



Volume 13, Number 5 June 6, 2019

Seventy Years since the “First Hudna”: The Legacy of the Rhodes Agreements

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During the last two years the Arab world, in general, and Palestinian arena in particular, has witnessed a lively public discourse on the longstanding conflict with Israel. The discussion stems from a collection of anniversaries of significant historical events: fifty years since the Six Day War (1967); thirty years since the First *Intifada* (1987); one hundred years since the Balfour Declaration (1917); seventy years since the Partition Plan (1947) and the *Nakba* (1948); and twenty-five years since the Oslo Accords (1993). This discussion was carried out mainly in the media and among intellectuals, and to a more limited degree in the political sphere and among the public.

Seventy years have passed since the signing of the Rhodes Agreements – the series of armistice agreements that put a formal end to the first Arab-Israeli war - but they are absent from the public discourse. The agreements were signed separately with four Arab states that were involved in the war – Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, between February and July 1949, without Palestinian involvement and without Iraq, which took part in the fighting but refused to countenance any agreement with the new state of Israel. Although largely forgotten, and unmentioned in the current discourse, the Rhodes Agreements were of great historical significance, for they shaped the geopolitical map of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite the fact that the borders that were drawn in 1949 were not perceived as part of a final status arrangement or peace agreement between Israel and the Arab states, they became over the years, and especially after 1967, the legitimate and internationally recognized demarcation lines of Israel.

Palestinians, and Arabs more generally, usually view the Rhodes Agreements in a negative light. This impression has limited discussion about them. Since its inception, the “First Hudna”¹ (“ceasefire”) – which is how the Rhodes Agreements are often referred to – was a synonym for defeatism, treason, and the absence of vision. The Palestinians played a key role in spreading this image of the agreements in the Arab world. The agreements were described as a typical expression of the self-interest and the self-centeredness of “reactionary” Arab rulers. Those rulers were described as acting in full cooperation with Zionism and Western imperialism, willing to recognize Israel and promote normalization, while abandoning their commitment to their Palestinian brothers. Consequently, Arab rulers wanted to keep the existence of the agreements concealed, as much as possible, and discussion of them muted.

The wave of revolutions that swept the Arab world at the beginning of the 1950s strengthened impressions of the Rhodes Agreements as the “original sin.” The agreements were presented as a disgrace brought upon by the Arab regimes that fell to revolutionary forces – especially the royal dynasty in Egypt and the first generation of leaders in Syria. The pre-revolutionary regimes were characterized as responsible for the loss of dignity, submission to foreign edicts, and recognition of Israel (King Abdallah of Jordan was assigned most of the blame for this). In the eyes of the revolutionary leaders, the “correct” historical action was to continue the struggle against Israel until its end, which was also supposed to ameliorate the deep crisis that the Palestinians found themselves in following the war. Abdallah al-Tall, a disgruntled ex-senior officer in Jordan's Arab Legion, gave concrete expression to the widespread contempt and disgust for the Rhodes Agreements in his book *The Palestine Tragedy*, in which al-Tall described them as “a despicable agreement” and “a great betrayal.”²

The Arabs that remained in Israel after the 1948 war also profoundly criticized the agreements. Criticism was particularly sharp among the residents of “The Little Triangle,” (an area in the center of Israel populated mostly by Arabs) who, in the aftermath of the Jordanian-Israeli armistice agreement, found themselves, overnight, living under Israeli rule. They felt a special humiliation because Israeli forces did not occupy their communities as part of the fighting. Instead, they were

¹ Editor's note: A "hudna" is word derived from the Arab-Muslim tradition that refers to a temporary truce, characterized by a cessation of hostilities for a limited period of time.

For a primer on how this term has appeared in the Arab-Israeli context, see [here](#).

² Abdallah al-Tall, *Karithat Filastin* [The Palestine Tragedy] (Cairo: Dar al-Kalam, 1959).

subjected to Israeli control as a result of border adjustments made between Israel and Jordan as part of the Rhodes agreement.

