

Palestine Refugees and their *Nakba* in Israeli Official Documents

By Abdulkhalek Alzamli*

History is a contested terrain and is always, therefore, under constant review. Rewriting history is a universal and ceaseless act. It is clear then that history is far from being etched in stones as nations rediscover their past and rewrite their biographies. The world and nations change and historiography changes with them, willingly and unwillingly.

This article is focusing on a group of Israeli new historians who have declared the re-examination of mainstream Israeli national historiography to be their goal and have published new and controversial views and writings about facts accompanied the establishment of Israel in 1948. Those historians include such scholars as Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, Tom Segev, Simha Flapan, and researchers Uri Milstein and Yosi Amitai. Due to declassification laws in Israel, many archives became available throughout the 1980s which formed the body of the new historians' scholars. Thus, antecedent to the rise of the new history was the release of classified Israeli archives. The new historians base their research on Israeli government documents and official papers.

The main argument of the Israeli new historians discloses and refutes all Zionist narrative and propaganda regarding the events of 1948 war. **First**, the Israeli official version of the war said that Britain tried to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state; the new historians claimed that it tried to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state; as a matter of fact, it is the United Kingdom that dedicated itself for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine by all means available i.e., confiscating land and enacting Land Laws on behalf of the Jewish Agency during the Mandate, supplying the Zionists with sophisticated military equipment, facilitating the Jewish immigration to Palestine, etc. **Second**, the Israeli official version said that the Palestinians fled their homes of their own free will; the new historians said that the Palestinian refugees were expelled to empty their land and homes for the new-coming Jewish immigrants using means including massacres, terror, and psychological propaganda. **Third**, the Israeli official version said that the balance of power was in favor of the Palestinians and Arab armies; the new historians said that Israel had the advantage both in manpower and in arms in which the Jews had a sophisticated arms comparing of that with the Arabs. They utilized from the well-trained Jewish fighters who fought with the British during the WWII. **Fourth**, the Israeli official version said that Arab intransigence prevented peace; the new historians said that Israel is primarily to be blamed for the dead end and the Zionist leaders never wanted peace with Arabs rather they wanted all Palestine only for Jews.

In other words, the critical historians view the history of Israel from a perspective which has a sharp break from the traditional Israeli national history. The traditional Israeli national history lays all the blame for the war of 1948 and its consequences on the Arab side. This is a nationalist version of history and, as such, it is simplistic, selective, and self-serving. The conventional view argues that in 1947 the Zionist leaders accepted the UN partition plan, which was rejected by the Arabs. The Arabs united to launch a war to expel the Jews from Palestine, a war during which

Israel narrowly escaped destruction. In the course of the war, the Palestinians fled at the behest of Arab leaders. Later, Israel sought peace which has always been refused by every Arab state. Yet, until the 1980s, this one-sided narrative went largely unchallenged outside the Arab world. The school of the new historians has posed a challenge to this conventional understanding on the basis of Israel's chronicle of 1948 war.

Benny Morris may be considered, while not undermining the other new historians, the master of the masters. In his book, *Righteous Victims*, he discloses the myth of Israeli propaganda regarding Palestinian refugees and 1948 war. He believes that the emergence of the State of Israel was the destruction of the Palestinian society and the birth of the refugee problem.

Morris, who sometimes justified massacres against Palestinians, talks in length on the Zionist plan for transferring Palestinians from Palestine to make a vacancy for the newly-coming Jewish immigrants. He argues that Zionists adopted the Transfer policy against native inhabitants of Palestine, the Palestinians, to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish state. Zionist leaders regarded transfer as a legitimate solution to the Arab problem. Morris used in his arguments Israeli official documents to disclose the myth of 1948 war. He quoted many Zionist leaders on the Transfer policy- or the Ethnic cleansing- mainly Ben-Gurion, as he was the mastermind of the Palestinian refugees catastrophe. The following quotations of Ben-Gurion by Morris book *Righteous Victims* could be considered the basis of refuting the Zionist narrative on Palestine refugees' issue: Ben-Gurion in June 1938 said: *"I support compulsory Palestinian Arab population transfer. I do not see in it anything immoral."*

Ilan Pappé meticulously peels off the layers of the myth surrounding Israel's "war of independence" whereby a small nascent nation courageously repelled an attack by a well-equipped and well-coordinated enemy force from seven hostile Arab counties whose aim was to drive Israel out onto the sea. In dissecting this myth, Ilan Pappé sets out the main theme, that is, the pre-meditated expulsion of the Palestinians from the land of Israel. He develops the main paradigm by an ingenious multi-dimensional discourse whose framework skillfully draws on the legal and official definitions of "ethnic cleansing" and the way they apply to modern time examples such as former Yugoslavia. Pappé discloses the truth in the way it had been documented and told by both perpetrators and victims, using recently declassified material from official Israeli sources, eyewitness testimonies and interviews, memoirs and diaries of Zionist leaders as well as UN documents, and British mandatory sources.

