

State of denial: the Nakba in Israeli history and today

Ilan Pappé

IN **NAQD 2005/1 No 21** , PAGES 37 TO 51

PUBLISHER **NAQD**

ISSN 1111-4371

DOI 10.3917/naqd.021.0037

Uploaded: 10/08/2014

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-naqd-2005-1-page-37?lang=en>



Discover the contents of this issue, follow the journal by email, subscribe...
Scan this QR code to access the page for this issue on Cairn.info.



Electronic distribution Cairn.info for NAQD.

You are authorized to reproduce this article within the limits of the terms of use of Cairn.info or, where applicable, the terms and conditions of the license subscribed to by your institution. Details and conditions can be found at cairn.info/copyright.

Unless otherwise provided by law, the digital use of these resources for educational purposes is subject to authorization by the Publisher or, where applicable, by the collective management organization authorized for this purpose. This is particularly the case in France with the CFC, which is the approved organization in this area.

Ilan Pappé¹
Professor of History,
Director of the European Centre for
Palestine Studies, University of Exeter.

State of denial: The Nakba in Israeli history and today²

For Israelis, 1948 is a year in which two things happened which contradict each other: on the one hand, Zionism, the Jewish national movement, claimed it fulfilled an ancient dream of returning to a homeland after 2,000 years of exile. From this perspective, 1948 was ‘a miraculous event’ in the collective Israeli Jewish memory. It constitutes a chapter in history that not only proclaims triumph and the realisation of dreams but also carries associations with moral purity and absolute justice. This is why anything that happened in that year is wedded to the most basic values of present Israeli society. Hence, the military conduct of the Jewish soldiers on the battlefield in 1948 became a model for generations to come, and the leadership’s statesmanship in those years is still a paragon for future political elites. The leaders are described as people devoted to the Zionist ideals and as men who disregarded their private interests and good for the sake of the common cause. 1948, then, is a sacred year, revered in more than one way as the formative source of all that is good in the Jewish society of Israel.

On the other hand, 1948 marked also the worst chapter in Jewish history. In that year, Jews did in Palestine what Jews had not done anywhere else in the previous 2,000 years. Even if one puts aside the historical debate about why what happened in 1948 in fact transpired, no one seems to question the enormity of the tragedy that befell the indigenous

1. He was a senior lecturer in the department of Middle Eastern History and the Department of Political Science in Haifa University, Israel between 1984 and 2006.

2. This article was published in *Speaking the truth: Zionism, Israel, and occupation* edited by Prior, Michael P and Aruri, Naseer Hasan (Olive branch press, Interlink publishing, 2005). Copyright © Ilan Pappé 2005. Reproduced with Permission from Interlink publishing. All rights reserved.

population of Palestine as a result of the emergence and success of the Zionist movement. Jews expelled, massacred, destroyed and raped in that year, and generally behaved like all the other colonialist movements operating in the Middle East and Africa ever since the beginning of the 19th century.

In normal circumstances, as Edward Said recommended in his seminal *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), painful dialogue with the past should enable a given society to digest both the most evil and the most glorious moments of its nation's history. But this could not work in a case where a moral self-image is considered to be the principal asset in the battle for public opinion, and thus the best means of surviving in a hostile environment. The way out for the Jewish society in the newly-founded state was to erase in the collective memory the unpleasant chapters of the past, and leave intact the gratifying ones. It was a conscious mechanism put in place and motion in order to solve the impossible tension arising from the two contradictory messages of the past.

Moreover, the fact that so many of the people living in Israel today lived through the 1948 period has made the task all the more difficult. 1948 is not a distant memory, and the crimes committed then are still visible in the landscape around for the present generation of Israelis to behold and comprehend. And on the Palestinian side, of course, there are still victims living, who can tell their story; and when they are gone, their descendants—who have heard the tales of the 1948 horrors over and over again—are likely to represent their point of view for generations to come. And, of course, there are people in Israel who know exactly what they did, and there are even more who know what others have done.

Nevertheless, the Israeli authorities continue to succeed in eliminating these deeds totally from the society's collective memory, while struggling vigorously against anyone trying to shed light on the repulsive chapters of the 1948 history, whether inside or outside Israel. When one examines Israeli textbooks, curricula, media, and political discourse one notices that this chapter in Jewish history—the chapter of expulsion, colonisation, massacres, rape, and the burning of villages—is totally absent. In its stead one finds chapters of heroism, glorious campaigns and amazing tales of moral courage and military competence, unheard of in any other history of a people's liberation in the 20th century.

