

well-publicized massacres of Palestinians, again under Britain's watch, and most notoriously at the village of Deir Yassin on the outskirts of Jerusalem, only added to the mass exodus.⁴² As the campaign of expulsion intensified, Ben-Gurion saw the advantages of widening the war to the main area of the Galilee, where some 100,000 Palestinians, as well as tens of thousands of refugees from the fighting, were living on land that had been assigned to the Palestinian state under the Partition Plan. 'Then we will be able to cleanse the entire area of Central Galilee, including all its refugees, in one stroke,' he announced.⁴³

Rise of the Jewish State

Despite the mythical narrative promoted today, Israel's victory on the battlefield was rarely in doubt. During the first stage of the offensive, before Britain's departure, Jewish forces were in effect fighting a civil war against disorganized Palestinian militias, which had not recovered from their crushing by the British army during the three-year Arab Revolt a decade earlier. In the next stage, after Israel's Declaration of Independence, the Arab armies entered the war but were unprepared and lacked coordination, as the Israeli historian Shlomo Ben-Ami notes. The Arab leaders were less concerned about defending the Palestinians' national rights than 'establishing their own territorial claims or thwarting those of their rivals in the Arab coalition'.⁴⁴ Neither the Palestinian militias nor the Arab armies were a match for the Israeli forces: in fact, they were outnumbered throughout the fighting. As Benny Morris points out: 'It was superior Jewish firepower, manpower, organization, and command and control that determined the outcome of battle.'⁴⁵ The 'ruthless, successful offensive' by the new Jewish state set a pattern for its behaviour in the future, adds Ben-Ami, by unleashing 'a momentum of territorial expansion that [its] leaders ... would not allow to be interrupted by premature diplomatic overtures'.⁴⁶

The ruthless offensive of 1948 included dozens of massacres and rapes, the destruction of more than 400 villages, including communities that had signed non-aggression pacts with their Jewish

neighbours, and the purging of the Palestinian inhabitants of a dozen ethnically mixed cities.⁴⁷ This outcome is celebrated by Israelis as their War of Independence, but mourned by Palestinians as the *Nakba* (Catastrophe). As the historian Walid Khalidi observes, Israel's rapid and comprehensive dispossession of the Palestinian people in 1948 was 'one of the most remarkable colonizing ventures of all time'. Strikingly, Palestine was colonized 'in the wake of the (at least verbal) espousal by the Western democracies of the principle of national self-determination' and 'in the modern age of communication'.⁴⁸

Tales of atrocities are legion on both sides of the fighting, but perhaps one incident more than any other gives a flavour of the Israeli leadership's intentions during the war. In July 1948, the neighbouring Palestinian towns of Ramla and Lydd, halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, were almost entirely emptied of their inhabitants on Ben-Gurion's orders, despite the fact that they had been designated part of the Arab state under the UN plan. As Lydd was attacked, a large number of men sought refuge in the local Dahamish mosque. When they eventually surrendered, they were massacred by Jewish forces led by Yigal Allon and his deputy, Yitzhak Rabin, a later prime minister. Some 176 bodies were reportedly recovered from the mosque. Allon then rounded up the 50,000 inhabitants of Lydd (today the Israeli city of Lod), who were forced at gunpoint to march many miles to the Jordanian border; some died en route of exhaustion.⁴⁹ Years later Rabin recalled how Ben-Gurion indicated what he wanted done with the inhabitants: 'Yigal Alon asked: what is to be done with the population [of Lydd and Ramla]? Ben-Gurion waved his hand in a gesture that said: "Drive them out!"'⁵⁰

As Israel signed the armistice agreements with its Arab neighbours in 1949, at the close of the war, the Jewish state found itself in possession of 78 per cent of Palestine, far more territory than the 55 per cent allotted it by the UN Plan.⁵¹ Under the same agreements, the tiny coastal strip of Gaza was occupied by Egypt, and Jordan acquired control of the West Bank and the eastern half of Jerusalem, the consequence of an earlier secret pact with Israel that prevented the two armies from engaging in serious fighting.⁵²

