

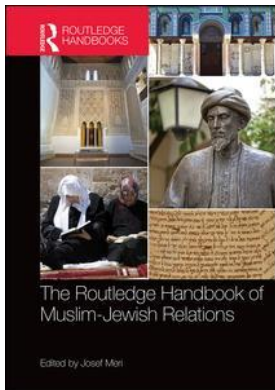
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Josef (Yousef) Meri

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Alexander Flores

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The Nakba

The Palestinian catastrophe of 1948

Alexander Flores

Nakba, Arabic for “disaster,” is the term used to describe events in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict, starting with the UN Partition Resolution on November 29, 1947 until the end of the ensuing war in January 1949 and seen from the perspective of the Arabs of Palestine. The term gained acceptance in Arab political discourse after the famous Arab nationalist writer Constantine Zurayq used it for the events of 1947/48 in his book *Ma'nā al-Nakba (The Meaning of the Disaster)* (Beirut 1948; English translation, Beirut 1956). In the Zionist view, this period was the crowning achievement in the effort to transform the pre-state Jewish community (“Yishuv”) into a sovereign state and to consolidate and expand this state in a war against the Arab Palestinians and neighbouring Arab states. Conversely, for the Palestinian Arabs, the Nakba represented a disaster, resulting in the destruction of Palestinian-Arab society. The bulk of the Palestinian population was expelled and dispossessed; the Palestinians who stayed in Israel became a minority and suffered discrimination, and most of them were also dispossessed. The inhabitants of those parts of Palestine remaining under Arab control were severed from the rest of the country. All Palestinians were deprived of their right to self-determination.

This stage of the conflict and, by implication, the Nakba has to be seen in its historical context. The conflict was brought about by the realization of the Zionist program in Palestine. Zionism, the movement aimed at settling as many Jews as possible in Palestine and at establishing a Jewish state there, was itself a reaction to conditions prevailing in Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century: the adverse and deteriorating situation for European Jews within an overall climate of nationalism, leading some Jews to initiate a nationalist program with the aim to improve the lives of Jewish citizens. Because in the twentieth century the situation for Jews deteriorated further, support for the program grew. In Europe, Zionism had been a defensive ideology, but its realization in Palestine could not but be offensive: The country was as densely populated as the land would permit under the given socioeconomic conditions, and the population was overwhelmingly Arab. The Zionist program implying mass immigration and Jewish dominance could only be put into practice to the detriment of the native population. Furthermore, since Palestine was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, the Zionists needed the support of one or more Western powers

with influence in the region, so they had to inscribe their movement in the context of the ongoing colonialist expansion of European powers. The Zionist leaders were conscious of these circumstances, and they planned and acted accordingly: For them, the Zionist project had top priority. When Palestinian Arabs were acquiescent, they were ignored and sometimes cajoled. When they were seen as an actual or potential nuisance, the Zionists fought them with all means at their disposal. Already Theodor Herzl had contemplated removing them from the country; from that time, the idea of a “transfer” of the Palestinian population was an integral part of Zionist thinking.¹

In the realization of their project the Zionists were conscious of the need to use force against any perceived violent threat, which, by and large, they saw as inevitable, but the movement showed a considerable degree of flexibility and stealth. When political circumstances seemed to dictate it, Zionist pronouncements for external consumption generally played down or denied the movement’s far-reaching aims. Stealth had its limits, though: In order to mobilise the rank and file, the real aims had to be stated somehow and were thus open to scrutiny.

Given the scope and nature of their project, the Zionists were interested in the land, not its inhabitants. They created clusters of settlements in strategic locations where they could hope to achieve a Jewish majority. This enabled them to claim that these were autonomous Jewish areas, even if territorially limited to start with. The Zionists exploited the fact that land had become a tradable commodity during the Ottoman Empire, but once they had bought the land, they took it out of circulation by prohibiting its resale to non-Jews. At the same time, they insisted that only Jews would be able to work the land, preferably in collectives. In this way, the Arab population was socially excluded from the Zionist project long before being physically expelled from the area under Zionist control.² The physical expulsion took place during the military conflict from 1947 to 1949.

The political background

Having backed a Jewish National Home as envisaged in the Balfour Declaration, the British mandatory power, under the impact of the Palestinian rebellion of 1936 to 1939, declared its intention to restrict any further development and to grant Palestine independence under terms largely favorable to the Arab Palestinians. As a result, the Zionists turned against Britain and, after a partial lull during the Second World War, waged a terror campaign to speed up the departure of the colonial power. The British, weakened by the war, faced conflicting pressures: On the one hand, world opinion demanded enhanced Jewish immigration to Palestine; on the other, Britain’s Arab allies wanted the exact opposite. The British response was to abdicate responsibility for the Palestine problem and to hand it over to the United Nations (UN).

In November 1947, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution recommending the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state and an Arab state on its soil as well as international control over Jerusalem. This was a great success for the Zionists, who had long fought for such an outcome. It opened the way for them to carve out a large portion of Palestine and to create a state virtually unhindered by outside forces. The only opposition came from the Palestinian Arabs and the neighbouring Arab states, a contest that had to be fought out on the battlefield.