According to Pappé, a code-named "Plan D" dictated methods for a systematic eviction of the Palestinians from vast areas of the country. They included large scale intimidation; laying siege to and bombarding villages and population centers; setting fire to homes, properties, and goods; expulsions, demolition and finally planting mines in the rubble to prevent any of the expelled inhabitants from returning. Pappé argues cogently that "Plan D" was an inevitable product of the Zionist ideology of having an exclusive Jewish presence in Palestine. According to him, both the Israeli and the Palestinian narratives ignored the concept of ethnic cleansing. While the Zionist version claimed that the local population left "voluntarily"; the Palestinian version refers to the magnitude of the Nakba rather than to its causes and perpetrators. Drawing on archive documents Pappé maintains that it was Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, who in 1947 told his associates to *"simultaneously accept and ignore the UN Partition Resolution of 29 November 1947"*. The categorical rejection of the scheme by the Arab Governments and

Palestinian leadership made it easier for Ben Gurion to assume that he could both accept the plan and work against it. Already in October 1947 Ben Gurion made it clear that *“if the map of the partition plan were not satisfactory the Jewish state would not be obliged to accept it.”* In reality, the Jewish leadership anticipated their future state to stretch over eighty percent of Mandatory Palestine: the 56% promised to the Jews by the UN with an additional 24% taken from the Arab state the UN had allocated to the Palestinians. While ethnic cleansing started as sporadic assaults in December 1947 coercive expulsion became an accepted practice as from February 1948. By the end of April more than half million Palestinians were ousted from their homeland.

The full-scale war between the Israeli troops and Arab Liberation Army erupted when the British Mandate ended on 15 May 1948 and the Arab league decided to intervene in order to protect the indigenous Palestinian population under the newly-created State of Israel. Pappé demolishes the David vs. Goliath ethos, according to which a small number of ill-equipped Jewish troops were facing the threat of a mighty enemy superior in number and weaponry. In reality, the war involved a confrontation between well-equipped and strategically coordinated Israeli troops and an assortment of Arab forces that lack central command, proper military training and equipment, as well as well strategic planning. Although the Jordanian Arab Legion put up a fierce resistance in Jerusalem and its surroundings, the strategically coordinated campaign conducted by the Israeli troops readily overpowered the scattered and disintegrated units of the Arab Liberation Army.

Israel’s military victory was accomplished by implementing the Zionist mission of driving the local Palestinian population out of the Jewish state. The inhuman methods employed by the victorious army included blatant intimidation, indiscriminate killings, executions, homes demolitions, and a rampant offensive of looting and destruction, resulting in the expulsion of more than 750,000 Palestinians, the destruction of 531 villages and the evacuation of Palestinian communities from 11 urban centers.

Israel has never been forced to comply with UN resolution 194 which called for an unconditional repatriation of the Palestinian refugees. Successive Israeli governments passed laws and took administrative measures to ensure that the 1948 refugees and their descendants will never have the opportunity to return to their homeland and reclaim their expropriated land leased by the Israeli Land Authority to kibbutz, villages and new development towns for Jewish immigrants.

The misleading story often told is that *“Jews declared Israel and then they were attacked.”* The fact is from November 1947 to May 1948 the Zionists were already on the offensive and had already attacked Palestinians. In the months before Israel was declared, the Zionists had driven 500,000 Palestinians off their land. In the months before Israel was declared, the Zionists had seized land beyond the proposed Jewish State (UN Resolution 181 of the partition of Palestine). In practice, Zionists did not accept the UN Partition Plan rather it was used as a pretense for taking over most of Palestine.

The key Zionists had no intention of accepting that UN partition. In 1938, Ben-Gurion said to other Zionists, *“After we become a strong force, as the result of the creation of a state, we shall abolish partition and expand to the whole of Palestine.”* Sure enough, after the creation of Israel

in 1948, Menachem Begin made clear how serious the “Jews accepting the UN partition” was in reality:

“The partition of the Homeland is illegal. It will never be recognized. The signature of institutions and individuals of the partition agreement is invalid. It will not bind the Jewish people. Jerusalem was and will forever be our capital. Eretz Israel (the land of Israel) will be restored to the people of Israel, All of it, and forever.”