The UN classified some 750,000 Palestinians as refugees, the great majority of them by then living in makeshift camps across the Middle East.⁵³ Ben-Gurion was determined that they should not be allowed to return. ‘Land with Arabs on it and land without Arabs on it are two very different types of land’, he told his party’s central committee in March 1949.⁵⁴ Fearful that the UN might insist on the return not only of the refugees but also of the areas of Palestine like the Central Galilee not assigned to the Jewish state under the Partition Plan, he cautiously referred to these regions as ‘administered’ rather than as part of Israel. His worries were unfounded, however. In May 1949, as Israel was admitted to the UN, Pappé notes, ‘all distinctions disappeared, along with the villages, the fields and the houses – all “dissolved” into the Jewish State of Israel.’⁵⁵

For a considerable time, government officials, private citizens and especially soldiers enjoyed free rein looting Palestinian homes of their valuables. One government minister reported seeing the army take 1,800 truckloads of property from the single, largely deserted city of Lydd, while another admitted that ‘the army does what it wants’.⁵⁶ The government sought to reassert control with new emergency regulations.⁵⁷ One, passed in late 1948, ended the legal definition of land as ‘abandoned’ and instead declared the Palestinian owners ‘absentees’; their seized property was then reclassified as ‘state land’.⁵⁸ In an attempt to make this land grab appear legal, the same regulation invested authority in an official, the Custodian of Absentee Property, whose job was supposedly to safeguard the property of the Palestinian refugees. According to a statement in 1980 from the Custodian, about 70 per cent of Israel’s total territory was ‘absentee’ land – that is, rightfully the property of Palestinian refugees.⁵⁹

Although officially a trustee, the Custodian – and in turn the State of Israel – was soon reaping the profits from rental income from buildings, farmland and religious endowment land; from his new-found ownership of large Palestinian businesses; and from the sale of produce from the refugees’ olive and citrus groves, their tobacco, fig, apple, grape and almond crops, and their quarries.⁶⁰ Of items from the large store of confiscated merchandise – from clothes to furniture

– the army was given first refusal. Remaining goods were put up for sale, with priority going to disabled war veterans, soldiers' families and government employees.⁶¹ Palestinian bank accounts were seized too. When Ben-Gurion was told that refugees' deposits totalling 1.5 billion Palestinian pounds had been discovered in the banks of Haifa, he noted simply in his diary: 'The banks are willing to hand this property over.'⁶²

The historian Michael R. Fischbach reports that a UN committee set up to evaluate Palestinian losses produced a very conservative estimate in the mid-1960s that Israel had confiscated at least 1.75 million acres of land (or seven million dunams, in the traditional unit of measurement used by the Ottomans)⁶³ – about a third of Israel's total territory.⁶⁴ This land was valued at close to \$1 billion in the prices of the day and would be worth many hundreds of billions more today.⁶⁵ If confiscated Palestinian moveable property such as bank accounts, jewellery, artworks, safe deposit boxes, bonds, as well vehicles, furniture, agricultural equipment and herds of animals was included, the total was pushed far higher. To the Palestinians, of course, their homeland was priceless. None of the successive Custodians, however, regarded their role as the protection of the refugees' property. Mordechai Schattner, the incumbent in 1953, observed: 'All money accruing from these sales should go the development authorities. This means, in fact, that it would be used for the settlement of new [Jewish] immigrants.'⁶⁶

Decades later, in 1990, Israel's state comptroller demanded a list of the refugees' moveable property as part of an audit of the Custodian's office. Seven years on, the Custodian had still not complied, claiming that the task was 'impossible' because some of the records were lost and others incomplete and because he had no computer. He added that 'it would require 500 workers to sit for two years' to prepare a complete list. On another occasion, in 1998, when an Arab legal group, Adalah, requested information about the property under the country's Freedom of Information Act, the Custodian replied that he could not divulge details because he needed to protect the refugees' privacy. When pressed further, the government responded in 2002 on

the Custodian's behalf that such information would 'damage relations with foreign governments'.⁶⁷ And when Israel and the Palestinians came to the negotiating table at Camp David in 2000 to reach a final-status agreement, Israel's attorney general, Elyakim Rubinstein, disclosed that the Custodian's records were no longer available and that the income from Palestinian assets had been spent. 'We have used them [the monies] up. It is up to the international community to create funds for this [a final settlement with the Palestinians].'⁶⁸

Unwelcome Citizens

The new Jewish state faced an uncomfortable twofold legacy from the war.