The war

It has often been claimed that the Palestinians were the aggressors in the war that followed. Analysis of the overall situation as well as actual events on the ground lead to the conclusion that the war was seen as inevitable by both sides but that the Zionists were more active in bringing about a fully fledged war. Throughout the history of the conflict, and certainly at the end of the mandate, the Zionist movement was the proactive party. It had for years prepared itself for armed conflict, and this preparation (planning, training, and purchase and production of arms) had been stepped up long before the partition resolution. The Palestinians had opposed the resolution because they did not want to concede the bulk of their country to a Jewish state in which Arabs (slightly less than half of the population of the proposed Jewish state) would be dominated by Jews or from which they would be expelled. In principle, therefore, both parties were ready to fight, although the Palestinians were less prepared than the Zionists, and many Palestinians were inclined to stay on even in the event of a Zionist takeover.³

In the first phase of the war, fighting was limited to specific areas (sniping and mutual terrorist attacks in mixed cities, attacks on traffic lines). At the beginning of April 1948, the Haganah, the main Zionist fighting force, started an offensive to secure the densely Jewish populated zone before the withdrawal of the British on May 15, the date by which an intervention of several Arab armies was anticipated. This offensive, following the so-called Plan Dalet, was largely successful.

The Arab intervention after the British withdrawal and the declaration of the state of Israel scored some initial successes: The Arab troops, although numerically weaker than the Zionist forces, were superior in armament. That changed with large shipments of primarily Czech weapons to the Zionists during the first truce from June 11 to July 8. In the renewed fighting, the Zionist forces, by now transformed into the Israeli army, had the upper hand, conquering substantial territories in the centre and north of the country. The second truce lasted from July 18 to October 15; after it, the Israeli army brought the rest of the country under control, with two exceptions: a strip of the Gaza coast from now on administered by Egypt, and the West Bank held by the (Jordanian) Arab Legion and Iraqi units. The fighting stopped in early January 1949, and armistice agreements between Israel and different Arab states were concluded during 1949.

The Nakba

For the Palestinian Arabs, the war brought about the destruction of their society. The most immediately visible aspect was the displacement of the bulk of the Palestinian population: About 750,000 Palestinian Arabs left their homes in the territory that became the state of Israel. This population transfer took place throughout the fighting. Benny Morris, whose overall estimates are low, writes that until March 1948, 75,000 to 100,000 Palestinians left their homes, another 200,000 to 300,000 in April-May, around 100,000 during the “Ten Days” in July 1948, then 100,000 to 150,000 in late October 1948, and 20,000 to 30,000 during the last period of the war and the years immediately after it.⁴ In the early stages, this number included many well-to-do urban Palestinians who left their homes in anticipation of severe trouble. This displacement can be said to have been partly voluntary, but in all other cases, some form of violence was used. Morris, who tends to exonerate the Jewish forces, is right when he ascribes the reason for the displacement to a variety of factors, among them the structural weakness of Palestinian society, the absence of a competent leadership, the

example of a large part of the elite leaving their homes, and the intimidation campaign by Zionist forces. In most cases, he writes, the displacement accompanied the conquest of a given town or village by Zionist (or, later, Israeli) units, this being largely the precipitating factor: "In general, in most cases the final and decisive precipitant to flight was Haganah, IZL, LHI or IDF attack or the inhabitants' fear of such attack."⁵

Arab villages and towns were depopulated in a number of ways. Morris differentiates between the following motives for the decision to flee: expulsion by Jewish forces, abandonment on Arab orders, fear of attack or fighting, military assaults, intimidation campaigns, and the fall of neighbouring towns or villages.⁶ He also warns us that the line between "military assault" and "expulsion by Jewish forces" is "occasionally blurred."⁷ This is an understatement. Outright expulsion orders were issued only in a minority of cases; according to Morris, the majority of the transfers happened after an area had been occupied, with psychological factors also playing an important role. In many cases, the conquest of a village involved heavy fire, including mortar fire, and an attack from three sides, deliberately leaving the fourth side free so that the population was forced to leave in that direction. Under such circumstances, occupation could easily turn into outright expulsion. Even if the bulk of the population in a village fled, others who were not willing or able to flee were subsequently forced out, sometimes after several inhabitants had been killed.

To give a concrete example: Most of the 4,500 inhabitants of Saffuriyya, a village close to Nazareth, fled during the ground attack on the village on the night of July 15, 1948 – after it had been "softened up" by repeated aerial bombing.