“A partial Jewish state is not the end, but only the beginning. I am certain that we will not be prevented from settling in the other parts of the country, either by mutual agreement with our Arab neighbors or by some other means. If the Arabs refuse, we shall have to speak to them in a different language. But we shall only have another language if we have a state.”¹

The rise of the State of Israel- in frontiers larger than those assigned to it under the Partition Plan and the flight of the native Palestinian population was a cataclysm so deeply distressing to the Palestinians that to this day they call it, quite simply, **Al-Nakba** (the Catastrophe). Deir Yassin was, as Begin rightly claims, the most spectacular single contribution to the Catastrophe. (Deir Yassin, a Palestinian town that had in fact refused to be used as a base for operations against the Jewish Agency by the foreign Arab volunteer force, was the site of a massacre of 240 innocent Palestinian by the Jewish terrorist groups Irgun and the Stern Gang in April 1948).

A great deal of fresh light is shed on the multiple and variegated causation of the Arab exodus in a document entitled “The Emigration of the Arabs of Palestine in the Period 1/12/1947-1/6/1948” Dated 30 June 1948, it was produced by the Israel Forces Intelligence Branch during the first weeks of the First Truce (11 June-9 July) of the 1948 war. Rather than suggesting Israeli blamelessness in the creation of the refugee problem, the Intelligence Branch assessment is written in blunt factual and analytical terms and, if anything, contains more than a hint of “advice” as to how to precipitate further Palestinian flight by indirect methods, without having recourse to direct politically and morally embarrassing expulsion orders. On the eve of the UN Partition Plan Resolution of 29 November 1947, according to the report, there were 219 Palestinian Arab villages and four Arab, or partly Arab, towns in the areas earmarked for Jewish statehood, with a total Palestinian population of 342,000; by 1 June, 180 of these villages and towns had been evacuated, with 239,000.²

Plan D, prepared by the Haganah chiefs, was a major landmark in the development of this offensive strategy. During the preceding month the Palestinian irregulars, under the inspired leadership of Abdel Qader al-Husseini, cut the main road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and started to gain the upper hand in the fighting with the Haganah. After suffering several defeats at the hands of Palestinian irregulars, the Haganah chiefs decided to seize the initiative and go on the offensive. The aim of Plan D was to secure all the areas allocated to the Jewish state under the UN partition resolution as well as Jewish settlements outside these areas and corridors leading to them, so as to provide a solid and continuous basis for Jewish sovereignty. The novelty and audacity of the plan lay in the orders to capture Arab villages and cities, something

¹ Noam Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians*, 1999, South End Press, p.162.

² Benny Morris, *The Causes and Character of the Arab Exodus from Palestine: the Israel Defense Forces Intelligence Branch Analysis of June 1948*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, London, January 1986, pp. 5-19.

the Haganah had never attempted before. Although the wording of Plan D was vague, its objective was to clear the interior of the country of hostile and potentially hostile Arab elements, and in this sense it provided a warrant for expelling civilians. By implementing Plan D in April and May, the Haganah thus directly and decisively contributed to the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem. Plan D was not a political blueprint for the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs, it was a military plan with military and territorial objectives. However, by ordering the capture of Arab cities and the destruction of villages, it both permitted and justified the forcible expulsion of Arab civilians. By the end of 1948 the number of Palestinian refugees had swollen to around 700,000. But the first and largest wave of refugees occurred before the official outbreak of hostilities on 15 May.³

The Jews moved from defense to an offensive, once Plan D was adopted. The plan, *inter alia*, aimed at extending Jewish rule in Palestine from 1 April 1948 to the end of the war; Jewish operations were guided by the desire to occupy the greatest possible portion of Palestine. By 15 May 1948, about 380,000 Palestinians had become refugees. By the end of the war the number was doubled and the UN report spoke of 750,000 refugees.⁴

The transfer of Palestinians

The concept of “*transferring*” European Jews to Palestine and “*transferring*” the Palestinian people out is central to Zionism. Ben-Gurion, eloquently articulated this essential Zionist pillar, he stated in 1944:

“Zionism is a *transfer* of the Jews. Regarding the *transfer* of the Palestinian Arabs this is much easier than any other *transfer*. There are Arab states in the vicinity and it is clear that if the Palestinian Arabs are removed to these states, this will improve their condition and not the contrary.”⁵

When it was impossible to achieve superiority based on Jewish immigration and natural growth, Zionists had concluded that forcible “*population transfer*” (Ethnic Cleansing) was the only solution to what they referred to as the “Arab Problem.” To excuse the Jewish state from any war crimes perpetrated against the Palestinian people, especially the ones committed during the 1948 war, Zionists have concocted a myth that the Palestinian people had willingly left their homes, farms, and businesses, and as a result they have forfeited their right to return.

