

Zionism's legacy of ethnic cleansing

Part 2—Israeli expansion creates more Palestinian refugees

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At the heart of the breakdown of the Middle East talks lies the refusal of the Zionist state to accept the right of return for the Palestinians who lost their homes and country after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The first of a two-part article on this subject—"Israel and the Palestinian right of return"—appeared yesterday. The following is the concluding part.

While Israel continues to deny Palestinians the right of return, one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the new state was the "Law of Return", enabling Jews from all over the world to come and live in Israel.

In the aftermath of the Second World War there were hundreds of thousands of Jews living in desperate conditions in displaced persons camps throughout Europe, as well as many others facing rampant anti-Semitism and discrimination. With few countries willing to take them, Israel provided their only possibility of a home.

The Israeli legislation was not simply a humanitarian measure aimed at providing a refuge for Jews facing persecution, however. Immigration to provide manpower was vital if the fledgling state was to survive and its businesses were to have access to cheap labour. The Zionist state therefore actively encouraged the immigration of Jews to Israel and between 1948 and 1952 the Jewish population doubled.

After an initial huge influx of Jews from Eastern Europe, Stalin initiated a vicious anti-Semitic campaign; Jews faced frame-up trials and the doors were closed to Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. So Israel turned to the Jews living in the Middle East and North Africa for new sources of immigration.

It used all means at its disposal to achieve this, going far beyond what would generally be considered "encouragement".

The case of the Iraqi Jews is the most well known, and is documented in several books (see Moshe Gat's *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq 1948-1951* and Shlomi Hillel's *Operation Babylon*). The Zionist underground, backed by Mossad le-Aliya, the forerunner of the Israeli security service, sent *agents provocateurs* abroad to create conditions whereby Jews would leave their homes and come to Israel. As a result of Mossad activities, in the space of a few weeks more than 120,000 Jews—almost the entire community in Iraq—were forced to leave their homes and possessions for Israel. Until the onset of Zionist-Palestinian conflict and the inflaming of political tensions by Britain's stooge regime under King Feisal and Prime Minister Nuri Said in Iraq, Jews had lived there without incident for 2,500 years, since the Babylonian exile from biblical Palestine.

Israel was not the destination of choice for the Iraqi Jews. A privileged few, those with money and connections, went to the West. But the majority lived in Israeli camps, where food and medicines were in short supply, until homes in "development" towns could be built on the ruins of Palestinian villages.

In subsequent years, entire communities of Jews from all over the Middle East and North Africa, who had had no interest in Zionism and had not faced discrimination or the anti-Semitism so prevalent in Europe, came to Israel. They now form the majority in Israel. Both the size and

speed of this exodus gives rise to the suspicion that in some cases at least, deals were done. Morocco's King Hassan was subsequently able to call on Mossad's services in Paris to dispose of Ben Barka, a political opponent, in circumstances that have never been clarified. The Royalist forces in Yemen received support from the Israeli Defence Force in their murderous civil war against the Republicans who were backed by Egypt's Nasser.

Thus, irrespective of their stated motives and intentions, and despite their anti-Israeli rhetoric, the viability of the Zionist state was crucially dependent upon the actions of the Arab bourgeoisie.

Today the population of Israel has grown to over 6 million, including more than 1 million Russians who left after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is widely believed that many of these are non-Jews, who were desperate to escape the widespread poverty and misery that followed Russia's economic collapse. This in turn has infuriated the religious authorities, who fear the diminution of their power.

At the very least, the enormous expansion of Israel's population refutes any claim that there was not enough room in Israel-Palestine or the means to support an enlarged Palestinian citizenry. The crucial question for Zionism was that the expansion has been Jewish and at the expense of the Palestinians. Those Palestinians who continued to live inside Israel have been treated as second-class citizens: Israeli Palestinians do not have the same rights as Israeli Jews. Ninety-three percent of the land is now characterised as Jewish land, meaning that no non-Jew is allowed to lease, sell or buy it. Thus the Land Rules have not just made the Palestinians into refugees, they have also worked to dispossess them of their property within Israel itself. Furthermore until 1966, Palestinian Israelis were ruled by military ordinance.