And so the villagers of Saffuriyya did not flee because the army outwitted their defenders on the ground or because they were cowardly or weak or told by their leaders to do so. They fled because a pair of Israel Air Force planes pummelled them with bombs from on high, sending up flames and sending down mayhem.⁸

The people remaining in the village or those who tried to return to it were finally expelled in January 1949.⁹ Saffuriyya is categorized by Morris as having been depopulated through military assault.¹⁰

In Morris's breakdown, cases of outright expulsion are relatively few (although one of these, the depopulation of Lydda and Ramleh, accounts for almost one-tenth of the entire refugee population); the bulk of the depopulation is the result of "military assault." Another large category is that in which psychological factors come into play: fear of fighting, fall of neighbouring areas, and intimidation campaigns by Zionist/Israeli forces. Such intimidation could take different forms; a typical one is described by Yigal Allon, a Zionist military leader:

There were left before us only five days, before the threatening date, the 15th of May. We saw a need to clean out the inner Galilee and to create a Jewish territorial continuity in the entire area of the upper Galilee. The long battles had weakened our forces, and before us stood great duties of blocking the routes of the Arab invasion. ... We therefore looked for means which did not force us into employing force, in order to cause the tens of thousands of sulky Arabs who remained in Galilee to flee, for in case of an Arab invasion these were likely to strike us from the rear. We tried to use a tactic ... which worked miraculously well.

I gathered all of the Jewish Mukhtars, who have contact with Arabs in different villages, and asked them to whisper in the ears of some Arabs, that a great Jewish reinforcement has arrived in Galilee and that it is going to burn all of the villages of the

Huleh. They should suggest to these Arabs, *as their friends*, to escape while there is still time. ... The flight numbered myriads.¹¹

In almost all the cases of depopulated Palestinian villages and towns, Zionist/Israeli actions were the immediate reason for the displacement or a precipitating factor:

If Jewish attacks directly and indirectly triggered most of the Arab exodus up to June 1948, a small but significant proportion of that flight was due to direct Jewish expulsion orders ... and to Jewish psychological warfare ploys (“whispering propaganda”) designed to intimidate inhabitants into leaving.¹²

Massacres

One way in which the mass transfer was achieved were massacres. The massacre in the village of Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948 is widely known, and it is often presented as an exceptional case, but the evidence does not support this view. In the first edition of “The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem,” Morris writes about “actual atrocities committed by the Jewish forces (primarily at Deir Yassin),”¹³ thus severely understating their real extent. After further research made possible by the declassification of Israeli army documents, Morris corrected the picture and spoke of a certain number of massacres and of a pattern, indicating that these massacres were premeditated and followed a policy. On a number of massacres perpetrated during the conquest of the rest of Galilee at the end of October 1948, he writes,

Almost all the massacres followed a similar course: a unit entered a village, rounded up the menfolk in the village square, selected four or ten or fifty of the army-age males (in some places according to prepared lists of persons suspected of helping Qawuqji’s or Grand Mufti Hajj Amin al Husayni’s forces), lined them up against a wall, and shot them.¹⁴

In the second edition of his book, Morris writes about “the 20-odd cases of massacre.”¹⁵ This is still a serious underestimation. In a large-scale research project undertaken during the 1990s and early 2000s, Saleh Abdel Jawad scrutinized the massacres during the 1947–1949 war. He gathered all available kinds of evidence and questioned a large number of refugees. He found and documented almost seventy massacres, and this, he says, is a conservative count. According to Abdel Jawad, a massacre “is the killing of unarmed civilians or combatants who have surrendered and who have come under the authority of the conquering force, by an armed military or para-military force.”¹⁶ He then distinguishes between different types of massacres: selective killings, prisoner massacres, indiscriminate killings, “reprisal” raids, and terror operations, involving, for example, explosives, aerial bombardments, deaths resulting from expulsions, and the execution of old people remaining in an otherwise “emptied” village.¹⁷

Based on his research, Abdel Jawad arrives at a list of sixty-eight clearly documented massacres. These varied in type and scale, the number of victims ranging from three (according to Abdel Jawad the killing of three or more victims constitutes a massacre) to a thousand (the estimated number of civilians killed during and after the conquest and depopulation of Lydda). There were many smaller massacres but also a great number involving tens and some involving hundreds of victims.¹⁸

To summarize Abdel Jawad's research: there were many more massacres than has so far been assumed, to the extent that they appear to have been a common occurrence in the conquest of Palestinian villages and towns by Zionist/Israeli forces. Overall, massacres were a means to ensure, or complete, the depopulation of a territory. An Israeli researcher remarked that in "each village occupied by the Israeli army we could smell the stench of a massacre".¹⁹

Massacres as an instrument to depopulate a village or town were usually part of a "long cumulative process of harassment and terror" encompassing "repeated attacks before the final assault and occupation ... aerial and artillery bombardment ... (as well as) psychological warfare and propaganda."²⁰ Abdel Jawad describes the massacres as "a tool, probably the primary tool, of a total war through which Zionists and later Israelis sought to expel the Arabs from their lands by means of ethnic cleansing."²¹ And further:

I strongly argue that the massacres, along with the other techniques used to acquire Palestinian land, were so consistent, comprehensive, and effective that the existence of a central guiding intelligence can be inferred. Perhaps most chilling is that the leaders of the massacres ... not only went unpunished, but were promoted to the highest positions in Israeli public life.²²

To reinforce the policy of expulsion, the Zionist and then the Israeli leadership decided very early on that Palestinians who had left their villages or towns would not be allowed back, whatever the circumstances. This official policy was not strictly enforced everywhere (in the Galilee, a number of refugees slipped back in and were later given legal status), but in many places, the return of refugees was prevented by a shoot-to-kill policy.