On July 12, 1937, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary explaining the benefits of the compulsory population transfer:

“The compulsory transfer of the Palestinian Arabs from the valleys of the proposed Jewish state could give us something which we never had, even when we stood on our own during the days of the first and second Temples. We are given an opportunity which we never dared to dream of in our wildest imaginings. This is

³ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, 2000, Norton, New York, p.31.

⁴ Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-51*, 1992, London: I.B. Tauris, 1992, pp. 76-99.

⁵ Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of “Transfer” in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992, p. 159.

more than a state, government and sovereignty; this is national consolidation in a free homeland.”⁶

Ben-Gurion explained how compulsory population transfer could be implemented. He said in 1937:

“if we have to use force we shall use it without hesitation - but only if we have no choice. We do not want and do not need to expel Arabs and take their places. Our whole desire is based on the assumption which has been collaborated in the course of all our activity in the country - that there is enough room for us and the Arabs in the country and that if we have to use force - not in order to dispossess the Arabs from the Negev or Transjordan but in order to assure ourselves of the right, which is our due to settle there- then we have the force.”⁷

Ben-Gurion became obsessed about “transferring” the Palestinian Arabs out of Palestine, and he started to contemplate the mechanics and potential problems that could arise if “transfer” to be implemented. Ben-Gurion contemplated the “Arab Question” in “Eretz Yisrael” and wrote:

“We have to examine, first, if this transfer is practical, and secondly, if it is necessary. It is impossible to imagine general evacuation without compulsion, and brutal compulsion, There are of course sections of the non-Jewish population of the Land of Israel which will not resist transfer under adequate conditions to certain neighboring countries, such as the Druze, a number of Bedouin tribes in the Jordan Valley and the south, the Caucasians and perhaps even the Metwalis. But it would be very difficult to bring about resettlement of other sections of the Palestinian Arab populations such as the Fellahin and the urban populations in neighboring Arab countries by transferring them voluntarily, whatever economic inducements are offered to them.”⁸

Ben-Gurion was happy and sad when the UN voted to Partition Palestine into two states. He was happy because finally Jews could have a “country” of their own. On the other hand, he was sad because they have lost almost half of Palestine, and because they would have to contend with a sizable Palestinian minority, well over 45% of the total population. In the following few quotes, we see how he also stated that a Jewish state cannot survive being 60% Jewish; implying that something ought to be done to remedy the so called “Arab demographic problem”. He stated on November 30, 1947:

In my heart, there was joy mixed with sadness: joy that the nations at last acknowledged that we are a nation with a state, and sadness that we lost half of the country, Judea and Samaria, and, in addition, that we would have in our state 400,000 Palestinian Arabs.”⁹

Ben-Gurion clearly never believed in static borders, but dynamic ones as described in the Bible. He stated during a discussion with his aides:

⁶ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999*, Knopf, 1st edition, 1999, p. 142.

⁷ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims, 1881-1999*, Knopf, 1st ed., 1999, p142.

⁸ Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of “Transfer” in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992, p 129.

⁹ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims, 1881-1999*, Knopf, 1st edition, 1999, p.190.

“Before the founding of the state, on the eve of its creation, our main interests was self-defense. To a large extent, the creation of the state was an act of self-defense. Many think that we’re still at the same stage. But now the issue at hand is conquest, not self-defense. As for setting the borders, it’s an open-ended matter. In the Bible as well as in our history, there all kinds of definitions of the country’s borders, so there’s no real limit. Border is absolute. If it’s a desert, it could just as well be the other side. If it’s sea, it could also be across the sea. The world has always been this way. Only the terms have changed. If they should find a way of reaching other stars, well then, perhaps the whole earth will no longer suffice.”¹⁰

It has been customary among all Zionists leaders to use the Bible to justify perpetrating *war crimes*. Regardless of the methods used to build the Jewish state, the quote above is a classical example how the Bible is used to achieve political objectives.

