

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-00967-6 - The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited

Benny Morris

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction to revised edition

In 1988 CUP published the first edition of this work, which sought to describe the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem that, along with the establishment of the State of Israel, was the major political consequence of the 1948 war. The study examined how and why, over November 1947–October 1950, an estimated 600,000 to 760,000 Palestinian Arabs departed their homes, moving to other parts of Palestine (i.e., the West Bank and Gaza Strip) or abroad, primarily to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.¹ There are today on the United Nations rolls close to four million Palestinian refugees (the Palestinian Authority says five million). About one third live in so-called refugee ‘camps’, which in reality are concrete-structured slum neighbourhoods on the peripheries of cities (Nablus, Gaza, Ramallah, Beirut, Damascus, Amman, etc.).

Perhaps curiously, little serious historiography had been produced, both in the four decades before the publication of the original version of this book or since, on why and how these Palestinians became refugees. Soon after 1948, several chronicles were published by Palestinian exiles, including ‘Arif al ‘Arif’s *Al-Nakba, 1947–1952*² (the catastrophe 1947–1952) and Haj Muhammad Nimr al Khatib’s *Min Athar al Nakba*³ (following the catastrophe). About a decade after the event, Walid Khalidi, a Palestinian scholar, published two academic essays, ‘The Fall of Haifa’⁴ and ‘Why Did the Palestinians Leave?’⁵ that shed fresh light on aspects of the subject. The first major piece of research on the origin of the refugee problem, based mainly on open United Nations documentation and newspapers, was a doctoral study by an Israeli scholar, Rony Gabbay, *A Political Study of the Arab–Jewish Conflict: The Arab Refugee Problem (a Case Study)*,⁶ published in 1959. Two decades later, a Palestinian scholar, Nafez Nazzal, published *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee 1948*,⁷ a path-breaking regional study but based almost completely on interviews in the Beirut-area refugee camps conducted in the early 1970s. A few years later, Israeli sociologist Baruch

Kimmerling's published *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-Territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics*,⁸ which contributed to understanding what had happened. During the decades after 1948, a number of Israelis and Palestinians produced serious essays and stories that illuminated the exodus, combining personal recollection and objective analysis – most prominently, Ephraim Kleiman's 'Khirbet Khiz'ah and Other Unpleasant Memories',⁹ S. Yizhar's 'The Story of Khirbet Khiza',¹⁰ and Elias Shoufani's 'The Fall of a Village'.¹¹

All had suffered from the relative paucity of archival materials. In recent years, a number of young Israeli scholars produced MA and PhD theses and articles on the exodus in particular areas of Palestine and Yoav Gelber published *Palestine 1948: War, Escape and the Emergence of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*,¹² which in part dealt with the subject under discussion.

The Palestinian refugee problem and its consequences have shaken the Middle East and acutely troubled the world for more than five decades. Terrorist or guerrilla incursions into Israel by these refugees have helped trigger at least three conventional Arab–Israeli wars, in 1956, 1967 and 1982, and Palestinian terrorism, especially attacks on airline passengers and aircraft hijackings during the 1970s and 1980s, have caused chaos and instability worldwide. More recently, since 2000, Palestinian rebellion (the Second Intifada), largely powered by the refugee camps, has scuppered the Israeli–Arab peace process and destabilised the Middle East.

The centrality in the conflict of the refugee problem was convincingly demonstrated in the Israeli–Palestinian–American negotiations of July 2000–January 2001 ('Camp David' and after), when the refugees emerged as the single most important and intractable issue, with the Arabs insisting on their 'right to return' to their lost homes and lands and Israel rejecting that demand, arguing that its implementation would bring about the Jewish State's demise.

The question of what in 1948 turned hundreds of thousands of Palestinians into refugees has been a fundamental propaganda issue between Israel and the Arab states ever since. The general Arab claim, that the Jews expelled Palestine's Arabs with predetermination and preplanning, as part of a systematic, grand political–military design, has served to underline the Arab portrayal of Israel as a vicious, immoral robber state. The official Israeli narrative, that the Palestinians fled 'voluntarily' (meaning not as a result of Jewish compulsion) or that they were asked or ordered to do so by their leaders and by the leaders of the Arab states, helped leave intact the new state's self-image as the haven of a much persecuted people, a body politic more just, moral and deserving of the West's sympathy and help than the surrounding sea of reactionary, semi-feudal, dictatorial Arab societies.