Most of the conquered and depopulated villages were destroyed during or soon after the war. The Israeli leadership wanted to create a *fait accompli* on the ground that should once and for all preclude a return of the Palestinian population. Only a few of the 418 depopulated villages were left standing, now serving as picturesque dwelling places for artists and well-to-do Jewish Israelis. The fate of the depopulated villages and their present condition has been meticulously documented in the volume *All that Remains*.²³ The conclusion reached is that of the 418 depopulated villages, 70 percent were totally – and 22 percent largely – destroyed. In a third category of villages (5 percent), the level of destruction could not be ascertained, and only fifteen villages were left totally or largely intact.²⁴

The towns

The expulsion policy also affected the bulk of the Arab population in towns that came under Israeli control, including those that were not part of the Jewish state as delimited in the partition plan, such as Jaffa, Jerusalem, Lydda, and Ramleh. The volume *Jerusalem 1948* gives a detailed history of the Arab neighbourhoods in what was later termed "West Jerusalem" (where Arabs had owned as much real estate as Jews).²⁵ In Jerusalem and the area around it, the Zionist policy of systematic expulsions started long before it is widely assumed to have begun. Already in late December 1947 and early January 1948, Lifta, Sheikh Badr, and Romeima, Arab villages or neighbourhoods on the western outskirts of Jerusalem, were cleared of their Arab inhabitants and taken over to house Jewish families.²⁶ On February 7, 1948, Ben-Gurion reported to the council of his party:

From your entry into Jerusalem, through Lifta, Romeima ... there are no Arabs. One hundred percent Jews. Since Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, it has not been

so Jewish as it is now. In many Arab neighborhoods in the west one sees not a single Arab. I do not assume that this will change ... What has happened in Jerusalem ... is likely to happen in many parts of the country ... in the six, eight or ten months of the campaign there will certainly be great changes in the composition of the population of the country.²⁷

Up to mid-May 1948, Jewish forces, on the heels of the withdrawing British army, occupied all of what was to become West Jerusalem and emptied it of its Arab population. Similar actions were taken in Haifa, Jaffa, Tiberias, Beisan, and Safed, all conquered before mid-May, and in Acre, Lydda, Ramleh, and other places after that date. Nazareth stands out as the only larger Arab town that was not depopulated during or after the conquest, probably due to Ben-Gurion's order to observe restraint in this town because of its standing in the eyes of the Christian West, coupled with the unwillingness of the local commander to expel the Arabs.²⁸ Ben-Gurion backed the commander, but several weeks later expressed his disappointment at the sight of Nazareth: "Why so many Arabs? Why didn't you expel them?"²⁹

The number of city dwellers expelled during the war was about 254,000; roughly 390,000 villagers and some 70,000 to 100,000 semi-sedentary Bedouin suffered the same fate.³⁰

Premeditation?

Was all this done following a preconceived Zionist master plan aimed at the expulsion of the Arab population? Morris emphatically denies that there was such a plan, arguing that he would have found written orders about the wholesale expulsion of the Arabs in the vast archival material he analysed, had such a plan existed. Other researchers make the case for premeditation. They highlight "Plan Dalet," the plan for military action finalised by the Zionist leadership in March 1948 and put into practice from early April, in anticipation of the Arab intervention of mid-May.³¹ It outlined the conquest and consolidation of the territory envisaged for the Jewish state in the partition resolution (and some other territories) by Zionist military forces. It also provided for action against Arab villages that either resisted the conquest or were strategically located, including their destruction and depopulation. In practice, the distinction between "peaceful" and "resisting" villages became meaningless; very few Arabs remained in the territories conquered by Zionist forces up to May 15, 1948.

These events are sufficient proof for those who believe that expulsions were part of a preconceived strategy. They also point to the determination of the Zionist leadership very early on to prevent any return of the refugees and to plans for a population transfer right at the inception of the Zionist project. This is how Theodor Herzl expressed his wish to remove the Arab inhabitants of Palestine: "We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country."³² The debate about this idea in Zionist circles became very intense after the Peel Report of 1937, with its first official proposal to partition the country along ethnic lines. Although the proposed Jewish state was relatively small and comprised the bulk of the Jewish population then in the country, it would have included a considerable number of Arabs. Foreseeing difficulties with such a population mix, the report envisaged a "population exchange" – de facto, a transfer of Arabs, compulsory if necessary.³³ Some Zionists hesitated to adopt the plan because the Jewish state was so small; others, most notably Ben-Gurion, welcomed it: This was the way to Jewish statehood, offering the prospect of such a state without a large Arab population. The "transfer" itself was seen as the

task of the mandatory power. Ben-Gurion emphatically embraced the idea in his diary and, more publicly, at the twentieth Zionist Congress in Zurich in August 1937. Because of the sensitivity of the subject, the relevant passages of his speech were deleted from the published proceedings of the Congress.³⁴

During the 1940s, the idea of a transfer remained on the minds of Zionist leaders, for some of them to such an extent that it became a predominant focus of thought and actions. Foremost among these was Joseph Weitz, head of the lands department of the Jewish National Fund. He was obsessed with the idea of clearing all of Palestine of its Arab population. In 1940, he wrote, "It must be clear that there is no room in the country for both peoples. ... Not one village must be left, not one tribe."³⁵ Weitz continued to campaign for this aim up to and throughout the war of 1948.

