

Continuation of the Nakba

Having owned under 7% of the land of the Palestinian Mandate, the Jews were promised 56% by the UN Partition Plan and seized a total of 78% in the conflict of 1948. In securing their nation, they had uprooted 90% of Palestinians from their homes and sent the vast majority into exile. After the armistice, they immediately embarked upon a campaign to complete the dispossession of the Palestinian people. The refugees who found themselves outside Israeli borders after the conflict frequently tried to return to their homes. Referred to as “infiltrators” by the Israeli government, they were regularly arrested, imprisoned and expelled, and it was not long before Israel adopted a policy of firing at Palestinians making their way home.



The Israelis were quick to improvise a legal structure to facilitate the expropriation of Arab lands depopulated during the War. Even before their declaration of nationhood, bodies were already being formed to administer the lands acquired through the expulsion of their legitimate owners. They were given a legal basis in the Emergency Regulations of 1948 before developing into the Absentees’ Property Law in 1950, which granted Israelis “custodianship” of absentees’ lands until the resolution of the refugee problem.

An “absentee” was defined as any Arab who had once left his village after November 1947, even if he had remained within the 1948 borders of Israel. This included, for instance, landlords in Acre who had traveled the few meters from the New City to the Old City and were therefore liable to have their homes confiscated. The Custodian had overwhelming powers in declaring absentee status and was not obliged to provide the sources of the information in coming to a decision; in addition, once land was sold by the Custodian, the sale could not be reversed – a technicality which ensured that land would remain in Jewish hands once it had been reallocated. This authorized the theft of the property of over a million Palestinians chased off their land in 1948.

Of the more than 800 Palestinian towns and villages that had existed in Palestine in 1945, less than 450 remained after the War and only 105 of them within the Israeli borders.

A Refugees Conference was held in Ramallah on March 17, 1949, calling for the implementation of UN Resolution 194, which recommended the return of all Palestinian refugees to their homeland. A three-member delegation of refugees subsequently traveled to Lausanne to meet Israeli representatives in order to present the resolutions of the Refugees Conference. They stated their willingness to negotiate with the Israelis and their refusal to be represented by the AHC or by Arab states. The Israelis announced their refusal to deal with popular bodies or organizations and advised the delegation to influence the Arab govern-

ments to negotiate with Israel on behalf of the refugees. In this way, the refugees were introduced to their role as political pawns, in which they would be used both by Israel and the Arab states.

Theft of Palestinian Taxes

In August 1948, the Anglo-Palestine Bank – now Israel’s Bank Leumi – issued the lira to replace the existing Palestine pound employed during the British Mandate. Public and private bank accounts in Palestine were seized, and the Mandatory governmental accounts held in England were delivered by the British into Israeli hands. In this way the British were complicit in depriving the Palestinians of a lifetime of taxation, completing the dispossession of the Palestinian refugees.

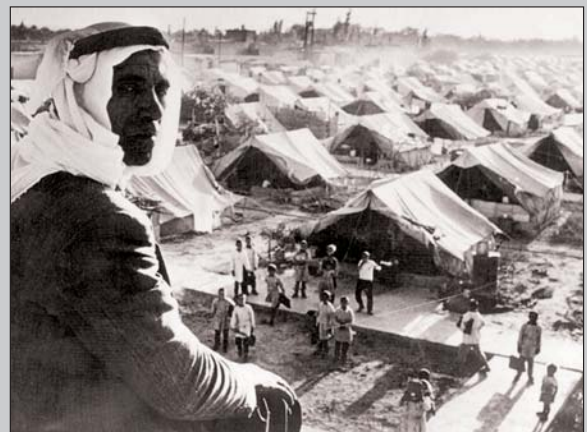
Demographic Tools

Two laws were adopted after the War to ensure an overwhelming majority of Jews in Israel. The first, passed in 1950, was the *Law of Return* which granted any Jew in the world the right to settle in Israel and become an Israeli citizen, institutionalizing a process which had been a fundamental part of the Zionist movement since its earliest days. The second, passed in 1952, was the *Law of Entry into Israel* and controlled the entry of foreigners to Israel, stripping Palestinian refugees of any legal rights they might have claimed to return to their homes. Much debate revolves around the nature of the expulsions, but refugees around the world invariably return home after a conflict regardless; the essence of the Nakba is that the Israelis wish to permanently deny Palestinians their right to return to their homeland.

The Lasting Legacy of the 1948 Refugee Problem

The clearing of the Arab population in Palestine has always been an essential component of Zionist strategy. Chaim Weizmann had likened the indigenous population to “the rocks of Judea, as obstacles that had to be cleared on a difficult path”¹⁸, and this vision has persisted and been incorporated into Israeli policy ever since. As a result of the ongoing process of the Nakba, Palestinians have become the world’s oldest and largest refugee population and now make up more than one quarter of the world’s total refugees.

Many of the Palestinians fleeing their homes in 1948 left with a minimum of luggage in the belief that they would be returning to their homes within days, as soon as the violence passed their villages. Now living in overcrowded and underprivileged camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, or the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, they and their descendants, now entering a fourth generation, are still waiting.



18 Masalha, Nur. *Expulsion of the Palestinians*. Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.