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Palestine

The Palestinian Catastrophe

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The Palestinian Nakba of 1947-9 was the defining feature of a process which began in the 1880s and continues to this day. It determines the daily lives of Palestinians in the state of Israel, Palestinians under military occupation in the rest of Palestine, and Palestinians in exile from their homeland. This is the injustice that must be addressed in any attempt to resolve 140 years of conflict and dispossession.

On 15 May 1948, the State of Israel was established on the ruins of Palestine. For Israeli Jews, the date is a celebration, marked annually as Independence Day. For Palestinians, the date symbolises the Nakba, or Catastrophe.

The Nakba was not a single-day event, but a process lasting most of 1947-9, the culmination of almost 70 years of Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine. A region which had been one of the economic, intellectual, cultural, and political centres of the Arab world was wrested away from its people, who became either refugees from their homeland or third-class citizens living under conditions of military rule.

From the beginning of the Zionist project, in the early 1880s, Jewish settlers, mainly from Eastern Europe, had moved to Palestine. These Zionist settlers represented a small fraction – about 1% – of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who fled the harsh repression and antisemitism of the dying Tsarist regime; most refugees preferred to seek safety in the United States, Britain, and other Western capitalist states.

Of those who reached Palestine, more than half left within a few years. Although some who remained tried to live harmoniously with the indigenous Palestinian population of the region, most sought to displace and replace Palestinians and to establish their own society in the area. There were clashes over land and dispossession as far back as the 1880s, long before the 1917 Balfour Declaration and even before the formal establishment of the World Zionist Organisation in 1897.

As a result of the wars of 1947-9 and the establishment of the Israeli state on the ruins of Palestine, some 750,000 Palestinians were forced into exile from their homes and land. This was accompanied by scores of massacres. In the best-known of these, more than 100 Palestinians were slaughtered in the village of Deir Yassin on the outskirts of Jerusalem. [1] This act was carried out by armed militias of the Zionist right, though most of the lesser-known massacres were the work of militias of the ruling 'Labour Zionist' groups.

In Lydda, forces under the command of Yitzhak Rabin (later to become prime minister of Israel) killed at least 500 Palestinians; scores of these were murdered while seeking shelter in the mosque. In the border village of Hula (now in Lebanon), about 60 men were murdered, and the women and children expelled. The company commander, Shmuel Lahis, was later convicted by an Israeli court of a war crime for this, and sentenced to seven years imprisonment. On appeal, his sentence was reduced to one year, and he then received a presidential amnesty. In 1979, Lahis was appointed director-general of the Jewish Agency, the executive body of the World Zionist Organisation.

In Dawayma, near Hebron, an unknown number – certainly several score – were shot as they took refuge in a cave. Although Israeli diplomat Abba Eban (and subsequently foreign minister) claimed in the UN that there was no such village, researchers later unearthed mass graves in the cave. Similar stories were reported the length and breadth of Palestine.

About 150,000 remained in the Israeli state, where they lived as second-class citizens under military rule until 1966. Many of them were designated by Israel as 'present absentees', and had their homes and lands expropriated by the state. At least 400 villages (some estimates go as high as nearly 700) were destroyed, and their land given to settlers. [2] This was acknowledged by the Israeli state.

In 1969, speaking to students in Haifa, then-Defence Minister Moshe Dayan said, 'Jewish villages arose in place of Arab villages. You don't even know the names of these villages and I'm not reproaching you for that, as those geography books no longer exist. Not only do the books no longer exist but the villages don't exist anymore either... Not one place in this country was built where there hadn't formerly been an Arab population.' [3]

An unfinished process

Palestinian citizens of Israel face both official and unofficial discrimination. Palestinian human rights organisation Adalah has compiled a database of scores of Israeli laws which discriminate, either directly or indirectly, against Palestinian citizens. These include the Law of Return, the Citizenship Law, the Jewish National Fund Law, the Absentees' Property Law, and the Land Law, whose combined effect means that 93% of the land area in the state of Israel is officially designated as for Jews only.