Other Zionist leaders are also on record as stating repeatedly that they wanted the Arab minority in the future Jewish state to be as small as possible – and this at a time when Arabs still constituted a large majority in Palestine.

In the area designated for the Jewish state by the UN partition resolution, there was a population of around 500,000 Jews and 400,000 Arabs. A Jewish state would, therefore, have comprised roughly 40 per cent Arabs, or around 50 per cent including the Bedouin.³⁶ As for the land, Jews owned roughly 1,500 square kilometres in a Jewish state of about 13,500 square kilometres. Cultivable land in this area amounted to about 7,500 square kilometres. Jews, therefore, held about 11 per cent of the area of the proposed Jewish state and roughly 20 per cent of its cultivable area.³⁷

On December 30, 1947, Ben-Gurion had this to say about the demographic situation:

Together with the Jews of Jerusalem, the total population of the Jewish state at the time of its establishment, will be about a million, including almost 40 percent non-Jews. Such a composition does not provide a stable basis for a Jewish state. ... There can be no stable and strong Jewish state as long as it has a Jewish majority of only 60 percent.³⁸

On land holdings, the Zionists were equally explicit. From the ownership pattern, it is clear that they were at a formidable disadvantage, and this led them to the following conclusion:

We can purchase 3,000,000 dunums without displacing or causing any injury to the non-Jewish population. As a result we should then have about 4,500,000 dunums out of 7,500,000 which can be utilized. That means 60 percent of the present cultivable area. Can we afford as a people to hold less than 60 percent of the soil?³⁹

It is not obvious how the authors of this statement envisaged the purchase of 3,000 square kilometres of land, thus tripling the area in Jewish possession, without displacing or harming the Arabs. In any event, the status quo regarding people and land was highly undesirable for the Zionists, and they said so openly. Early on, a near-consensus had been formed among leading Zionists that there should be as few Arabs as possible in a future state, and given the Zionist aim – a state able to absorb massive Jewish immigration – this position was logical, almost inevitable. Although some leaders had moral qualms about the consequences of this stance for the Arabs, these proved to have no effect.

In summary, the Zionist leadership concluded that a removal of the Arab population from Palestine would be highly desirable, even indispensable, for the success of their project. During the course of the war, it had worked energetically to that end and, in its new form as the Israeli government, it resolved not to allow the return of any Palestinian refugees.

Consequently, many observers argue that there was a clear-cut expulsion policy at work. On the other hand, a “smoking gun” proof for the existence of such a policy, such as an official document ordering a wholesale expulsion, has not been found, and this has led others to deny the existence of such a policy. Abdel Jawad argues that the actual course of events is proof enough for the existence of an expulsion policy and that there are other cases of ethnic cleansing or outright genocide for which a written order could not be found. In the case at hand, it can be shown that mass expulsion was an important aim of the Zionist leadership.

There is, in fact, some additional evidence in the form of a semi-official expulsion order that goes a long way to show what actually happened and how the differences between the two schools of thought are smaller than is apparent. During the conquest of the two towns of Lydda and Ramleh, on July 12, 1948, Ben-Gurion conferred with the military leaders of the operation:

Someone, possibly Allon, after hearing of the start of the shooting in Lydda, proposed expelling the inhabitants of the two towns. Ben-Gurion said nothing, and no decision was taken. Then Ben-Gurion, Allon and Rabin left the room. Allon asked: “What shall we do with the Arabs?” Ben-Gurion made a dismissive, energetic gesture with his hand and said: “Expel them [*garesh otam*].”⁴⁰

Clearly, Israeli leaders, especially Ben-Gurion, wanted the Arabs to be expelled, but at the same time they did not want to tarnish Israel’s image or go down in history as the “great expellers.” It is, therefore, not surprising that they tried to avoid leaving any documentary proof of an expulsion policy. This was in line with the general method of the Zionist movement: With the final aim firmly in mind, the Zionists displayed considerable flexibility and pragmatism in the gradual implementation of their programme.

The Nakba (continued)

The refugee problem was the dominant feature of the Nakba: Three-fourths of a million Palestinians were expelled, or fled, from their places of residence, and they were not allowed to return.

Another important aspect of the Nakba was the fate of those Palestinians, about 156,000, who remained in the state of Israel. They were mainly concentrated in parts of the Galilee – in a small strip of land adjacent to the West Bank (the “Little Triangle”) that had been held by Arab forces till the end of the hostilities and had subsequently been ceded to Israel by Jordan in the armistice agreement – and in the northern Negev. Small numbers of Arabs remained in the towns of Acre, Haifa, Jaffa, Lydda, and Ramleh.

Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians in its territory was determined by two considerations. On the one hand, Jewish Israelis were determined never to compromise their firm grip on state power; on the other, they had to avoid giving the impression of discriminating against the indigenous population in order to be accepted into the group of “liberal civilized states” on whose support they depended.

Thus, the Arabs were given Israeli citizenship and the right to vote, yet they encountered many different forms of discrimination. The Israeli authorities not only expropriated the land belonging to expelled Palestinians but also the bulk of the land of those who were still in the country: 3,250 square kilometres of land were taken from Palestinians who had left the country; 1,750 square kilometres from those who stayed; 1,500 square kilometres of land in the northern Negev, which the local Bedouin considered to be their property, were

also claimed by the Israeli government,⁴¹ an issue that continues to be disputed. All this was possible because the Zionist movement now had state power and could design laws that gave legal cover to illegitimate dispossession.

Immediately after the war of 1948, the Arabs in Israel were placed under military rule, which severely restricted many of their freedoms, most notably the freedom of movement without a special permit. This rule ended only in 1966. Furthermore, compared to Jewish society in Israel, the Arab sector is severely underfinanced, many work places are closed to Arabs, and there are almost no Arabs in higher positions in the Israeli political and judicial system. When an Arab rises to the position of Israeli consul in a U.S. city, as happened a few years ago, this is hailed as a tremendous achievement. In Israel, Jews are privileged over non-Jews in many ways. All this is the outcome of the Zionist insistence that the state of Israel is not the state of all its citizens but the state of the Jews – not only of Israeli Jews but of all Jews. The Israeli establishment sees the demand of many Israeli Palestinians to transform the country into a state of all its citizens as an onslaught on the very foundations of the state.

Although the Arabs in Israel enjoy certain rights, they are by and large still treated as colonial subjects, whereas Jewish Israelis enjoy the privileges of a settler society.⁴² The problematic relationship between Jews and non-Jews in Israel is one of the consequences of the Nakba still troubling the country today.

Denial

The truth about the Nakba and the historical injustice it inflicted on the Palestinians would have severely tarnished Israel's image had it been disseminated widely, especially in the West, on which Israel was, and still is, largely dependent. Israel, therefore, made a huge effort to suppress the true version of events and to replace it with a radically different one. The Israeli version placed the responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities, and therefore for all its consequences, exclusively on the Palestinians and Arab governments. It denied any active role of the Zionist and Israeli forces in the displacement of the Palestinians. In this narrative, the mass flight is depicted as the direct result of an Arab League order for the Palestinians to leave the country, with the aim of clearing the battlefield for the advancing Arab armies. Israel justified its refusal to allow any refugees back with the argument that these refugees would be hostile to Israel and would have endangered Israel's security and existence.

Another way in which Israeli propaganda tried to stave off the adverse effect of the Nakba on the image of Israel was to couple it with the migration of Jews from Arab countries to Israel after 1948 that was comparable in scope to the transfer of the Palestinian population in the war of 1948. Thus, so the argument goes, the entire process amounted to a population exchange for which the Zionist/Israeli leadership should not be blamed. The argument is not convincing. A historical injustice cannot be justified by another one committed later. And the phenomena brought together here are quite different in nature. Whereas the Nakba was largely the forceful expulsion of a population against its will, the migration of Arab Jews to Israel was due to several factors. It is true that after the creation of Israel and the injustice toward the Palestinians, which it implied, a climate hostile to Jews emerged in some Arab countries that was intensified by the administrative measures of some Arab governments. In such an atmosphere, most Arab Jews left their countries of origin in a longer process – not necessarily, but mostly to Israel. In this migration, Israel and different Zionist bodies played a very active role because they desired it. Often they acted in collusion with Arab governments. Thus, the phenomenon is hardly comparable to the Nakba and cannot serve as an excuse for it.

Although this picture was largely based on outright lies and half-truths, it was widely accepted. Much of Western opinion was uncritical toward Israel; the country was even seen as a progressive, democratic element in an otherwise problematic, backward, and undemocratic world region. The Palestinian victims had a thoroughly different story, but they did not find a receptive audience in the West. Often, their case was not presented effectively, but even when journalists or researchers started to tell the real story, they did not achieve a great deal.⁴³ As far as world opinion was concerned, the memory of the Nakba had largely been buried.

Over the past decades, however, the official Israeli version of the history of the war has begun to crumble. The probable reason is the problems created by the Nakba, and the problems still affect the lives of Palestinians and also those of the Israelis themselves. The Palestinians in Israel continue to be second-class citizens; the occupation of the rest of Palestine, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip reinforced the settler-colonialist aspect of Zionism; there were repeated wars, most notably Israel's Lebanon war in 1982, and the first Intifada broke out. All this led to a more critical approach toward Israel and the Zionist endeavour. People began to question the accepted version of history, including that of the 1948 war.