First, the remains of several hundred Palestinian villages dotted the countryside, not only an embarrassing reminder of the native population that had recently been expelled but also a testament to the war crimes that had been committed during the ethnic cleansing campaign. Furthermore, there was a general fear among the leadership that, should the villages remain standing, Palestinian refugees might successfully lobby the international community for their right to return.⁶⁹ Israel therefore invested much energy after the war in the mammoth task of erasing the villages. A significant number of the more impressive homes in cities like Jerusalem, Haifa, Lydd and Ramla were used to house Jewish officials or new immigrants,⁷⁰ but most rural communities were destroyed by the army, which either dynamited them or bombed them from the air.⁷¹ Maps were changed too: over the course of several years a Jewish National Fund committee replaced Arab place names with Hebrew ones, often claiming as justification to have 'rediscovered' biblical sites. The committee hoped to invent an ancient, largely mythical landscape all the better to root Israeli Jews in their new homeland. The real landscape of hundreds of destroyed Palestinian villages was entirely missing from the new maps.⁷² Cleared of Palestinian traces, the 'empty' lands were handed over to Jewish agricultural communities, the kibbutzim and moshavim, for their exclusive use.

By the 1960s, however, dozens of remoter Palestinian villages could still be found intact across Israel. During a search of the official archives, a history professor at Tel Aviv University, Aharon Shai, discovered that in 1965 the Israeli government had recruited the JNF and prominent archeologists to a project to 'clean' the land of these last Palestinian blemishes. Several arguments for renewing the destruction programme were offered, according to Tom Segev:

The deserted villages spoiled the beauty of the landscape and constituted a neglected nuisance. There were pits filled with water which endangered the well-being of visitors, particularly children, as well as many snakes and scorpions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was concerned about the 'unnecessary questions' which tourists would present regarding the deserted villages.

The Association for Archeological Survey issued the permits needed by the government to make the destruction 'lawful', while a body called the Society for Landscape Improvement lobbied to preserve any architecturally important buildings.⁷³ Historic or scenic mosques were sometimes left intact: one in Caesarea became a restaurant and bar, for example, while another in al-Zeib was incorporated into the site's seaside complex.

The second problem was that Israel had acquired, along with most of Palestine, a small rump population of Palestinians, about 150,000,⁷⁴ who had managed to remain within the new borders in more than 100 Palestinian communities that were spared.⁷⁵ They constituted then, and continue to constitute today despite subsequent waves of Jewish immigration, nearly a fifth of the total population.⁷⁶ Israel worked quickly to 'de-Palestinianize' the minority, who were officially referred to either as 'the minorities' or as 'Israeli Arabs'.⁷⁷ State policy was to encourage group identification at the sectarian and ethnic levels – in a classic strategy of divide and rule – by accentuating communal differences. In 1949, for example, the Education Ministry was advised to 'emphasize and develop the contradictions' between the Druze, Christian and Muslim populations to diminish their Arab and Palestinian identities.⁷⁸

There was no official interest in integrating the Palestinian population. As a commentator observed in the *Ha'aretz* newspaper in 1954, 'the authorities did not even try to think, after the establishment of the State, about the possibility of "Israelizing" the Arab minority.'⁷⁹ Eleven years later, the *Ma'ariv* newspaper reported an election speech by Moshe Dayan in which he dismissed the idea of integration: 'This is going too far. It shall not be.'⁸⁰ Having expelled Palestinian intellectuals and eradicated Palestine's urban centres, the minority could be kept in an almost permanent state of social, economic and political underdevelopment. Meron Benvenisti, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, notes that decades later 'no urban society worthy of the name has been created [for Palestinian citizens] in Israel. There are, indeed, Arab towns in Israel, but they are merely dormitory communities.'⁸¹

No single reason can explain why the Palestinians who remained inside Israel were not expelled too. Some belonged to the small Druze community – 10 per cent of the new Palestinian minority – whose leaders had backed the Jewish forces during the fighting. A few Christian communities in the Galilee, most notably Nazareth, were left in peace for fear of the international reaction,⁸² and other Christians, such as those in the village of Eilaboun, were allowed to return under pressure from the Vatican. Some villages, such as Jisr al-Zarqa and Fureidis, were untouched after local Jewish communities, which relied on their Palestinian neighbours for manual labour, lobbied on their behalf. Other villages were spared by individual Jewish commanders who refused to carry out expulsion orders. A number of Palestinians, including some Bedouin in the Negev, managed to sneak back over the porous borders after they were driven out. And, finally, 30,000 Palestinians living under Jordanian rule in an area of the West Bank known as the Little Triangle were belatedly handed over to the Jewish state as part of the 1949 armistice agreement with Jordan.⁸³