The publication of the first edition of this book in 1988 provoked a great deal of anger and controversy. My conclusions appeared to satisfy no one (except the few who like their history complex and nuanced). The book failed to endorse either the official Palestinian or Israeli narratives and, indeed, tended to undermine both. I was vilified alternatively as a 'propagandist for the Palestine Liberation Organisation' and as a 'sophisticated Zionist propagandist'; more rarely, as merely a bad historian.

I embarked upon the research not out of ideological commitment or political interest. I simply wanted to know what happened. Often, at some point in their career, journalists get an urge to write 'a book' and I had decided on a history of the Palmah, the strike force of the Haganah, the main militia of the Jewish community in Palestine, and, later, of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in 1948. I had always wanted to do military history and nothing serious had been done on this subject. In late 1982 I was privileged to be given access to the still classified papers of the Palmah's headquarters by the association of Palmah veterans, 'Dor Hapalmah'. But a few months later, perhaps sensing trouble, the veterans abruptly withdrew this access, and I realised I would be unable to write the planned history. Yet I had seen and read batches of documents, often marked 'top secret', that shed light on the creation of the refugee problem. I felt that there might be a good story there. Serendipity would have it that my interest in the subject had been ignited a few weeks earlier when, as a reporter, I had been sent to cover the Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon. It was there, in the ruins of Rashidiye Refugee Camp, outside Tyre, in June 1982, that I first met and interviewed refugees, originally from al Bassa, in the Galilee.

Historians, like generals, need luck. 1982 proved to be a pivotal year in the Israeli archives. The government began opening large amounts of documentation on 1948 at the Israel State Archive (ISA). Simultaneously, local and party political archives began organising and releasing materials. When I added these to the material I had seen in the Palmah Archive (PA), and material I was later to see in British and American archives and the United Nations Archive, I had a solid documentary basis on which to write the contemplated study.

But a major problem remained: Arab documentation. Unfortunately, the Palestinians failed to produce and preserve 'state papers' from 1947–1949, and the Arab states – all dictatorships of one sort or another (military juntas, absolute monarchies, etc.) – refused and continue to refuse access to their papers from the 1948 war, which they regarded and still regard as a humiliating catastrophe. In the course of the research and writing, I did my best to illuminate this 'area of darkness' by culling heavily from Jewish or Israeli intelligence material and British and American diplomatic dispatches dealing with the Arab world

and, specifically, with the evolving refugee problem. The intelligence and diplomatic material went some way towards filling out the picture of what was happening in the field, in the towns and villages of Palestine, in 1948. They were less enlightening about policy-making in the Arab capitals and military headquarters. But given the disarray, confusion and general absence of clear policy in those capitals concerning the evolving problem over November 1947 – June 1948, this paucity of information was not as important as at first seems. As it turned out, with regard to the refugees there was very little connection between what was happening in the field and what was discussed and, even, decided by the Arab leaders inside and outside Palestine.

I also made use of some Arab diaries, memoirs, and books based on interviews, to round out the picture. (A number of Israeli orientalist (though, strangely enough, no Arabs) later took me and the book to task for failing to cull Arab memoirs more thoroughly. But none was able to show how use of this ignored material would have substantially or even marginally altered or enhanced the picture that I was able to draw on the basis of the Israeli and Western archives.

After careful thought, I refrained almost completely from using interviews, with Jews or Arabs, as sources of concrete information. My brief forays into interviewing had persuaded me of the undesirability of relying on human memories 40–50 years after the event to illuminate the past. The clincher came when I asked Yigael Yadin, the famous professor of archaeology who in 1948 had served as the Haganah\IDF head of operations (and often de facto chief of general staff), about the expulsion of the Arabs from the towns of Lydda and Ramle. ‘What expulsion?’ he asked – about what had been the biggest expulsion of the war. He did not deny that an expulsion had taken place; he merely said that he could not remember.

I believe in the value of documents. While contemporary documents may misinform, distort, omit or lie, they do so, in my experience, far less than interviewees recalling highly controversial events some 40–50 years ago. My limited experience with such interviews revealed enormous gaps of memory and terrible distortion and selectivity born of ‘adopted’ and ‘rediscovered’ memories, ideological certainties and commitments and political agendas. I have found interviews occasionally of use in providing ‘colour’ and in reconstructing a picture of prevailing conditions and, sometimes, feelings. But not in establishing ‘facts’.

