



Palestinian women and children leaving their homes during the Nakba.

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The Nakba May 15, 1948

1. What is the Nakba?

May 15, 1948 marked the end of the British Mandate (1922-1948) and the beginning of Israel as an independent Jewish State. Palestinian Muslim and Christian Arabs consider this day to be al-Nakba (pronounced an-Nakba), 'the Catastrophe', whereby they were dispossessed from their homes, lands, and livelihoods as a result of Israeli ethnic cleansing operations during the Arab-Israeli War between November 1947 and July 1949. In 2008 Palestinians commemorate 60 years of loss and dispossession while the Israeli state celebrates 60 years of independence and existence.

In order to reach a just and comprehensive peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the Nakba must be acknowledged. The events of 1947-9 stand at the root of the conflict. By acknowledging them, there is hope for sincere reconciliation.

2. What is the UN Partition Plan of 1947?

In 1947, the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP) recommended that Palestine be divided into two states, one Arab and one Jewish. The plan would have caused *almost half of the Palestinian*

population—the indigenous majority on its own ancestral soil to be converted overnight into a minority under alien rule. (1). The Zionist leadership agreed and the Arab League and Palestinians leadership did not.

On November 29, 1947, the UN partition proposal (UN General Assembly Resolution 181) was accepted 33:13, with 10 abstentions. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. supported the resolution. Britain abstained.

The partition assigned 52% of the land to the Jewish state and 45% to the Arab state. Jerusalem and

Bethlehem (3%) would be under international control.

Jews owned almost six percent of the land area in all of Palestine.

At the time of the partition, there were approximately 1.3 million Palestinian Arabs and 610,000 Jews living in Palestine.

Between 400,000-500,000 Palestinians and approximately 500,000 Jews were living on land partitioned for the Jewish state (2).

Approximately 10, 000 Jews and between 725,000-818,000 were living on land partitioned for the Arab state.(3)



The Zionist leadership agreed [to a partition plan] and the Arab League and Palestinians did not because *this would have caused almost half of the Palestinian population- the indigenous majority on its own ancestral soil to be converted overnight into a minority under alien rule.*

Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*

3. What happened between 1947-1949?

Plan Dalet, agreed upon as a strategy in March 1948 by Ben-Gurion and his consultancy, with the intention to control at least the land that the UN partition allotted for the Jewish state with the least amount of Palestinians. Today we would call this plan ethnic cleansing. Historian Ilan Pappé documents the systematic detailing of villages by Jewish forces that allowed Plan Dalet to come to fruition.

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 debris) and especially of those population centers which are difficult to control continuously; 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 (Plan Dalet, 10 March, 1948)(4)



Mona Halaby
Mona's mother with her friends in her garden in the early '40s. Her mother is on the far right, with her friends, Mimi, Ada, Aida and Salwa.

At the time when Plan Dalet was circulated, Jewish Brigade Commanders had lists of villages for which they were responsible and the ways that orders would be carried out: Occupation, destruction or expulsion.(5) Village details had

been collected much earlier in the 1930-40's by the Hagana and academicians.(6)

Around the time of the UN Partition and prior to Israeli independence, the Arab League established and funded the Arab Liberation Army, recruiting volunteers to fight against Jewish military forces in Palestine.(7) During the fighting, Jewish military forces perpetrated a number of crimes against indigenous Palestinians. In the quotes that follow, Ilan Pappé describes the crimes in gruesome detail.

On April 9, 1948, **Deir Yassin** village was occupied by the Irgun and Stern Gang (Lechi) Jewish forces. At least ninety three Palestinian villagers were killed in cold blood, their bodies abused while a number of the women were raped and then killed. Of those killed, thirty were babies.(8)

On May 22, 1948, Jewish soldiers from the Alexandroni Brigade occupied **Tantura** and shot 110-230 Palestinian men. As Pappé documents: *The Jews gathered all the women and children, in a place where they dumped all bodies, for them to see their dead husbands, fathers and brothers and terrorize them.*(9)

On October 28, 1948, in the village of **Dawaymeh**, near Hebron, about 145 children, women and men were killed. Over 450 went missing, of which 170 were women and children.

On October 29, Jewish and Druze On On October 29, Jewish and Druze soldiers attacked and occupied the village of **Safsaf**. The next morning, seventy men were shot in cold blood. ...*Four women and a girl were*

The Deir Yassin, Tantura, Dawaymeh and Safsaf atrocities are only four cases of many similar brutalities that occurred and that live in Palestinian memory of expulsion, displacement, massacres, rape, and other acts of violence, including complete village destruction. These atrocities greatly influenced fear and flight of Palestinians in other villages.

The Arab Liberation Army sent volunteer ‘rescue’ troops to Palestine to help Palestinians fight and resist the partition. With the official end of the British Mandate and the Israeli declaration of Independence on May 15, 1948, neighboring Arab armies, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan, start to fight with the Israeli defense forces. Arab armies somewhat became involved to intervene on the possibility of another Deir Yassin-like massacre.