Re-emergence of the Nakba

From the late 1980s, several Israeli historians and journalists published works that questioned the official Israeli version of the war of 1948. Benny Morris with his "Birth of the Palestinian refugee problem" was the first of them; others were Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, and Simha Flapan. Although they worked independently of one another, these authors came to be known collectively as the "new historians." The "old" historians fought back, but Benny Morris in particular was also criticized for not being radical enough in his exposure of Israel's responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem. This lively debate is still continuing but, by and large, historians now consider the old version of events as simply wrong.⁴⁴

The result of the conflict so far has been the gradual realization of the Zionist aim: the transformation of Palestine from an ethnically Arab into a Jewish country. Today, this aim has largely been achieved; the Nakba was the most important step toward it. The refugee problem created by the Nakba remains unsolved to this day. It is one of the three core aspects of the conflict; the other two are the exclusively Jewish character of the state of Israel and the occupation of the rest of Palestine, including the ongoing settlement process in the West Bank. In the 1990s, the Oslo peace process gave rise to the hope that the conflict might be settled, starting with an end of the occupation. In that framework, the Palestinian leadership expressed its readiness to renounce the return of a large number of refugees in exchange for Israel's accepting its responsibility and for the right of return in principle. The Palestinians also recognized the state of Israel and cancelled the passages of the Palestinian National Charter calling for its destruction. This means that the Palestinian leadership did not press for a solution of the problems created in 1948 when a solution of the problems created in 1967 seemed to be in sight, but when the Oslo process came to nothing, the hope for an end to the occupation vanished. The more unwilling Israel proved to make concessions in any of the three core areas, the more the Palestinians were tempted to demand redress in all of them. That is why, after having been virtually forgotten, the Nakba has now come to the fore again and, in 1998, the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba was widely commemorated.⁴⁵

Israel, for its part, has tried to suppress the memory of the Nakba. Although the Israeli version of the 1948 war has been shown to be false, Israel still propagates it, and the Israeli government continues to deny any responsibility for the refugee problem, refusing to

consider any kind of return of the refugees. Any mention of the Nakba is depicted as an attack on the state. The Knesset passed a law (the so-called “Nakba law”) authorizing the finance minister to cut the budget of any state-funded bodies “that openly reject Israel as a Jewish state or mark the state’s Independence Day as a day of mourning.”⁴⁶ The Nakba continues to haunt the Palestinians – and Israel.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of “Transfer” in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992)
- 2 Cf. Dan Diner, *Israel in Palästina. Über Tausch und Gewalt im Vorderen Orient* (Königstein: Athenäum 1980)
- 3 Cf. Saleh Abdel Jawad, *The Arab and Palestinian Narratives of the 1948 War*, in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict. History’s Double Helix* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006) pp. 72–114
- 4 Cf. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) pp. 30, 128, 216, 236, 253
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 294
- 6 Cf. *ibid.*, p. xiv
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Adina Hoffman, *My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness. A Poet’s Life in the Palestinian Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) p. 133
- 9 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 164
- 10 Cf. Morris, *Birth*, p. xv
- 11 Yigal Allon, quoted in Walid Khalidi, “Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 69 (Autumn 1988), p. 18f.
- 12 Morris, *Birth*, p. 287f.
- 13 Morris, *Birth*, p. 288
- 14 Benny Morris, “Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948”, in Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The War for Palestine. Rewriting the History of 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 55
- 15 Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 592
- 16 Saleh Abdel Jawad, “Zionist Massacres: the Creation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem in the 1948 War”, in Eyal Benvenisti, Chaim Gans and Sari Hanafi, eds, *Israel and the Palestinian Refugees* (Berlin and New York: Springer, 2007) p. 75
- 17 Cf. Abdel Jawad, *Zionist Massacres*, pp. 82–104
- 18 Details in Abdel Jawad’s list of massacres; see Abdel Jawad, *Zionist Massacres*, pp. 104–124
- 19 Arieh Yitzhaki, quoted in Abdel Jawad, *Zionist Massacres*, p. 69
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Abdel Jawad, *Zionist Massacres*, p. 70
- 22 Abdel Jawad, *Zionist Massacres*, p. 127
- 23 Walid Khalidi, ed., *All that Remains. The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992)
- 24 Cf. Khalidi, *All that Remains*, p. xix (footnote 10)
- 25 Salim Tamari, ed., *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighbourhoods and their Fate in the War* (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies/Badil Resource Center, 1999)
- 26 Cf. Nathan Krystall, “The Fall of the New City,” in Tamari, *Jerusalem 1948*, pp. 92–146, here 100f.
- 27 Ben-Gurion, *War Diary*, quoted in Krystall, “The Fall of the New City”, p. 102f.
- 28 Cf. Benny Morris, *1948. A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008) p. 281f.; Hoffman, *My Happiness*, p. 192f.
- 29 Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, quoted in Hoffman, *My Happiness*, p. 193
- 30 Cf. Khalidi, *All that Remains*, p. xxxiif.
- 31 Further discussion may be found in Walid Khalidi, “Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 69 (Autumn 1988), pp. 4–37, here 8–19; Masalha,