After the Six-Day War in June 1967, when Israel seized East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights in Syria, many Palestinians became refugees for a second time. They were forced to leave their homes and flee to Jordan and the Lebanon. Palestinian resistance to the military occupation that followed the war provoked a brutal response from the Israeli army. Whole villages were razed to the ground and families expelled. This vicious sequence was repeated over and over again as the Israelis drove the Palestinians further away from their original homes.

The Palestinian-Israeli scholar Nur Masalha details how the Zionists planned and implemented programmes to rid the "Promised Land" of its native people in his book *A Land without a People: Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians, 1949-96*. He explains that this policy continued well after the 1948-49 war and involved not just the politicians and military forces, but also Israeli intellectuals. It included transfer, massacres—as in the case of Kfir Qasim—housing demolitions and expulsions.

Jewish settlements were established in the newly occupied lands within weeks of the war, not by right-wing zealots but by the party of government, the Labour Party. As Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell explains in his book *The Founding Myths of Israel*, "Despite the impression that some of the founders of the labour movement, motivated by internal

political struggles, have attempted to create, everyone in the coalition—both the founders and their successors—were united in pursuing a policy of *fait accompli* in the occupied territories. Despite the divisions in the Mapai [Labour] since the mid-1940s, the family of Mapai remained true to the doctrine of never giving up a position or a territory unless one is compelled by a superior force.”

As Sternhell explains, while the then Prime Minister Levi Eshkol feared the consequences of such a move, he had no ideological alternative to offer. His failure to prevent the colonising of the Occupied Territories stemmed not from personal weaknesses, but from the fact that he had no response to the Zionist argument that if Jews could live in the Arab towns and neighbourhoods of Jaffa and Haifa and consider them their legitimate homes, there was no reason to prevent them living in Palestinian Nablus or Hebron.

According to Sternhell, Golda Meir, who followed Eshkol as prime minister, was chosen precisely because she wholeheartedly embraced the nationalist perspective of the Labour Zionists and appealed to history as proof of the legitimacy, morality and exclusivity of the Jewish people's right to the country. For her, there was room for only one national movement in Palestine—a Jewish one. This was why she prohibited the use of terms such as “Palestinian national movement” and “Palestinian state” on Israeli state radio and television.

The promulgation by the government of literally hundreds of “occupiers' laws” directly contravened not only the tenets of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights but the Geneva Conventions as well. These violations of basic democratic rights included administrative detention, mass land expropriations, forced movement of populations, and torture.

Palestinians were made homeless and whole areas were ethnically cleansed so that Israelis, often new immigrants, could be housed. Initially it was only the right-wing zealots, determined to colonise the West Bank (known as Judea and Samaria in biblical Palestine), who came to the new settlements. But it was only possible to populate them by offering financial inducements, in the form of subsidies and tax rebates, to encourage poor Israelis to settle there who otherwise had no chance of obtaining decent, affordable housing. Even after talks to reach a negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resulted in the 1993 Oslo Accords, settlement building did not abate. The opposite occurred, it increased, transforming the demography of the West Bank and Jerusalem.

As a result of the 1967 Six-Day War and Israeli reprisals against those suspected of supporting the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), many Palestinians fled to Jordan. Three years later, many were hounded out of Jordan in a military campaign by King Hussein, aided by Israel, in what became known as Black September, and fled to Lebanon.

The Israeli invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 created further displacements as the Palestinians left their homes in southern Lebanon and moved to Beirut to avoid Israeli air raids. Many Palestinians thus became refugees several times over. Israel's 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon was accompanied by frequent aerial bombardments that destroyed countless Arab homes and villages. The Palestinians, despite their expulsion from their homes in 1948 and 1967, were never safe from the extended arm of Israel's military and secret service, even in their place of refuge.

