

Zionism's legacy of ethnic cleansing

Part 1—Israel and the Palestinian right of return

By Jean Shaoul
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At the heart of the breakdown of the Middle East talks lies the refusal of the Zionist state to accept the right of return for the Palestinians who lost their homes and country after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The following is the first of a two-part article on this subject. The second and concluding part—"Israeli expansion creates more Palestinian refugees"—will appear tomorrow.

According to the United Nations, there are presently some 3.5 million Palestinian refugees. They are comprised of those expelled, or their descendants, following the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948-49 and the 1967 "Six-Day War", as well as countless others who have since been expelled from the Occupied Territories or Israel. The majority have lived their lives in wretched conditions in refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Many now live elsewhere in the Middle East, while others have moved to the West.

Israel adamantly refuses to acknowledge the principle of the right of return for Palestinian refugees and their descendants because this would be tantamount to accepting responsibility for what happened to them. Moreover, since it would end the Jewish majority in Israel, it has been repeatedly denounced as a threat to the very survival of the Zionist state.

Outgoing President Bill Clinton tried to find a face-saving formula that could accommodate the Israelis and enable Yassir Arafat, the Palestinian Authority chairman, to sell a "framework" for a final agreement to his people. Clinton has proposed that Israel accept the return of 100,000 refugees as part of a policy of reuniting families; that the Palestine Authority accept several hundred thousand; and that an international fund be set up to provide compensation for the rest. While the final numbers would be subject to negotiation, the deal on offer does not address the fundamental issue of Palestinian rights.

Even this proposal is unacceptable to the Israeli political elite, which refuses to accept more than a handful of refugees back into Israel. Neither would a Palestinian state with a population substantially enlarged by a massive influx of refugees be tolerated on its borders.

The state of Israel was founded in 1948, following the catastrophe that overtook European Jewry in the 1930s and 1940s, and which culminated in the extermination of 6 million Jews in the Nazi concentration camps. The Zionist movement was able to channel the despondency felt by Jews at what had happened behind a perspective for creating a separate Jewish state through the partition of Palestine, which had been controlled by Britain since 1917. A Jewish state would build, it was claimed, a just and democratic haven for a people who had faced discrimination and oppression for centuries. It would be a state defined uniquely, not in geopolitical terms, but by religion.

Its doors would be open to all who subscribed to Judaism.

The formation of such a state inside Palestine, a country where Jews were in the minority, inevitably led to what today would be called ethnic cleansing. Zionism's central slogan was: "A land without people for a people without land." Thus the very foundation of the state was based on profoundly undemocratic principles: the denial of the rights of non-Jews already living there. It would also sanction control by religious authorities, something that modern states had rejected and overthrown centuries ago.

The sympathy felt throughout the world for the plight of the Jews following World War Two lent support for the creation of such a state. In addition, the major powers, and particularly the United States, saw the establishment of Israel as a means of enhancing their own strategic interests in the region, or at least blocking those of Britain, which was then the dominant power in the Middle East. As a result, in November 1947, the Zionists were successful in persuading the United Nations General Assembly—to the fury of the Arab world—to vote for the partition of Palestine into two states: one Palestinian and one Jewish.

In May 1948, Ben Gurion (who was to become Israel's first prime minister) proclaimed the establishment of the state of Israel. War immediately broke out between the Jews and the Palestinians, who were supported by neighbouring Arab countries. The fighting was to last until January 1949.

The take-over of Palestinian land was the essential prerequisite for the founding of the state of Israel.

Although the UN had expected London would help implement the partition plan, Britain hastily pulled out its administrative and military forces from Palestine, wanting no part in implementing the proposals. This was not out of any consideration for the rights of the Palestinians, but for fear of losing the support of its client states in the region, notably Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, and jeopardising its not inconsiderable assets in Iran and the Gulf states, then under British rule.

To this end, the British secretly arranged that King Abdullah of Transjordan, now Jordan, would use the Arab Legion, which still had British officers and funding, to take up positions in the areas allotted to the Palestinians.

Apart from Abdullah, most Arab leaders had assumed that their combined forces would easily defeat the Hagana, the forerunner of Israel's Defence Force. But it soon became clear that Israel had a numerical and military advantage, armed as they were with Czech weapons, courtesy of the Soviet Union. Over the next seven months the Hagana drove the Palestinian population from their homes and into neighbouring Arab countries, gaining control of territory far

larger than that proposed by the UN, including part of Jerusalem and the Negev desert.

A British census had recorded the population of Palestine in 1947 as 1,157,000 Palestinian Muslims, 146,000 Christians and 580,000 Jews. Two years later, only about 200,000 Palestinians remained in the parts of Palestine that had become Israel. The take-over of Palestinian-owned land was even more dramatic: in 1946 Jews had owned less than 12 percent of the land in what became Israel; this rose to 77 percent after the 1948-49 war.