- Expulsion*, pp. 175–199; Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006) passim.
- 32 Theodor Herzl, *Diaries*, quoted in Masalha, *Expulsion*, p. 9
 - 33 Cf. *Palestine Royal Commission Report* (Cmd. 5479) (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1937) pp. 389–393
 - 34 Cf. Benny Morris, “Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948”, pp. 41–44
 - 35 Joseph Weitz, *Diary*, quoted in Morris, *The Birth ... Revisited*, p. 54
 - 36 Cf. “Binationalism, not Partition. Report of Sub-Committee 2 on the UNSCOP Partition Plan,” in Walid Khalidi, ed., *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem Until 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987) pp. 645–701, here 675–678
 - 37 Cf. Khalidi, “Plan Dalet”, p. 12
 - 38 Ben-Gurion, quoted in Masalha, *Expulsion*, p. 176
 - 39 *Zionist Review*, January 30, 1948, quoted in Khalidi, “Plan Dalet”, p. 12
 - 40 Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, quoted in Morris, *Birth*, p. 207
 - 41 Cf. Alexander Schölch, “Die historische Dimension und die aktuelle Bedeutung des Landproblems in Israel”, in Alexander Flores and Alexander Schölch, eds., *Palästinenser in Israel*, (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 1983) pp. 11–26, here 12
 - 42 Cf. Shira Robinson, “Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel's Liberal Settler State” (December 19, 2013): <http://mondoweiss.net/2013/12/citizen-strangers-palestinians.html> (accessed: May 3, 2016)
 - 43 See, for instance, Erskine Childers, “The Wordless Wish. From Citizens to Refugees”, in I. Abu-Lughod, ed., *The Transformation of Palestine* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971) pp. 165–202; “The Other Exodus”, reprint of an article by Erskine Childers, and of the correspondence in *The Spectator* to which this article gave rise, no date, no place; Walid Khalidi, “Why Did the Palestinians Leave?”, *Middle East Forum* XXXIV (July 1959), 21–24, 35
 - 44 Cf. Benny Morris, “The New Historiography: Israel Confronts Its Past”, *Tikkun*, 3, 6 (Nov-Dec 1988), pp. 19–23, 99–102
 - 45 Cf. Tom Hill, *Historicity and the Nakba Commemorations of 1998* (Fiesole: European University Institute, 2005)
 - 46 “Ha'aretz Corrects 'Nakba Law' Lost in Translation” , Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), May 13, 2012: http://www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=2&x_outlet=55&x_article=2243 (accessed: May 3, 2016).

Further reading

- Abdel Jawad, Saleh, “The Arab and Palestinian Narratives of the 1948 War,” in *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict. History's Double Helix*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 72–114. Overview of the Palestinian and Arab narratives of the 1948 War.
- Abdel Jawad, Saleh, “Zionist Massacres: The Creation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem in the 1948 War,” in *Israel and the Palestinian Refugees*, eds. Eyal Benvenisti, Chaim Gans, and Sari Hanafi (New York: Springer, 2007), pp. 59–127. The results of a comprehensive study of Zionist/Israeli massacres during the 1948 war.
- Childers, Erskine, “The Wordless Wish: From Citizens to Refugees,” in *The Transformation of Palestine*, ed. I. Abu-Lughod (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), pp. 165–202. An early essay arguing for the systematic character of Zionist/Israeli depopulation policies.
- Hoffinan, Adina, *My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness. A Poet's Life in the Palestinian Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). The biography of a Palestinian poet from Saffuriyya (close to Nazareth), with a focus on the events of 1948.
- Khalidi, Walid, “Plan Dalet: Master plan for the conquest of Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 69 (Autumn 1988): 4–37. A discussion of “Plan Dalet” with relevant documents.
- Khalidi, Walid (ed.), *All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992). A comprehensive study of the Palestinian villages depopulated during the 1948 war.

- Masalha, Nur, *Expulsion of the Palestinians. The Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992). A study of the history of Zionist thinking concerning the removal of the Palestinian population.
- Masalha, Nur, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern and Reclaiming Memory* (London: Zed Books, 2012). Focusing on Palestinian oral history and memory, Masalha explores the obliteration of Palestinian landscape and culture after the founding of Israel in 1948.
- Morris, Benny, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). A history of the 1948 war giving the context of the Nakba.
- Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). The first detailed study of the creation of the refugee problem, relying mainly on Israeli military archives.
- Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2004). Much enlarged version of Morris's first book, with many more details.
- Pappe, Ilan, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006). A history of the depopulation of Palestine, arguing strongly for the "ethnic cleansing" thesis.
- Robinson, Shira, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel's Liberal Settler State* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). A study of the ethnically exclusive character of the state of Israel and the discrimination against its Arab population.
- Tamari, Salim (ed.), *Jerusalem 1948. The Arab Neighbourhoods and Their Fate in the War* (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies/Badil Resource Center, 1999). A study of the Arab quarters and the Arab environment of Jerusalem in the 1948 war and after.
- UNSCOP, "Binationalism, not Partition. Report of Sub-Committee 2 on the UNSCOP Partition Plan," in *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem Until 1948*, ed. Walid Khalidi (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987), pp. 645–701. Report of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine subcommittee report recommending a binational state in historic Palestine.