Palestinian homes were no more sacrosanct in Jerusalem—“the eternal and undivided capital of Israel,” according to the Zionists. Under vaguely defined and discriminatory rules, Palestinians who live there lose their residency rights if they are unable to prove that Jerusalem is the “centre of their life”. The loss of residency rights means expulsion from Jerusalem and exile to a village in the West Bank, where access to Jerusalem is denied.

The Labour politicians Shimon Peres—who played a major role in securing the Oslo agreement in 1993—and Yitzhak Rabin—who signed the

accords—did not do so because of some Damascene conversion to the legitimacy of Palestinian national rights. An agreement offered the most rational solution to the conflict from the perspective of Israel's own national interests. They postponed the resolution of the most difficult issues—the “refugee question” and the status of Jerusalem—to later talks, in the hope of first getting agreement on borders and land transfers.

The right-wing opposition within Israel has obstructed every step of the protracted Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. In the final analysis, despite the majority of Israelis supporting an end to the conflict, the Labour Party and its liberal and secular supporters have been unable to oppose the right-wing fundamentalists. The relationship between the secular Labourites, the peace movement and the religious nationalists is much closer than might appear on the surface. All share a perspective based on upholding claims to an historical and religious Jewish right to Palestine, which dictated the Palestinian expulsions and precludes the recognition of similar rights for the Palestinians.

The liberal historian Benny Morris, who has quite correctly exposed the way Israel forcibly ejected the Palestinians from their homes in order to establish the Zionist state, exemplifies this outlook. His nationalist perspective renders him blind to the logical implications of his own work. He wrote in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper: “The spectacle of Palestinian rejection of the *reasonable terms* offered by President Clinton and the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak (Israeli withdrawal from 95 percent of the West Bank and the Arab half of Jerusalem, and Palestinian statehood), and the insistence on the refugees' right of return to their homes, towns and villages in pre-1967 Israel, is alienating most Israelis and undermining the sympathy that the past decades of suffering and peace negotiations have engendered.”

He concluded his article by saying, “Almost all Israeli Jews, *including myself*, believe that whatever the rights and wrongs of 1948, and whoever was to blame for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, a solution based on their repatriation to Israel would spell the destruction of the Jewish state” (emphasis added throughout).

This brief review of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows that any recognition of the Palestinians' right of return, however circumscribed, immediately raises the undemocratic character of the Zionist regime and its essential inviability.

As this article has sought to show, it is a myth to say that the state of Israel was established in a land without people. On the contrary, the state of Israel was created as a result of the planned and systematic expulsion of the Palestinian people.

Moreover, Israel cannot be regarded as any kind of progressive society, committed to social equality and the advancement of all its peoples. The Zionist state enshrines discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs. It is a society riven from top to bottom with social and political divisions of a most explosive character.

Despite posturing as a new form of society, founded on equality and quasi-socialist principles, from its origins Israel has been a garrison state, surrounded by hostile neighbours, with the army serving as the central pillar of society.

The tragic irony of the Zionist solution to the oppression of the Jewish people—traditionally and historically connected with a struggle for tolerance and freedom—has been the brutal suppression of another oppressed people. In consequence, the right-wing forces cultivated by the Zionist state now threaten to reproduce within Israel the same conditions of dictatorship and civil war from which an earlier generation of Jews fled.

The only way out of the current dead end is the development of a political movement to unite Arab and Jewish workers and intellectuals in a common struggle against capitalism and for the building of a socialist society. This also offers the only means of genuinely redressing the historic iniquities suffered by the Palestinian workers and peasants, and

ending the twin evils of oppression and war that are fuelled by the profit drive of international capital and the native ruling elites. The creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East would remove the artificial borders that presently divide the peoples and economies of the region, enabling its plentiful resources to be utilised in order to fulfil the social, economic and democratic aspirations of all its peoples.



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