In the aftermath of the area's transfer to Israeli control in May 1949, the residents' anger was reflected in the Jordanian newspaper *al-Nasr's* May 9 front page column, "I am Israeli beginning on May 8, 1949," signed by "the Israeli," Ahmed Ben-Ali (perhaps a pseudonym), a resident of Tira (a village in the "Little Triangle"). The writer described himself as someone with an Arab name, a descendant of generations of Arabs and Arab culture, who, through "a removal order," became an Israeli subject. He pondered what would become of his name and language, and whether he would be entitled to see his brother on the other side of the border: "it seems as though since May 8, 1949, I am no longer a part of you, that in fact I became an Israeli. The ceasefire agreement instantly divides me from you, I became an Israeli and I am no longer an Arab!" The following day the publicist Akram al-Khalidi published a response in a column titled, "But an Arab from May 8, 1949," in which he claimed, "in spite of Israeli citizenship, barbed-wire fences, the maps and the agreements, your identity won't wane, Ahmed." According to Khalidi, "the fences and the agreements are temporary... You are an Arab despite your Israeli citizenship...we remain your brothers and close partners in spite of the agreement and Israeli citizenship."

With time, the anger and shame associated with the agreements among many Israeli Arabs waned, but did not disappear completely. A half a century later, the Nazareth newspaper *al-Diyar* encapsulated the trauma of the Rhodes Agreements in the Arab collective memory, when it referred to them "the darkest episode in the history of our people [the Palestinian] and our nation [the Arab], which we are obligated to study and whose memory is to be endowed to future generations."³

The Rhodes Agreements are also absent from the Israeli collective memory. In the first decade after the agreements, the state's founders were disappointed by a process that was initially expected to inaugurate a transition to formal, contractual peace with the Arab world. In 1949, an expression of the short-lived optimism was articulated by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who pondered whether a vision of peace was developing "with the neighbors and with the world."⁴ Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett described the armistice agreement with Egypt (February 1949) – the first of the Rhodes Agreements – as "a turning point in the history of Israel's foreign

³ *al-Diyar*, May 15, 1998.

⁴ Shmuel Cohen-Shani, *Be-Naa 'layim Meubakot ve be-Aniva* [In Dusty Shoes and a Tie] (Tel-Aviv: Ma'arachot, 2002), p. 32.

relations and an event opening a period in the life of the Middle East.”⁵ Nevertheless, shortly thereafter the hope of peace among Israeli leaders dissipated, as the dynamics of the conflict resulted in ever-increasing violence and mutual hostility.

Seventy years after their signing, the Rhodes Agreements occupy an increasingly remote place in the Israeli and Arab collective memories, yet their practical implications are real. Of the borders that were determined as part of these agreements, the ones that remains nearly unchanged are Israel's borders with Lebanon and Egypt (except the Gaza Strip region that was under Israeli domain between 1967-1994, and since 1994 has mostly been under Palestinian jurisdiction). The border with Jordan changed dramatically by the Six Day War with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. However, as with Egypt, the Rhodes armistice agreement – in the areas except those marking the boundary between the West Bank and Israel – became the basis for the 1994 peace agreement. In the Syrian case, the situation was different since the line marking Israeli control was altered by the Israeli conquest of the Golan Heights in 1967, and the slight modifications of that line following the October 1973 war. The Palestinians, for their part, were the actor that was absent from the 1949 discussion, but eventually became an influential entity that demanded independence in the ex-Jordanian West Bank and Gaza, i.e. in accordance with the borders of the Rhodes agreements. Thus although some of the 1949 borders were unilaterally altered or deemed not entirely relevant by Israeli governments at different junctures, they are continuously perceived by the Arab world, the international community, and important segments in Israel as an integral starting point for discussing any future agreement. Moreover, this view is anchored in relevant UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference documents. Although the absence of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement has not prevented some Arab Gulf states from deepening their strategic and economic links with Israel, these remain largely out of the public eye. Perhaps one may say that the Rhodes legacy of Arab states making agreements with Israel while not concluding formal peace treaties with it so long as Palestinian needs and demands are not adequately addressed remains relevant to the current situation.

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⁵ Rina and Jacob Sharett (editors), *Davar Davur* (Tel-Aviv: Amutat Moshe Sharett, 2016), p. 236.

**This is a translated and updated edition of an article that was originally published in the MDC's Tzomet HaMizrach HaTichon (The Middle East Crossroads) on May 5, 2019. The editorial team at Tel Aviv Notes, would like to thank Tzomet's Editor, Esther Webman, for making the original article available for publication here.*

***This article was translated from Hebrew by Mr. Benjamin Rathouser.*