The value of oral testimony about 1948, if anything, has diminished with the passage of the 20 years since I first researched the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem. Memories have further faded and acquired memories, ideological precepts, and political agendas have grown if anything more intractable; intifadas and counter-intifadas have done nothing for the cause of salvaging historical truth.

But, thankfully, the liberalisation of Israeli archival practices has led during the past decade and a half to the release of an enormous amount of archival material that was closed when I wrote the first version of this study. More specifically, the ISA has declassified almost all the Israeli Cabinet protocols for 1948–1949 and the IDF Archive (IDFA) and the Haganah Archive (HA), which were both completely closed to anyone not employed by the Defence Ministry, have opened their doors and declassified hundreds of thousands of documents, a true boon for historians. While the IDFA, HA and ISA continue to keep sealed a certain amount of sensitive documentation, enough has recently been declassified and made available – including much if not most of the IDF operational and intelligence material from 1948 – to warrant a fresh look at what brought about the refugee problem.

I have no doubt that the eventual declassification of the material still untouched or newly sealed by the IDFA declassifiers, and the materials stored in the still-closed Israeli intelligence archives at Geliolot, will supply further revelations and new insights. But enough has been opened to give a good idea of what at least the materials in the IDFA and HA can reveal about what happened. The newly-opened documentation very substantially enriches the picture, and our understanding, of what happened in various parts of Palestine during 1948 – what happened week by week and month by month in Jaffa and Haifa and Jerusalem, and in the countryside; and, on the other hand – and this is a paradoxical conclusion which won't sit well with either Israeli or Palestinian propagandists and 'black-or-white historians' – they substantially increase both Israeli and Palestinian responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem. For what the new documents reveal is that there were both far more expulsions and atrocities by Israeli troops than tabulated in this book's first edition and, at the same time, far more orders and advice to various communities by Arab officials and officers to quit their villages or to at least send away their women, old folk and children, substantially fuelling the exodus. I have added a great many passages based on this material to this edition.

The other major innovation here is the addition of a new chapter on Zionist thinking about 'Transfer' – i.e., the organised, compensated, mutually agreed shift, or one-sided expulsion, of Arab communities out of Palestine – a subject accorded only four pages in the 1988 edition. Over the intervening years, I have concluded that pre-1948 'Transfer' thinking had a greater effect on what happened in 1948 than I had allowed for and, hence, deserved deeper treatment and more space. An additional reason for this deeper treatment was criticism of my original handling of the subject by both Arab and Israeli scholars: Arab historians like Nur Masalha¹³ argued that the pre-1948 Zionist 'Transfer' thinking was a pillar of Zionist ideology and was tantamount to a master plan – which was then systematically implemented in 1948. Masalha

was eager to prove that Zionism was a robber ideology and Israel, an innately expansionist robber state. From the Israeli side, Shabtai Teveth,¹⁴ David Ben-Gurion's biographer, and Anita Shapira,¹⁵ an historian of Zionism, argued that the Zionist leadership – including Ben-Gurion – had never supported the idea of transfer and had never taken the idea seriously, and that, therefore, there was no connection between the occasional propagation of the idea in the 1930s and 1940s and what happened to the Palestinians in 1947–1949. Both were driven by a desire to clear Israel of the charge of premeditation in what befell Palestine's Arabs.

As readers of the new chapter will see, the evidence for pre-1948 Zionist support for 'Transfer' really is unambiguous; but the connection between that support and what actually happened during the war is far more tenuous than Arab propagandists will allow.

I have also tried, in this revision, to integrate fresh insights and evidence published by a number of Israeli historians during the past 15 years. Unfortunately, no worthwhile historiography on 1948, comparable to that of, say, Uri Milstein and Yoav Gelber, has been produced by Palestinians, though I have occasionally referred to the essentially anthropological 'village series' produced by Bir Zeit University Press during the past two decades.

The Arab exodus from the areas that became the Jewish State at the end of the war occurred over the space of 20 months, from the end of November 1947 to July 1949, with several small appendages during the following months and years. It occurred in the course of a war marked by radically shifting circumstances and conditions in the various areas of the country. The exodus of the rich from Jaffa and Haifa over December 1947 to March 1948 was vastly different from the mass urban flight of April and early May; indeed, the multi-layered flight from Jaffa was markedly different from that from Haifa; and both had little in common with the expulsion and flight from Lydda and Ramle in July or from 'Eilabun, Dawayima and Kafr Bir'im in October–November 1948. To describe and explain the exodus I have had to describe and explain events and circumstances during the war's various stages and in different areas. Where necessary, and this is truer of this edition than of its predecessor, I have gone into considerable detail. Fortunately or unfortunately, the devil is in the details and an historian cannot avoid the devil.