During a visit to Haifa, Ben-Gurion was told that Abba Khoushi, a labour leader and an official in the Haifa’s City Hall, was trying to persuade Palestinians city to stay. Ben-Gurion reportedly said: “*Doesn’t he have anything more important to do?*”¹¹

On 16 June 1948, there were calls by members of the Mapam party for the return of Jaffa’s “peace minded” Palestinian refugees, and in response, Ben-Gurion stated during a Cabinet meeting:

“I do not accept the version (i.e. policy) that we should encourage their return. I believe we should prevent their return. We must settle Jaffa, Jaffa will become a Jewish city. The return of (Palestinian) Arabs to Jaffa would be not just foolish.” If the (Palestinian) Arabs were allowed to return, to Jaffa and elsewhere, “and the war is renewed, our chances of ending the war as we wish to end it will be reduced.”¹²

Similarly, Moshe Sharett agreed with Ben-Gurion on rejecting Palestinian refugees return, and stated during the same Cabinet meeting:

“Can we imagine a return to the status quo?” He asked. It was inconceivable. Rather, the government should now peruse the Yishuv (Palestinian Jews before 1948) of “the enormous importance of this demographic change in terms of the solidity of the state structure and of the solution of crucial social and political problems.” Israel should be ready to pay compensation for the abandoned land but “they will not return. That is out policy. They are not returning.”¹³

Although an important document dating 16 July 1948 is still classified by the Israeli censorship, there is enough information to indicate the link in Ben-Gurion’s mind between the concept of transfer and war. It was at the time that Ben-Gurion stated that he:

“was not surprised at the Arab exodus and that “we should prevent Arab return at any cost.” He also cited ones again the Turkish-Greek war crime as an example in which the Turks expelled the Greeks from Anatolia.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Tom Segev, *The First Israelis: 1949*, Holt Paperbacks (1998), p.6.

¹¹ Benny Morris, *The Birth of Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, Camb. Univsty Press, 1989, p328.

¹² *Ibid*, p.141.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians, 1882-1948*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992, pp.191-192.

It is extremely ironic to point out that this is the second time in history when Turks are cited as an “example” to justify perpetrating war crimes. The first was used by the earliest Zionist leaders (such as Chaim Weizmann, Ben-Gurion, and Moshe Sharett), and the second was used by Hitler when he cited the Turkish genocide of Armenians (during WWI) as a precedent for the holocaust.

In 18 August 1948, Moshe Sharett wrote to Chaim Weizmann about the Israeli government’s determination to block the Palestinian Arab refugees’ return:

“With regard to the refugees, we are determined to be adamant while the war lasts. Once the return tide starts, it will be impossible to stem it, and it will prove our undoing. As for the future, we are equally determined to explore all possibilities of getting rid, once and for all, of the huge (Palestinian) Arab minority (referring to the Palestinian Israeli citizens of Israel) which originally threatened us. What can be achieved in this period of storm and stress (referring to the 1948 war) will be quite unattainable once conditions get stabilized. A group of people (headed by Yosef Weitz) has already started working on the study of resettlement possibilities (for the Palestinian refugees) in other lands. What such permanent resettlement of “Israeli” Arabs in the neighboring territories will mean in terms of making land available in Israel for settlement of our own people requires no emphasis.”¹⁵

In response to an announcement made by the Jewish Agency in mid-1949 that Israel would be willing to take back Palestinian refugees, and even to compensate them when the war ends, Moshe Sharett instructed his Director General not to repeat such an announcement, and in that regard he stated:

“We must not be understood to say that once the war is over they (referring to Palestinian refugees) can return. We’ll keep every option open.”

In 1904, before Zionism matured into a powerful political force, Menachem Ussishkin¹⁶ stated that:

“Land is acquired by force, that is, by conquest in war, or in other words, by ROBBING land from its owner; by expropriation via government authority; or by purchase (The Zionist movement was limited to the third choice) until at some point we become rulers.”¹⁷

On 19 May 1936, Manachem Ussishkin declared:

“What we can demand today is that all Transjordan be included in the Land of Israel on condition that Transjordan would be either be made available for Jewish colonization or for the resettlement of those (Palestinian) Arabs, whose lands (in Palestine) we would purchase. Against this, the most conscientious person could not argue. For the (Palestinian) Arabs of the Galilee, Transjordan is a province; this will be for the resettlement of Palestine’s Arabs. This is the land problem. Now the (Palestinian) Arabs do not want us because we want to be the rulers. I will fight for

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 149-150.

¹⁶ Menachem Ussishkin was one of the founding fathers of Zionism, from 1923 until 1941 he was the chairman and member of the Jewish National Fund, the president of the 20th Zionist Congress, the permanent president of World Zionist Organization’s Zionist Action Committee, and a member of the Jewish Agency Executive.