Let us, then, begin with a brief overview of the denied chapters of the history of 1948. Some of these chapters are also missing so far from

the Palestinian collective memory. The two forms of amnesia stem, of course, from two very different ways of dealing with the past: Jewish Israelis are unwilling to acknowledge, or be accountable for what happened in 1948, whereas the Palestinians, as a community of victims, have little appetite to revisit the traumas of the past. For such distinct reasons, popular memory on both sides, and the failure, or unwillingness of professional historians to provide a true representation of the past have left us without a clear picture of the 1948 events.

THE ERASED CHAPTERS OF EVIL

The 1948 war's diplomatic manoeuvres and military campaigns are well engraved in Israeli Jewish historiography. What is missing is the chapter on the ethnic cleansing carried out by the Jews in 1948. As a result of that campaign, 500 Palestinian villages and 11 urban neighbourhoods were destroyed, 700,000 Palestinians were expelled and several thousands were massacred.³ Even today, it is hard to find a succinct summary of the planning, execution and repercussions of these tragic results.

In November 1947, the UN proposed to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state as the best solution to the conflict. That scheme was very problematic from its inception, for three major reasons. Firstly, it was presented to the two contending parties, not as a basis for negotiation but as a *fait accompli*, even though the total Palestinian rejection of the principles underpinning the plan was well known to the UN. The alternative course, as proposed by a number of UN member states, and later recognised by the American State Department as the best option, was to begin, in 1948, negotiations under the auspices of the UN that would last for several years. The scheme proposed by the UN, on the other hand, faithfully represented the Zionist strategy and policy. Imposing the will of one side, through the agencies of the UN, could not have been a recipe for peace, but rather, for war. The Palestinian side viewed the Zionist movement as the Algerians did the French colonialists. Just as it was unthinkable for the Algerians to agree to share their land with the French settlers, so it was unacceptable for the Palestinians to divide Palestine with the Zionist movement. Even the Palestinians

3. The scope of the tragedy is well described in a collection of articles in Kanni and Cortran 1999.

recognised, of course, that the cases were different, and consequently a longer period of negotiations was needed, but was not granted.

Secondly, the Jewish minority (660,000 out of two million) was offered the larger part of the land (56 percent). The imposed partition, then, would begin with an unjust proposal. Thirdly, because of the demographic distributions of the two communities—the Palestinians and the Jews—the 56 percent of the land offered to the Jews as a state included an equal number of Jews and Palestinians. All the Zionist leaders, from left to right concurred on the need to maintain a considerable Jewish majority in Palestine; in fact, the absence of such a solid majority was regarded as heralding the demise of Zionism. Even a cursory knowledge of Zionist ideology and strategy, should have clarified to the UN peace architects that such a demographic reality would lead to the virtually total cleansing of the local population from the future Jewish state.

On 10 March 1948, the *Hagana*, the main Jewish underground in Palestine, issued a military blueprint preparing the community for the expected British evacuation of Palestine, scheduled for 15 May 1948. The total Arab and Palestinian rejection led the Jewish leadership to declare the UN resolution dead to all intents and purposes. Already in May 1947, the Jewish Agency had drawn a map which included most of Palestine as a Jewish state, apart from the West Bank of today which was granted to the Transjordanians. Thus, a plan was devised on 10 March 1948, to take over these parts, which together constituted 80 percent of Palestine. The plan was called Plan D (plans A, B and C had been similar blueprints in the past formulating Zionist strategy *vis-a-vis* an unfolding and changing reality). Plan D (or *Dalet* in Hebrew) instructed the Jewish forces to cleanse the Palestinian areas falling under their control. The *Hagana* had several brigades at its disposal, and each one of them received a list of villages it had to occupy and destroy. Most of the villages were destined to be destroyed and only in very exceptional cases were the forces ordered to leave them intact (see Pappé 1992: 124-43).

The ethnic cleansing operation, beginning in December 1947, continued well into the 1950s. Villages were surrounded on three flanks, and the fourth one was left open for flight and evacuation. In some cases the tactic did not work, and many villagers remained in their houses—it was in such cases that the massacres took place. This was the principal strategy of the Judaization of Palestine.

The ethnic cleansing took place in three stages. The first one was from December 1947 until the end of the summer of 1948, when the coastal and inner plains were destroyed, and their population evicted by force. The second one took place in the autumn and winter of 1948- 49 and included Galilee and the Naqab (Negev).

By the winter of 1949, the guns in the land of Palestine were silent. The second phase of the war had ended, and with it the second stage of the cleansing had terminated. Nevertheless, the expulsion continued long after the noise of war had subsided. The third phase of the ethnic cleansing would extend beyond the war, up until 1954 in fact, when dozens of additional villages were destroyed, and their inhabitants were expelled. Of the approximately 900,000 Palestinians living in the territories designated by the UN as a Jewish state only 100,000 remained on, or near their lands and houses. Those who remained became the Palestinian minority in Israel. The rest were expelled, or fled under the threat of expulsion, and a few thousand died in massacres.