Most of these Palestinians eventually received citizenship, though that was not the original intention. As the fighting subsided, the authorities issued Palestinians inside the borders of Israel with a variety of residency permits. The primary purpose was to distinguish

the permit holders from the refugees outside Israel, and so ensure the continuing exclusion of the overwhelming majority of Palestinians and prevent them from returning undetected to their properties.⁸⁴ Only later did the permits entitle their holders to citizenship. The first Nationality Law, drafted in 1950, for example, proposed that the Palestinian minority inside Israel be denied citizenship and left stateless. The law was not ratified, notes Meron Benvenisti, because it became clear ‘it would irrevocably deface the state’s image in the eyes of the international community’.⁸⁵ Citizenship was finally conferred on most of the Palestinian minority two years later in a different draft of the law.⁸⁶

Nonetheless, the Jewish leadership still hoped the numbers of Palestinians could be significantly reduced. Sabri Jiryis, a Palestinian lawyer who lived through those early years, observes: ‘Apparently there were many [in the leadership] who hoped to be rid of the Arabs, if not by “sending” them after their brothers beyond the borders, then at least by “exchanging” them for Jews from the Arab nations. International events stifled such hopes.’⁸⁷ Researching Israel’s archives, the Palestinian scholar Nur Masalha has found evidence of almost continual plotting by governments in the first decade to expel these new Palestinian citizens. Some schemes, such as offering incentives for whole communities to relocate to Brazil, Argentina or Libya, remained on the drawing board.⁸⁸ But other plans were carried out: 2,000 inhabitants of Beersheva were expelled to the West Bank in late 1949,⁸⁹ while 2,700 inhabitants of al-Majdal (now Ashkelon) were driven into Gaza a year later;⁹⁰ as many as 17,000 Bedouin were forced out of the Negev between 1949 and 1953;⁹¹ several thousand inhabitants of the Triangle were expelled between 1949 and 1951;⁹² and more than 2,000 residents of two northern villages were driven into Syria as late as 1956.⁹³

In the most ambitious plan, Operation Hafarferet, Israel hoped to find a pretext to expel to Jordan what had become 40,000 inhabitants of the Little Triangle on the eve of the Suez War of 1956. The plan was shelved, however, when a brigade of soldiers implementing the early stages of the plan by enforcing a curfew massacred 49 Palestinian

citizens, including women and children, returning to their village of Kafr Qassem.⁹⁴ Later, in 1964, according to Uzi Benziman, political editor of *Ha'aretz* newspaper, Ariel Sharon, then head of the army's Northern Command, asked his staff to work out the number of buses and trucks needed to expel the country's 300,000 Palestinian citizens in time of war.⁹⁵

Judaizing the Land

Visiting the north in the 1950s, Ben-Gurion expressed his shock at the number of Palestinian villages still to be found there. 'Whoever tours the Galilee gets the feeling that it is not part of Israel,' he declared.⁹⁶ His concern was widely shared. The Galilee had been assigned to the Arab state under the UN Partition Plan, and Israeli officials feared that the neighbouring Arab countries might make a case for the region's secession unless Jews were quickly settled there. The government therefore set its primary goals as containing the Palestinian population within the tightly delimited boundaries of their remaining villages and confiscating their wider lands for the benefit of Jewish immigrants, in what the state was soon referring to as a 'Judaization' programme. Joseph Nahmani, the long-time head of the Jewish National Fund, set out the rationale for Judaization in a memo to Ben-Gurion in 1953:

The Arab minority centred here [in the Galilee] presents a continual threat to the security of the nation. ... The very existence of a unified Arab group in this part of the country is an invitation to the Arab states to press their claims to the area. ... At the very least, it can become the nucleus of Arab nationalism, influenced by the nationalist movements of the neighboring states, and undermining the stability of our state.

It was, therefore, 'essential to break up this concentration of Arabs through Jewish settlements', and create '*faits accomplis* which will make it impossible for the government, for all its good intentions, to give up any of the uncultivated land for the Arabs to live on'.