The study generally proceeds chronologically, from the United Nations General Assembly Partition Resolution (No. 181) of 29 November 1947 to the collapse of the Lausanne peace conference in September 1949. In examining the exodus, the study proceeds geographically, from area to area. But the chronological-geographical flow is interrupted by a number of horizontal chapters dealing with specific subjects ('Transfer' and 'Blocking the return of the refugees').

A major criticism of the 1988 edition, especially by Israelis, was that the book lacked 'context' – that I had not given sufficient weight to the Holocaust, which had ended less than three years before the events described, and, more importantly, to the events of the 1948 war itself, which had in many ways shaped and moulded Israeli decision-making and actions, at local and national levels. Some critics noted that I devoted little space to describing Arab massacres of Jews in the course of 1948 (there were three such massacres). My response to this is twofold. First, this is not a history of the 1948 war or a history of what the Arabs did to the Jews but a history of how and why the Palestinian refugee problem came about. In this context, what Jews did to Arabs, including massacres, played a role; what Arabs did to Jews was barely relevant. Second, where possible, I did try to describe the context of hostilities – specific battles – that resulted in Palestinian flight or expulsion. In any event, in this current edition I have slightly expanded the discussion of the varying contexts in which the refugee problem was created.

In general, it cannot be stressed too strongly that, while this is not a military history, the events it describes, cumulatively amounting to the Palestinian Arab exodus, occurred in wartime and were a product, direct and indirect, of that war, a war that the Palestinians started. The threat of battle and battle itself were the immediate backdrop to the various components of the exodus.

Throughout, when examining what happened, the reader must also recall the wider context – the clash of arms between Palestine's warring Jewish and Arab militias and, later, the armies of the Arab states and Israel; the intention of the Palestinian leadership and irregulars and, later, of most of the Arab states' leaders and armies in launching the hostilities in November–December 1947 and in invading Palestine in May 1948 to destroy the Jewish state and, possibly, the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) itself; the fears of the Yishuv that the Palestinians and the Arab states, if given the chance, intended to re-enact a Middle Eastern version of the Holocaust; and the extremely small dimensions, geographical and numerical, of the Yishuv (pop. 650,000) in comparison with the Palestinian Arabs (1.25 million) and the infinitely larger surrounding Arab hinterland, with tens of millions of people. At the same time, it is well to recall that, from late July 1948, it was clear to the Yishuv's leaders (and probably to most Arab leaders) that Israel had won its war for survival, at least in the short term, and that the subsequent IDF offensives were geared to securing the political-military future of the Jewish state in what continued to be a highly hostile and uncomfortable geopolitical environment and to rounding out its borders.

I believe this revised edition adds substantially to our understanding of what happened in 1948 and of the deep roots of Israeli–Arab enmity in our time.

ENDNOTES

1. While most of these dislocated people did not become 'refugees' in the strict sense of the word – they were not exiled from their country but rather they moved or were moved from one part of the country to another – the world has come to accept the usage 'refugee' to describe those dislocated from their homes who ended up outside the country and in other parts of Palestine, and their progeny. For shorthand's sake, we shall do the same.
2. Al Maktaba al 'Asriya, Beirut and Sidon, 1956–1960.
3. Al Matba'a al 'Amumiya, Damascus, 1951.
4. *Middle East Forum*, XXXV\10, Dec. 1959.
5. *Middle East Forum*, XXXV\7, July 1959.
6. Libraire E. Droz, Geneve, and Libraire Minard, Paris, 1959.
7. Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut, 1978.
8. Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1983.
9. *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 40, 1986.
10. Sifriyat Poalim\Mishlat, Merhavia, 1949.
11. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 1\4, 1972.
12. Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, 2001.
13. Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians*; and Masalha, 'A Critique of Benny Morris'.
14. Teveth, 'The Evolution of "Transfer" in Zionist Thinking'.
15. Shapira, *Land and Power*, 285–86. Criticism of my original handling of the transfer issue was also broached by Efraim Karsh, 'Fabricating Israeli History, the "New Historians"'. But his criticisms are of such brazen mendacity and distortion – regarding what I wrote and what is in the documentation – that they are not worthy of detailed treatment. Readers may regard the new chapter on 'Transfer' as an implicit rebuttal of what the various critics have written.

