

# The Nakba

## – Israel’s ‘War of Independence’ and Palestine’s catastrophe



### The beginnings: Ottoman Palestine and British duplicity

Palestine was part of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire until that fell at the end of World War One in 1918. But even during that war, in 1916, the British and French governments carved up the Ottoman Empire between them (the Sykes-Picot Agreement); part of Britain’s share was Palestine. During the war, Britain promised the overwhelmingly Arab population of Palestine self-government within 10 years, while, in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, it supported the creation of a national home for the Jews. Britain had two mutually incompatible plans for the same land. The population of Palestine at that time was about 800,000: 730,000 Palestinian Arabs (650,000 Muslim; 80,000 Christian); and 60,000 Jews.

### The Zionist project: racism and ethnic cleansing

Zionism originated in Europe in the late 19th century; it was partly a religious but mainly a nationalist movement to establish a Jewish state. The Zionist Congress quickly settled on Palestine for its endeavour. Now there were two peoples claiming the same land: the Palestinians who had lived there for centuries and

Zionists who said that they needed a Jewish state as a refuge from antisemitism and who came to claim that God had given this land to them. Very quickly the ambition of the Zionist movement went beyond having a place of safety and autonomy for Jews but to have a purely Jewish state in which Arab citizens would not be welcome.

The Zionist leadership knew the land was already populated and that it would not be given away voluntarily. Consequently the policy was to seize the land by force and drive out or kill the indigenous population, the Palestinians.

### Colonial rule under the British Mandate

From 1918 to 1948 Britain held a mandate to govern Palestine and during this time the colony developed considerably more than the surrounding countries: educational and medical services were established and roads, railways and mail services were greatly improved. There was an active agricultural economy which, by 1935, was relatively prosperous, exporting 65% of its produce. While Britain’s declared aim was to create an integrated Arab/Jewish society, it also supported the Zionist plan to create an exclusively Jewish state and it tolerated large scale Jewish immigration. This created intense resentment in the Arab population.

In time, resentment erupted in violence between the Arab majority and the Jewish minority. When severe violence erupted in 1929 and again 1936 it was brutally repressed by the British, who by now had concluded that its objective

**In 1941, David Ben Gurion, who became Israel’s first Prime Minister, said:**  
*“It is impossible to imagine general evacuation without compulsion, and brutal compulsion.”*

**UN Resolution 47/80 December 16, 1992**  
*The United Nations General Assembly strongly rejects policies and ideologies aimed at promoting ethnic cleansing in any form.*





The King David Hotel in Jerusalem, HQ of the British army, bombed by the Irgun gang in 1946. 91 people died.

of peaceful coexistence was unattainable and that partition was unavoidable. In 1939 Britain confirmed its withdrawal from the Balfour Declaration and undertook to limit Jewish immigration and land purchase. The Zionists reacted with ferocious violence, now against the British as well as the Palestinians.

During the Second World War, Palestine was a major logistics centre for the British Army

and internal politics took second place to defeating the Nazis. After the War the political problem was handed to the United Nations which, in 1947, consisted of only 57 member states. On 29 November 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted 33 to 13, with 10 abstentions and 1 absent, in favour of the partition plan.

In 1948, the population of Mandate Palestine was 1,750,000, of which 31% were Jewish, who owned no more than 6% of the land. The partition proposals, however, allocated 55% of the land for Jews, leaving just 45% for the Palestinian state.

## The Unilateral Declaration of the State of Israel

This partition plan was accepted by the Zionist leaders (though only as a temporary tactical measure) but was rejected outright by Palestinians and the surrounding Arab countries. The inhabitants of the land had not been consulted. If consultation had taken place, the plan would surely have been rejected. From March 1948 the Zionists' Plan Dalet, carefully prepared in advance, was put into effect. Its purpose was both to seize the military hardware and installations left by the British and to use force to remove as many Palestinians as possible, to destroy their villages and to take over the main towns. This was a war directed specifically against civilians and was, therefore, illegal as well as immoral.

