to trace the original document<sup>4</sup> has given rise to doubts as to whether Azzam actually made this threat. Criticizing Karsh for noting the threat in *Palestine Betrayed*,<sup>5</sup> Israeli academic Benny Morris wrote:

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1 See, for example, Rony E. Gabbay, *A Political Study of the Arab-Jewish Conflict: The Arab Refugee Problem (A Case Study)* (Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1959), p. 88; Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict over Palestine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 444, n. 14.

2 See, for example, John Roy Carlson, *Cairo to Damascus* (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 266; Mizra Khan, "The Arab Refugees—A Study in Frustration," in Walter Z. Laqueur, ed., *The Middle East in Transition: Studies in Contemporary History* (New York: Praeger, 1958), p. 237; Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *O Jerusalem!* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pp. 408, 588; Esther Rosalind Cohen, *Human Rights in the Israeli-Occupied Territories, 1967-1982* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 60, n. 72; Mitchell Bard, *Myths and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chevy Chase: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2006), p. 121.

3 Isidor Feinstein Stone, *This Is Israel* (New York: Boni and Gaer, 1948), p. 21.

4 Alexander H. Joffe and Asaf Romirowsky, "A Tale of Two Galloways: Notes on the Early History of UNRWA and Zionist Historiography," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Sept. 2010, p. 671.

5 New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010.



Akhbar al-Yom, October 11, 1947.

But was “extermination” their war aim, as Karsh would have it? There is no knowing. Indeed, the Arab leaders going to war in 1948 were very sparing in publicly describing their goals and “exterminating” the Jews never figured in their public bombast. I myself in the past have used the one divergent quote, by Arab League Secretary-General Abdul Rahman Azzam from May 15, 1948, in which he allegedly spoke of a “war of extermination” and a “momentous massacre” à la the Mongols. But in my recent history of the war, 1948 (Yale University Press, 2008), I refrained from reusing it after discovering that its pedigree is dubious.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the original document does in fact exist. It has eluded scholars for so long because they have been looking in the wrong place.

In his account of Israel’s birth, Stone alluded to the possibility that the threat was made

on the eve of the U.N. vote on partition, with the aim of averting this momentous decision, rather than before the pan-Arab invasion of Israel six months later.<sup>7</sup> Following this lead, David Barnett found a Jewish Agency memorandum, submitted on February 2, 1948, to the U.N. Palestine Commission, tasked with the implementation of the partition resolution, and yet again to the U.N. secretary-general on March 29, 1948.

Describing the panoply of Arab threats of war and actual acts of violence aimed at aborting the partition resolution, the memorandum read:

(6) ... The “practical and effective means” contrived and advocated by the Arab States were never envisaged as being limited by the provisions of the Charter; indeed, the Secretary-General of the Arab League was thinking in terms which are quite remote from the lofty sentiments of San Francisco. “This

6 Benny Morris, “Revisionism on the West Bank,” *The National Interest*, July-Aug. 2010, pp. 76-7.

7 Stone, *This Is Israel*, p. 21.



of the world to avenge the martyrdom of the Palestine Arabs, and viewing the war as dignifying every Arab and every Muslim throughout the world ...

"The Arab is superior to the Jew in that he accepts defeat with a smile: Should the Jews defeat us in the first battle, we will defeat them in the second or the third battle ... or the final one ... whereas one defeat will shatter the Jew's morale! Most desert Arabians take pleasure in fighting. I recall being tasked with mediating a truce in a desert war (in which I participated) that lasted for nine months ... While en route to sign the truce, I was approached by some of my comrades in arms who told me: 'Shame on you! You are a man of the people so how could you wish to end the war ... How can we live without war? This is because war gives the Bedouin a sense of happiness, bliss, and security that peace does not provide! ...

"I warned the Jewish leaders I met in London to desist from their policy,"<sup>11</sup> telling them that the Arab was the mightiest of soldiers and the day he draws his weapon, he will not lay it down until firing the last bullet in the battle, and we will fire the last shot ..."

He [Azzam] ended his conversation with me by saying: "I foresee the consequences of this bloody war. I see before me its horrible battles. I can picture its dead, injured, and victims ... But my conscience is clear ... For we are not attacking but defending ourselves, and we are not aggressors but defenders against an aggression! ..."



11 Azzam met with Eliahu Epstein, head of the Jewish Agency's Washington office, on June 18, 1947, and with David Horowitz and Aubrey (Abba) Eban, the Jewish Agency's liaison officers to the U.N. Special Committee on Palestine, on Sept. 15, 1947. In both meetings, he sought to dissuade his interlocutors from pursuing their quest for statehood by using the Crusaders metaphor. See Karsh, *Palestine Betrayed*, pp. 92-5.—Eds.

## Israel Poised to Become "Energy Giant"

OTTAWA—The London-based World Energy Council says Israel's Shfela Basin, a half-hour drive south of Jerusalem, holds 250 billion barrels of recoverable shale oil, possibly making the energy-vulnerable country "the world's newest energy giant." With reserves of 260 billion barrels, Saudi Arabia would remain the world's No. 1 oil country—though not, perhaps, for long. Howard Jonas, CEO of U.S.-based IDT Corp., the company that owns the Shfela Basin concession, says there is much more oil under Israel than under Saudi Arabia: Perhaps, he says, twice as much.

Even with a mere 250 billion barrels, the Shfela Basin (or 238 square kilometres of it) would make Israel the third-largest holder of shale reserves in the world—right behind the U.S. with 1.5 trillion barrels and China with 355 billion barrels. Assuming for the moment that Mr. Jonas is correct in his calculations, the U.S. and Israel would together hold shale reserves in excess of two trillion barrels: Enough oil to fuel these two countries (at combined consumption of eight billion barrels a year) for more than 200 years.

It will take years—probably decades—for Israel to reach maximum production from its vast reserves of shale oil. But odds are that the Shfela Basin will change the global balance of power long before then. Indeed, it will effectively change the balance of power the day it exports its first barrel of oil. This shouldn't take long. With such investors as Lord Rothschild (the banker and philanthropist), Rupert Murdoch (the media magnate), and Dick Cheney (the politician), Israel should be pumping oil within three or four years. Also on board is Shell Oil's top scientist, Harold Vinegar, who says the Shfela oil is not only abundant but premium quality as well: "The equivalent of Saudi extra-light."

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