1

Background: a brief history

Modern Zionism began with the prophetic-programmatic writings of Moses Hess, Judah Alkalai, Zvi Hirsch Kalischer and Theodor Herzl and the immigration from Russia to Ottoman-ruled Palestine in the 1880s of Jews dedicated to rebuilding a national home for the Jewish people on their ancient land, the Land of Israel, in Zionist parlance. The immigrants were impelled both by the positive ideal and by the negative experience of oppression in Eastern Europe; a wave of pogroms had engulfed Russia following the assassination of Czar Alexander II in March 1881.

Simultaneously, during the last decades of the 19th century, Arab intellectuals in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt began to advocate a revival of Arab culture and cultural 'independence' from the Ottoman Empire. By the beginning of the 20th century, with the spread of the spirit of nationalism to the area, they began to think and talk about 'decentralising' Ottoman rule and, more hesitantly, eventual political liberation and the establishment of an independent Arab state.

The spread of Jewish settlement in Palestine resulted in friction between neighbouring Arab and Jewish communities. Townspeople and villagers resented the influx of Russian- and Yiddish-speaking, Allah-rejecting foreigners and began to fear cultural-religious subversion of their way of life and physical encroachment and even displacement.¹

The First World War, which destroyed the Ottoman Empire, exacerbated regional nationalist hopes and fears and changed the face of the Middle East. The idea of national self-determination, trumpeted by the victorious Allies, fired the imaginations of the educated throughout the colonial world. Britain conquered Palestine in 1917–1918 and the League of Nations eventually sanctioned British Mandatory rule in the country (and in Transjordan and Iraq) and French Mandates in Syria and Lebanon; the imperial powers were charged with preparing the local inhabitants for self-government. But with regard to Palestine, the

British issued the Balfour Declaration undertaking to help establish in it a 'National Home for the Jewish People' while promising to safeguard 'the civil and religious rights' of its majority Arab inhabitants. The Mandatory charter, finally approved in 1923, stressed the historic connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel.²

Post-war troubles in Eastern Europe and the attractions of good British administration prompted new waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine. The contradiction between Britain's dual commitment to fostering Jewish self-determination and safeguarding Arab rights soon became apparent, and the inevitability of the clash between Jewish and Arab national aspirations became manifest.

The steady progress in the achievement of self-determination among the Arab peoples of the Levant; the reality of foreign, Christian imperial rule, albeit benign and constructive; the political separation of Palestine from (French-ruled) Syria-Lebanon; and the influx of Zionist immigrants with deeply held national aspirations, triggered a Palestinian Arab nationalist 'awakening'. But almost from inception, the Palestinian Arab national movement was rent into two camps, whose growth and polarisation was the chief characteristic of the politics of Arab Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s. One camp, assembled around the Husseini clan and the person of Haj Muhammad Amin al Husseini, from 1921–1922 the Mufti of Jerusalem and the head of the Supreme Muslim Council (SMC) and, from 1936, chairman of the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), soon demanded an immediate termination of the Mandate, the cessation of Jewish immigration and the establishment of an Arab state in all of Palestine, vaguely promising civil and religious rights for the Jews already in the country. The 'Opposition' camp, led by the Nashashibis, another aristocratic Jerusalem clan, was generally more moderate, less insistent on immediate independence, and more conciliatory, at least in tone, towards the Yishuv (occasionally accepting Jewish Agency bribes in exchange for softening its criticism of Zionism). The 'Opposition' never really agreed to Jewish statehood in all or part of Palestine but during the late 1930s was willing to accept an at least temporary confederation of parts of Palestine with King Abdullah's Transjordan. But the Husseinis generally set the tone of Palestinian Arab politics – toward Zionism, Britain and Transjordan – and from the mid-1930s dominated the national movement.

Anti-Jewish Arab riots and pogroms in the towns of Palestine in 1920–1921 and 1929 demonstrated the growing hatred of the Palestinian masses – egged on by a mixture of real and imagined religious and nationalist grievances, and Muslim preaching – for the burgeoning Zionist presence. The most traumatic single event was the massacre of 66 ultra-orthodox (non-Zionist) Jews in Hebron by their Arab neighbours and visiting villagers in August 1929. Arab fears of displacement, heightened by the mass Jewish immigration from Europe of the