Israel declared itself an independent state on 14 May, 1948. The new state of Israel was recognised by the USA on the next day and by the Soviet Union two days later, despite its criminal conduct and despite the fact that, uniquely, Israel did not (and still does not) have defined borders. Israel was admitted to the United Nations in May 1949.

### Extract from Plan D (for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine)

*“These operations can be carried out in the following manner: either by destroying villages (by setting fire to them, by blowing them up, and by planting mines in their rubble), and especially those population centres that are difficult to control permanently; or by mounting combing and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the villages, conducting a search inside them. In case of resistance, the armed forces must be wiped out and the population expelled outside the borders of the state.”*

## The Nakba (the Catastrophe)

From 1946 onwards the Zionists living in Palestine began to collect detailed information concerning Palestinian villages, for subsequent military use. Within two weeks of the adoption of the partition plan by the UN, Zionist militias began the process of ethnic cleansing. A month later the first Palestinian village was erased. Violence gradually increased and as many as 70,000 Palestinians had fled their homes before full-scale military activity began in March 1948.

The atrocities were as inhumane and violent as those that have been roundly condemned by the international community in other conflicts. On 9 April, 1948, Zionist forces that included the notorious Stern Gang and Irgun units entered the village of Deir Yassin close to Jerusalem and sprayed the houses with machine-gun fire, killing many of the inhabitants. The survivors were then collected together and between 100 and 200 Palestinians were murdered in cold blood, including 30 babies. The Irgun boasted of killing 256 and the village was razed to the ground. The scale of this operation was loudly proclaimed by the Zionists in order to demonstrate to other Palestinians what would happen to them if they were to stay.

Menachem Begin, head of the Irgun terrorist organisation and later a Prime Minister of Israel proclaimed:

*“As in Deir Yassin, so everywhere... Oh Lord, Oh Lord, you have chosen us for conquest.”*

In some of the other villages people were allowed to leave their houses, but had to leave their possessions, before their homes were blown up and their villages flattened. But there were many other massacres. Just one week after the declaration (22 May 1948), 200 men between the ages of 13 and 30 were murdered in cold blood at Tantura, near Haifa.



A 12 year old witness at Deir Yassin reported:

*"They took us out one after the other; shot an old man and when one of his daughters cried, she was shot too. Then they called my brother Muhammad, and shot him in front of us, and when my mother yelled, bending over him — carrying my little sister Hudra in her hands, still breastfeeding her — they shot her too."*



Refugees crossing the Jordan river in 1948

The conduct of the Zionist forces in the cities was little better. Haifa had 75,000 Palestinian civilian inhabitants against whom the Zionist forces used terrorist tactics — heavy shelling, detonation of crude bombs, igniting deliberately spilled oil, and sniper fire culminating in the deliberate shelling of civilians trying to escape by sea. The orders to the troops were, "Kill any Arab you see; torch all inflammable objects and force doors open with explosives." The Zionist forces achieved their objective: about 60,000 Palestinians were driven out and many killed, reducing the Arab population from 45% to just 4%.

A witness to the panicked flight from Haifa reported:

*"The boats in the port were soon filled with living cargo. The overcrowding in them was horrible. Many turned over and sank with all their passengers."*

It was much the same in Jaffa and in Safad in the Galilee, where 9,500 Arabs and 2,400 Jews had lived; the entire Arab population was driven out. Similar stories were repeated throughout Palestine. By the time the

British Mandate had ended more than a third of the Palestinian Arab population had been driven out. On the day that Israeli 'independence' was declared, 58 villages had already been wiped out. On the next day, but before any country had recognised Israel, Arab legion forces entered Palestine. But they were too few, too late and were no match for the well-trained and well-armed Israeli forces.

By March 1949, Israel had acquired 78% of Palestine, from which it had expelled over 750,000 Palestinians, and nearly 500 Palestinian villages had been erased.