Massacres continued after the establishment of the Israeli state. The notorious Unit 101 of the Israeli army, led by Ariel Sharon (later to become prime minister of Israel), killed over 2,000 Palestinians and Egyptians in cross-border raids between 1949 and 1956. During Israel's military occupation of the Gaza Strip following the 1956 Suez War, several hundred were killed in massacres in Khan Yunis and Rafah. And in a particularly notorious crime, 48 Palestinian citizens of Israel were murdered in 1956 for breaking a curfew in their village of Kafr Qasim – a curfew imposed while they were away farming their fields.

In the last case, the perpetrators were convicted and received prison sentences; but on their release, one was appointed head of security at Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona, and another was appointed 'head of Arab affairs' by the ethnically-cleansed city of Ramle.

The occupation in 1967 of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and (until 1982) Sinai saw Israel apply the same settlement and land-grab processes, under the cover of military rule. Today, there are at least 750,000 Israelis living in about 250 illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. They have expropriated nearly half the land area, and are governed by Israeli civil law, while the three million Palestinians live under military law. In Gaza, over two million Palestinians live in an area smaller than Rutland.

When the British Army occupied Jerusalem in 1917, the population was just 50,000. By the time of the partition of the city, and of Palestine, in 1948 this had risen to 150,000, and when Israel occupied East Jerusalem in 1967 and claimed to have 'reunified' the city, the population was about 250,000. Today, the population is close to one million.

The whole period has been marked by the steady growth of the Jewish population, and the theft of Palestinian property. Many areas in West Jerusalem are still known to locals by their former Arabic names, and the efforts of the municipality to impose nationalist Hebrew names has been largely unsuccessful. Some of the most desirable homes in West Jerusalem are stolen Palestinian property; indeed, the term 'Arab house' has become a selling-point for luxury estate-agents.

Palestinians in East Jerusalem have seen the process by which the west of the city – from which many of them are

refugees – has been transformed over the past 70 years into a mono-ethnic area, and fear the same is gradually happening in the east too.

Sheikh Jarrah

Following the 1967 occupation, Israel built several new quarters and satellite towns, designed to increase the Jewish population and to cut off East Jerusalem from the rest of the Palestinian community. Until recently, this has usually involved the theft of land and denial of building rights to Palestinians, rather than direct expulsions. But what is happening today in Sheikh Jarrah represents an intensification of Zionist colonisation.

Palestinians are being evicted from homes that their families have lived in for decades, sometimes with the excuse that before 1948 these belonged to Jewish families. Many of these Palestinians still have the deeds to properties stolen in 1948, but the law does not permit them to reclaim these and evict the Israelis now living there.

Palestinians are well aware that the Israeli state is built on the ruins of their land and homes. They know that the 'Independence Parks' in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are laid out over destroyed Muslim cemeteries; that Tel Aviv University is built on the ruins of the village of Sheikh Muwanis and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on the ruins of Sheikh Badr; that even Israel's Knesset is built on stolen land, for which a Palestinian still holds the deeds.

The Nakba took place during 1947-9, but its roots go back more than 50 years before, and the process continues today, nearly 75 years later. Any attempt to resolve the Palestine conflict without recognising and redressing nearly a century and a half of Palestinian dispossession will be justly doomed to failure. The right of the Palestinian people to return, to compensation, and to restitution is not negotiable.

That is why one of the triple demands of the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement is 'respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194'.

While demonstrating against the latest Israeli atrocities, and demanding an end to the bombing of Gaza and the beating of worshippers at Al-Aqsa, we must place these latest outrages in the context of an ongoing Nakba.

Source [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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[1] The remains of the village were taken over by the Israeli state, and used as the main psychiatric hospital for Jerusalem.

[2] [Mapping the Destruction](#), Zochrot 2013.

[3] [Zionism and Its Scarecrows](#), Moshé Machover and Mario Offenberg 1978