¹⁷ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims, 1881-1999*, Knopf, 1st edition, 1999, p. 38.

this. I will make sure that we will be the landlords of this land because this country belongs to us not to them.”¹⁸

In 1938, Menachem Ussishkin commented on the partition plan proposed by the British Peel Commission in 1937:

“We cannot begin the Jewish state with population of which the Arab living on their lands constitute almost half and the Jews exists on the land in very small numbers and they are all crowded in Tel Aviv and its vicinity; and the worst is not only the (Palestinian) Arabs here constitute 50 percent or 45 percent but 75 per cent of the land is in the hands of the (Palestinian) Arabs. Such a state cannot survive even for half an hour. The question is not whether they will be majority or a minority in Parliament. You know that even a small minority could disrupt the whole order of parliamentary life; therefore, I would say to the Peel Commission and the government that we would not accept reduced Land of Israel without you giving us the land, on the one hand, and removing the largest number of (Palestinian) Arabs—particularly the peasants, on the other before we come forward to take the reins of government in our lands even provisionally.”¹⁹

Ze’ev Jabotinsky stated in a letter to one of his Revisionist colleagues in the United States dated November 1939:

“There is no choice: the Arabs must make room for Jews of Eretz Israel. If it was possible to transfer the Baltic peoples, it is also possible to move the Palestinian Arabs.”²⁰

Israel Zangwill, who had visited Palestine in 1897 and came face-to-face with the demographic reality, stated:

“Palestine proper has already its inhabitants. The “Pashalik” of Jerusalem is already twice as thickly populated as the United States, having fifty-two souls to the square mile, and not 25% of them Jews. We must be prepared either to drive out by the sword the Arab tribes in possession as our forefathers did or to grapple with the problem of a large alien population, mostly Mohammedan and accustomed for centuries to despise us.”²¹

As the Israelis rampaged the friendly Palestinian village of Huj (northeast of Gaza), Yitzhak Avira (Haganah Intelligence Service officer) registered a complaint against the continued destruction of the village. He wrote Ezra Danin (a member of the first and second Transfer Committees and a Haganah Intelligence Officer) on 16 August 1948 that:

“recently a view has come to prevail among us that the (Palestinian) Arabs are nothing. Every (Palestinian) Arab is a murderer, all of them should be slaughtered, all the (Palestinian) villages that are conquered should be burned; I see a danger in the prevalence of an attitude that everything of theirs should be murdered, destroyed, and made to vanish.”

¹⁸ Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians, 1882-1948*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992, p. 51.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 111-112.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 29.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 7-10.

Danin Answered: “War is complicated and lacking in sentimentality. If the commanders believe that by destruction, murder, and human suffering they will reach their goal more quickly, I would not stand in their way. If we do not hurry up and do things, our enemies will do these things to us.”²²

It is worth noting that Palestinian inhabitants of Huj had collaborated openly with the Haganah and the Israeli Army before and during the 1948 war, however, such good will did not save them from being ethnically cleansed. Similarly, Zarnuqa inhabitants had a comparable experience with the Israelis, and paid the price of their collaboration by being driven out of their village under the threat of the gun towards neighboring Yibna. Sadly, Yibna’s people, who were not yet occupied, drove them back to Israeli occupied Zarnuqa, so they became unwanted people by both sides camping in the Wadis between the two towns. This is a typical story of collaborators who outlive their usefulness.²³

As the Israeli soldiers were occupying the al-Dawayima (northwest of Hebron), the soldiers perpetrated a mostly unknown massacre on 28-29 October 1948. According the Shabtai Kaplan, a Mapam party member, and eyewitness accounts, he describes the atrocity to Al Hamishmar editor as the following:

“The first wave of conquerors (89th Battalion of the 8th Brigade) killed about 80-100 (male Palestinian) Arabs, women and children. The children they killed by breaking their heads with sticks. There was no a house without dead,” Kaplan wrote. Kaplan’s informant, who arrived immediately, afterwards in the second wave, reported that the (Palestinian) Arab men and women who remained were then closed off in the houses “without food and water.” Sappers arrived to blow up the houses. “One commander ordered a sapper to put two old women in a certain house and to blow up the house with them. The sapper refused. The commander then ordered his men to put in the old women and the evil deed was done. One soldier boasted that he had raped a (Palestinian) woman and then shot her. One woman, with a newborn baby in her arms, was employed to clean the courtyard where the soldiers ate. She worked a day or two. In the end they shot her and her baby.” The soldier witness, according to Kaplan, said that “cultured officers had turned into base murderers and this not in the heat of the battle, but out of system of expulsion and destruction. The least (Palestinian) Arabs remained...the better. This principle is the political motor of the expulsion and atrocities.” Kaplan understood that Mapam in this respect was in bind. The matter could not be publicized; it would harm the State and Mapam would lambast for it.²⁴

On 10 May 1948, Aharon Cohen, the director during the war of the Arab Department of the newly formed Mapam party, wrote in a memorandum to the party’s Political Committee:

“There is a reason to believe that what is being done is being done out of certain political objectives and not only out of military necessities, as they claim sometimes. In fact, the transfer of the (Palestinian) Arabs from the boundaries of the Jewish state is being implemented, the evacuation/clearing out of (Palestinian) Arab

²² Ibid, p. 167.