## Refugees from the Nakba

Many of the 750,000 Palestinians who fled the carnage in 1948-49 were exiled in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. This is where they and their descendants still live, some within sight of their own homes and land. Israel has continued to maintain its ruthless quest for land without Palestinians. In June 1967 it occupied the remainder of Mandate Palestine — the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza as well as the Golan Heights in Syria — and proceeded to confiscate Palestinian land, on which huge Jewish settlements have been built illegally. Each home demolition and each land grab increases the number of Palestinian refugees.

## The Ongoing Nakba

Palestinians are gradually being expelled from Jerusalem, and Israel has walled the city off from the rest of the occupied West Bank.

Gaza has been converted into the largest prison camp

in the world, with frequent violent incursions by the Israeli army. In what had been the worst onslaught since 1948, during late December 2008 and early January 2009, Israel bombed and shelled Gaza from the land, sea and air for three weeks. 1,434 Palestinians were killed, including over 400 children, and homes, factories and schools were demolished. Then in 2014, an even bloodier assault was launched. Israel bombarded Gaza for 50 days leaving 2,205

## Palestinian loss of land from 1947





*Land grabs and ethnic cleansing continue with the building of the Wall, deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice and the UN*

Palestinians killed, at least 1,483 of them civilians, including at least 490 children, with many thousands more injured and an estimated 20,000 homes destroyed. The Israeli deaths totalled 71, of which 66 were soldiers. Israel has blocked the entry of building materials, fuel and other essential goods since the onslaught in 2008/9 and the damage to infrastructure is such that now (April 2016) over 90% of the water is undrinkable.

The level of home demolitions has drastically increased; by April demolitions for 2016 had almost reached the same level as the total number in 2015. These mainly take place in the West Bank where over 500,000 illegal settlers now live. Even inside Israel, there is wholesale demolition of Palestinian villages that have existed long before 1948. These villages are 'unrecognised' by Israel, which means they receive no services (such as education, health, electricity or mains water), despite paying Israeli taxes. The Palestinian Bedouin in the Naqab/Negev are particularly vulnerable.

Israel continues to refuse to allow the 5 million Palestinians who are now refugees to return. The area as yet uncolonised by Israel amounts to only 13% of the total area of 1948 Palestine, in five disconnected blocks, making a two-state solution virtually impossible.

At the same time, pressure is being stepped up on Palestinians to leave the Occupied Territories, and

## Extracts from the Universal Declaration of Human rights. December 10, 1948

*[13/2] Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.*

*[17/2] No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.*

UN Resolution 194 has been reaffirmed 130 times. It includes the statement:

***"...refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practical date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for the loss of or damage to property..."***

members of the Israeli government have openly stated that Palestinian citizens of Israel should be made to leave.

The story is indeed one of national catastrophe for the Palestinians. It is also one of immorality, illegality, racial discrimination and injustice. History shows that Britain has played a shameful role in helping to shape the fate of the Palestinian people; we owe it to them to support whole-heartedly their struggle for justice and independence.

*April 2017*

### Sources and further reading:

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*Palestinian refugees: the Right of Return*, ed. Naseer Aruri, Pluto Press, 2001

*Atlas of Palestine 1948*, Salman Abu Sitta, 2004

*A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, Ilan Pappé; Cambridge University Press, 2003

*The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Ilan Pappé, Oneworld Publications, 2006

*The Gun and the Olive Branch* (third edition), David Hirst, 2003

## What can you do?

- Join the PSC
- Boycott Israeli goods, tourism, cultural and sporting events and academic institutions
- Express your views to the media and counter Israeli propaganda about the establishment of the state of Israel
- Write to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, your local MP or MEP to urge government action in support of Palestinian rights
- Write to the Israeli Embassy demanding an end to the occupation and to Apartheid policies

*For full details of how to get involved, for further information on the historical and political background and for links to other organisations, see the PSC website: [www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org)*

*Facebook: [palestinesolidarityuk](https://www.facebook.com/palestinesolidarityuk)*

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