By the end of the Arab-Israeli war, over 6000 Israelis and between 8000-15,000 Arabs, military and civilian, lost their lives during this campaign.

At the end of the 1947-49 war, Israel controlled seventy-eight percent of Palestine, twenty-five percent more than the UN partition plan.

No Palestinian state was established on the remaining twenty-two percent. Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip; Jordan controlled the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

4. UN Response: In support of Palestinian refugees

In 1948, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (Article 13) stated that,

Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

However, Palestinians have not been allowed to return to their homes and villages, not even Palestinian citizens of Israel who were dispossessed.

In December, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passed Resolution 194, which is as follows:

Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible;

(UNGA 194: Article 11)

The UN Conciliation Commission on Palestine consisted of the United States, Turkey and France. The UNGA Resolution 194 instructs this commission

... to facilitate the repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation, and to maintain close relations with the Director of the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees and, through him, with the appropriate organs and agencies of the United Nations; (Article 11)

5. Who are the Palestinian Refugees?

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), developed to care temporarily for Palestinian refugees, Palestinian refugees are persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. UNRWA also includes descendants of people who became refugees in 1948. (12)

In 1949, 156,000 Palestinian Arabs remained in Israel and became Israeli citizens. 32,000 of these Israeli

Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights states that *Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.*

citizens were Palestinian internal refugees who could not return to their lands. The rest of the Palestinian refugees, those who found themselves outside the new state of Israel in 1949, were not allowed to return to their homes. The Israeli government decided that Palestinian expulsion and refusing the return of these refugees was necessary and desired for the growth of the new state.

By 1949, about 500 Palestinian villages, towns, and tribes were depopulated and destroyed and approximately 711,000 Palestinian refugees, according to the UN, were dispossessed.(13)

By 1953, there were 870,000 registered refugees, over 34% of them in refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. Bureaucratic complications prevented many refugees from registering with UNRWA, which suggests that the actual number of refugees was larger than those registered.

Today, there are an estimated 7 million Palestinian refugees. There are 58 registered refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

6. What is the state of Israel's relationship to Palestinian refugees and nearby Arab states?

The Israeli Absentees Property Law of 1950 declared expropriated Palestinian absentee property, even of Palestinian Israeli citizens, as state land, and continues to refuse the return of the refugees.

The majority of Palestinians today are considered refugees.

In 1949, armistice agreements were made between Israel and Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. There were no recognized borders between Israel and these countries until the

peace agreements with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). There are still no peace agreements with Lebanon and Syria.

7. Why must Jews recognize the Nakba?

Millions of Palestinians still long for a state of their own, one that will protect their rights as Palestinians, and have yet to see an agreement be reached with Israel that would support their self-determination with integrity and dignity. The majority of Palestinians today are considered refugees. Not addressing the issue of their refugee status and how they became refugees makes it difficult for a just and lasting peace to develop between Israelis and Palestinians. Israel has yet to acknowledge the enormous loss suffered by the majority of Palestinians in 1948.

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem since 1967 reinforces the need for Jews to acknowledge the significance of the Nakba for Palestinians. For forty years millions of Palestinians have lived under direct Israeli military occupation and still struggle for a home that was lost sixty years ago in 1947-1949. The link between how Palestinians and Israelis are deeply tied together in this history lives in the present.

As Jews, there must be a way to honor the traumatic histories of the past, how the past lives in the present for Palestinians, and the possible contributions toward peace and justice Jews can make by rightfully engaging in worthwhile solutions acceptable also to Palestinians. One step in this process is learning about the Nakba and providing recognition of Palestinian history. Knowing the histories that made Israel a state and

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Palestinians dispossessed is critical to establishing a just and lasting peace that can truly be agreed upon by Palestinians and Israelis.

A resolution to the refugee issue must be resolved equitably and in a manner that promotes peace and is consistent with international law. Implementation of these rights is possible through return, compensation, or resettlement. It is a matter to be negotiated between Israelis and Palestinians. Under any circumstances, the dispossession of the Palestinian refugees must be acknowledged and redressed in a way that leads to a just peace, security and hope for Palestinians and Israelis.

- (1) Morris, Benny, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*, Vintage Books, New York: 2001 (1999), p 186
- (2) Segev, Tom, *One Palestine Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate*, Henry Holt and Company, New York: 2000 (1999), p 496
- Morris, pp 184, 190
- Shlaim, Avi, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York: 2001 (2000), p 25
- Pappe, Ilan, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, One World, Oxford: 2007 (2006), p 35
- (3) Segev, p 496. Pappe, p 35
- (4) Pappe, p 39
- (5) Pappe, p 83
- (6) Pappe, p 19
- (7) Morris, p186
- (8) Pappe, p 90
- (9) Muhammed Nimr al-Khatib testimony in Pappe, p 137
- (10) Pappe, p 196
- (11) Pappe, p 184
- (12) Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1987. pp 132-154, 295
- (13) Morris 1987, pp 297-298