While many Palestinians fled to avoid the war, most left out of fear of what might happen to them at the hands of Zionist terrorists. One of the most notorious incidents was the Deir Yassin massacre where 250 men, women and children were murdered in cold blood by Menachem Begin's Irgun group, as it went from house to house to drive out the Palestinians. While it was always known that the massacre was a deliberate attack, it was assumed until recently to be a random act of terrorism by a group that was "out of control". Benny Morris's book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: 1947-1949* sets the record straight.

Morris, one of Israel's "new historians", makes it quite clear that the Hagana aided and participated in the massacre. More importantly, Deir Yassin was also part of an overall Zionist plan to systematically empty Palestine of its Arab population. As Morris explains, the sheer horror of its brutality had "the most lasting effect of any single event of the war in precipitating the flight of Arab villagers from Palestine".

It was more than just a few Arab villagers who fled. More than 800,000, or two-thirds of the entire Palestinian population, left. Later the Israelis were to build Givat Shaul, now a suburb of Jerusalem, on the ruins of Deir Yassin.

A Conciliation Commission established by the UN estimated that 80 percent of the land gained by the Jews was taken by force. In 1950 the Zionist state legalised the expropriation of land through the Absentees' Property Law, which also prevents its return to the original Palestinian owners, the Law of the State's Property, and the Land Ordinance (the Acquisition of Land for Public Purposes).

In later years, Israel claimed that the Palestinians had fled of their own accord, or due to the incitement of their Arab leaders. Its public relations machine worked long and hard to portray Israel as a country built on empty, neglected or uninhabited land. Censorship was used to ensure that any evidence challenging such a view was suppressed. Any criticism was denounced as anti-Semitism.

In his book *Pity the Nation*, British journalist Robert Fisk explains in some detail the way the land laws operated and to what effect. When interviewed by Fisk, the Custodian of Absentee Property admitted that "about 70 percent" of land in the state of Israel might have two claimants—an Arab and a Jew—holding respectively a British mandate and an Israeli deed to the same property. When Fisk's articles were published, they provoked a storm of protest from Israel and its supporters in Britain.

Even Israel's own leaders were censored as part of the suppression of the truth. To cite but one example: as late as 1979, the memoirs of military leader and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's were censored. In one passage, where Rabin tells of a meeting where he and Yigal Allon, another Jewish commander of the Harel Brigade, had asked Ben Gurion, "What is to be done with the population?" Ben Gurion waved his hand in a gesture that indicated, "Drive them out!" The Brigade subsequently rounded up 50,000 Arabs from the towns of Lod and Ramlah and drove them out of Israel, with some forced to walk up to 15 miles to an area controlled by the Arab Legion. One of

these was George Habash, who later became leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Rabin himself described the operation as "harsh and cruel", but defended it as a military necessity.

The passage was cut because it showed that the expulsion of the Palestinians was sanctioned at the very highest level and contradicts the assiduously cultivated myth of the Zionists fighting like David against an Arab Goliath.

In the event, the Zionists were able to take control of the central area of what is now Israel because King Abdullah's British-led troops evacuated the area without consulting his Arab counterparts. The other Arab armies were thus cut off, particularly the Egyptians, and easily defeated. As a result, Israel became a state of 8,000 square miles, one third larger than the UN resolution of 1947 had intended.

The US intervened and arranged a cease-fire. But by this time the UN regarded the Israeli victory and its enlarged territory as a fait accompli and henceforth it treated the Palestinian issue as a refugee problem. A UN resolution passed in December 1948 stated that displaced Palestinians should have a choice between repatriation and compensation and instructed the Conciliation Commission to implement the resolution. But after an initial meeting, Israel stayed away to avoid defining its borders, as some wanted the state to include the entire area of biblical Palestine.

King Abdullah thwarted any possibility of the Palestinians establishing a state on the Palestinian land that had not been conquered by Israel, by annexing the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the old Walled City, incorporating them into Jordan, while Egypt took over administration of Gaza.

Although Britain recognised this annexation by its client states, the rest of the world formally condemned it. However, nothing was done to stop it. Although a UN General Assembly resolution had previously called for Jerusalem to become an internationally administered city under UN control, Israel ignored it and Ben Gurion moved Israel's government offices from Tel Aviv to West Jerusalem.

At a cabinet meeting in June 1948, called to discuss what to do about the Palestinian population, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharrett described the Palestinian exodus as "A momentous event in world history and Jewish history. They are not returning and that is our policy." Ben Gurion's attitude was equally callous. He said, "They [the Palestinians] lost and fled. Their return must now be prevented.... And I will oppose their return also after the war." With that, the cabinet sealed the fate of the 800,000 displaced Palestinians. They and their families were to become permanent refugees.

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