²³ Ibid, p. 127.

²⁴ Ibid, pp.222-223.

villages is not always done out of military necessity. The complete destruction of the villages is not always done only because there are no sufficient forces to maintain a garrison.”²⁵

On 24 July 1948 the Mapai Center held a full-scale debate regarding the Palestinian Arab question against the background of the ethnic cleansing of Ramla and Lydda. The majority apparently backed Ben-Gurion’s policies of population transfer or ethnic cleansing. Shlomo Lavi, one of the influential leaders of the Mapai party, said that:

“the transfer of the (Palestinian) Arabs out of the country in my eyes is one of the most just, moral and correct that can be done. I have thought of this for many years.”²⁶

In an interview with the *Sunday Times* Golda Meir, Israel’s Prime Minister (between 1969-1974) stated in June 1969:

“It is not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them, they did not exist.”²⁷

The Case of Lydda & Ramla

Upon Lydda’s (later called Lod) and Ramla’s occupation on 11-12 July 1948, the Israelis were surprised to find that over 60,000 Palestinian civilians didn’t flee their homes. Subsequently, Ben-Gurion ordered the wholesale expulsion of all civilians (including men, women, children, and old people), in the middle of the hot Mediterranean summer. The orders to ethnically cleanse both cities were signed by Yitzhak Rabin. Many of the refugees died (400+ according to the Palestinian historian Aref Al-Aref) from thirst, hunger, and heat exhaustion after being stripped of their valuables on the way out by the Israeli soldiers.

From the quotes below, it shall be conclusively proven that the Palestinian version of the events is the true version. It should be noted that the Zionists’ account of this war crime was intentionally suppressed until Yitzhak Rabin reported it in his biography and in a New York Times interview (which was censored in Israel at the time); however, it was later confirmed in the declassified Israeli and Zionist archives.

Yitzhak Rabin wrote in his diary soon after Lydda’s and Ramla’s occupation:

“After attacking Lydda and then Ramla. What would they do with the 50,000 civilians living in the two cities? Not even Ben-Gurion could offer a solution; and during the discussion at operation headquarters, he (Ben-Gurion) remained silent, as was his habit in such situations. Clearly, we could not leave (Lydda’s) hostile and armed populace in our rear, where it could endanger the supply route to the troops who were advancing eastward.

Ben-Gurion would repeat the question: What is to be done with the population? Waving his hand in a gesture which said: Drive them out! (*garush otam* in Hebrew).

²⁵ Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians, 1882-1948*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992, p. 181.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 192.

²⁷ Avi Shlaim. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 311.

“Driving out” is a term with a harsh ring. Psychologically, this was one of the most difficult actions we undertook”.²⁸

Later, Rabin underlined the cruelty of the operation as mirrored in the reaction of the soldiers, he stated during an interview (which was censored in Israeli publications) with David Shipler from the New York Times on 22 October 1979:

“Great Suffering was inflicted upon the men taking part in the eviction action. They included youth-movement graduates who had been inculcated with values such as international brotherhood and humaneness. The eviction action went beyond the concepts they were used to. There were some fellows who refused to take part. Prolonged propaganda activities were required after the action to explain why we were obliged to undertake such a harsh and cruel action.”²⁹

Soon after the Lydda massacre was carried out by the Israeli Army’s Yiftah Brigade on 10 July 1948, Mula Cohen (the brigade’s commander) wrote of his experience when expelling the 50,000-60,000 Palestinians who inhabited Ramla and Lydda:

“There is no doubt the Lydda-Ramla affair and the flight of the inhabitants, the uprising and the expulsion (*geirush* in Hebrew) that followed cut deep grooves in all who underwent these experiences.”³⁰

On 16 July 1948, Aharon Cizling, the first Israeli Agriculture Minister, cautioned the Israeli cabinet (a few weeks after the ethnic cleansing of 60,000 people from Lydda and Ramla):

“We are embarking on a course that will most greatly endanger any hope of peaceful alliance with forces who could be our allies in the Middle East; hundreds of thousands of (Palestinian) Arabs who will be evicted from Palestine, even if they are to blame, and left hanging in the midair, will grow to hate us. If you do things in the heat of the war, in the midst of the battle, it’s one thing. But if after a month, you do it in cold blood, for political reason, in public, that is something altogether different.”³¹

And also went on to describe his dismay at the looting of the Palestinian Ramla City (but not at the raping of Palestinian women), Cizling stated:

“It’s been said that there were cases of rape in Ramla. I can forgive rape, but I will not forgive other acts which seem to me much worse. When they enter a town and forcibly remove rings from the fingers and jewelry from someone’s neck, that’s a very grave matter. Many are guilty of it.”³²

All the Israelis who witnessed the events agreed that the expulsion of the inhabitants of Lydda and Ramla, under the hot July sun, was an extended episode of suffering for the Palestinian refugees, especially those from Lydda. Some were stripped by Israeli soldiers of their valuables as they left the town or at checkpoints along the way. An Israeli archeologist, known by Guttman, subsequently described the trek of the Palestinian refugees out of Lydda:

²⁸ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999*, Knopf (1999), p.207

²⁹ Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, New York: Pantheon, 1987, p.101

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.206

³¹ Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992, p. 191.

³² Tom Segev, *The First Israelis: 1949*, Holt Paperbacks, 1998, pp.71-72.

“A multitude of inhabitants walked one after another. Women walked burdened with packages and sacks on their heads. Mothers dragged children after them. Occasionally, warning shots were heard. Occasionally, you encountered a piercing look from one of the youngsters in the column, and the look said: *We have not yet surrendered. We shall return to fight you.*”³³

In conclusion, Israel’s new historians deconstruct the official version of Israel’s history, unmasking inaccuracies and even deliberate distortions in Israel’s generally accepted historiography. Their efforts in that direction have earned them the praise of many quarters, including supporters of the Arab cause. Among them are such writers and historians as Benny Morris, who has written extensively on the Palestinian refugee problem; Avi Shlaim, who has studied the secret relationship between Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; Ilan Pappé, who has done research on Zionist foreign policy during the British mandate period; and Israeli columnist and author Tom Segev, who has focused on the impact of the Holocaust on Israeli policies and diplomacy.

The emergence of the new historians reflects the difficult process taking place in Israel of the demystification of Zionism. As Israeli society moves toward peace with the Palestinians, and changing its relationship with world Jewry, it is entering what can be described as the “post-Zionist” era in its development. Israelis are beginning to question many of the foundations of their political existence and to take a new look at controversial issues as the responsibility of Palestinian Nakba.

The opposition to the new historians, therefore, is not so much scholarly as political. Ironically, the new historians are using official documents being released by governmental and public institutions in Israel in order to question, and sometimes demolish, the official propaganda and myths that were perpetuated by the Zionist leadership and by court historians for decades in order to justify such policies as the non-recognition of Palestinian nationalism. They are helping Israel to look in the mirror. It is not surprising that many Israelis do not like what they see.

In some cases, the new historians have provided Israeli readers with anecdotal evidence that helped to de-romanticize many of the Zionist leaders and to question the accuracy of official Israeli history. Segev, for example, has pointed to evidence that suggests official discrimination in the 1950s by the Ashkenazi (European Jewish) Zionist leadership against the new Jewish immigrants from the Arab countries. He also stunned many Israelis by arguing- again based on documents from that era- that the Zionist leadership in Palestine had given a higher priority to the interest of the Zionist project in West Asia (Middle East) than to saving the Jews who were being exterminated in Europe during World War II.

Morris has documented Israeli government policies aimed at forcing thousands of Palestinians to flee the country in 1947 and 1948. Shlaim and other new historians studied “missed opportunities” for peace in the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict. He suggested, for example, that Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, rejected overtures for peace from several Arab leaders and was instrumental in creating the conditions for the escalation of tensions that led to the outbreak of Egyptian-Israeli military encounters, and eventually to the 1956 Suez War.

The new development is the fact that the Israeli new historians have been able to get their message across suggests that Israeli society is becoming more open to new ideas, and is willing

³³ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999*, Knopf, 1999, p.207.

to question the conventional wisdom, especially on the issue of Palestinian-Israeli relations. If more Israelis conclude that their government did wrong to the Palestinians in the past, perhaps they will be more willing to correct that. And that is an important beginning.

Finally, for their achievements, we should applaud the courage of Israel's new historians. This is not just any old page of history on which they have worked to shed light. What they have opened to public view is the "original sin" of the state of Israel. Is it acceptable for the survivors of Hitler's genocide to have the right to live in a state of their own, and for this right to exclude the right of the sons and daughters of Palestine to live similarly at peace in their own country? Fifty years after the event, the time is long overdue to bring an end to this logic that has generated so much war, and to find a way for the two peoples to coexist. At the same time, we should not draw a veil over the historical origins of the tragedy.

*The writer is a Ph.D. scholar at Jamia Millia University- New Delhi, residing in Montreal- Canada