The landscape of the countryside, the rural heartland of Palestine, with its 1,000 colourful and picturesque villages was ruined. Half of the villages were erased from the face of the earth, run over by Israeli bulldozers which set to work in August 1948 when the government decided either to convert them into cultivated land, or to build new Jewish settlements on their ruins. A special committee was established to give hebraised versions of the original Arab names to the new settlements—thus, e.g., Lubyā became Lavi, and Safuriya was turned into Zipori. David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, explained that this was done as part of an attempt to prevent future claims to these villages. This process was supported also by the Israeli archaeologists who authorised the names, not so much as a take-over of a title, but rather as a form of poetic justice which restored to ‘ancient Israel’ its ancestral map (see Benvenisti 2000: 1-50). Placenames were taken from the Bible and attached to the destroyed villages.

Urban Palestine was torn apart and crushed in a similar way. The Palestinian neighbourhoods in mixed towns were wrecked, apart from a few quarters which were left empty, waiting to be populated later by incoming Jewish immigrants from Arab countries.

The Palestinian refugees spent the winter of 1948 in tent camps provided by voluntary agencies. Most of these locations were to become their permanent residences. The tents were replaced by clay huts that became the familiar feature of Palestinian existence in the Middle

East. The only hope for these refugees, at the time, was the one offered by UN resolution 194 (11 December 1948), promising them a speedy return to their homes. This is one of many pledges made by the international community to the Palestinians that remains unfulfilled until to-day.

The catastrophe that befell the Palestinians would be remembered in the collective national memory as the *Nakba* ('the disaster'), kindling the fire that would restore the Palestinians as a national movement. The self-image of this national movement would be that of an indigenous population led by a guerrilla movement striving to turn the clock back, with, as it transpired, very little success.

The Israelis' collective memory, on the other hand, would depict the war as an act of a national liberation movement, fighting both British colonialism and Arab hostility, and ultimately triumphing against all the odds. The loss of one percent of the Jewish population, of course, would cast a cloud over the joy of having achieved independence, but would not deter the will and determination of the Zionists to judaize Palestine and turn it into the future haven for world Jewry. In the event, Israel has turned out to be the most dangerous place for Jews to live in in the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, most Jews have preferred to live outside Israel, and quite a few did not identify in general with the Jewish project in Palestine, and did not wish to be associated with its dire consequences in Palestine. Nevertheless, a vociferous minority of Jews in the United States continues to give the impression that world Jewry in general condones the uprooting of the Palestinians and the other events of 1948. The illusion that the majority of Jews have legitimised whatever Israel had done in 1948, and thereafter, has dangerously compromised the relationship between Jewish minorities and the rest of society in the Western world particularly in places where public opinion since 1987 has become increasingly hostile to Israel's policies towards the Palestinians.

Professional remembering and the Nakba

Until very recently, the Israeli-Zionist representation of the 1948 war has dominated the academic world, and probably because of that also, the more general public's perception of the *Nakba*. A consequence of this is that the events of 1948 have been consistently portrayed as primarily a war between two armies. Such an assumption calls on the expertise of military historians, who can analyse the military strategy

and tactics of both sides. In such a manner, all activities, including even atrocities, are portrayed as part of the theatre of war, wherein things are judged on a moral basis in a manner very different from the way they would be treated in a non-combat situation. For instance, it is within this context that the death of civilians during a battle is accepted as an integral part of the battle, and condoned as an action deemed necessary as part of the overall attempt to win a war—although even within a war, of course, there are exceptional atrocities which are not accepted, but are treated as illegitimate in military historiography.

Portraying a conflict as a ‘war’ entails also the presumption of parity in questions of moral responsibility for the unfolding events on the ground, including in our case the massive expulsion of an indigenous population. In such a fashion, the paradigm of balancing between the two sides was deemed to be ‘academic’ and ‘objective’, while any Palestinian narrative claiming that there were in 1948, not two equally equipped armies, but, rather, an expeller and an expelled, an offender and its victims, was dismissed as sheer propaganda.

I suggest, however, that the events that unfolded after May 1948 in Israel and Palestine should be reviewed from within the paradigm of ethnic cleansing, rather than as part of military history. Historiographically, this would mean that the deeds perpetrated then were part of the domestic policies implemented by a regime *vis-a-vis* civilians—in many cases, given the fact that the ethnic cleansing took place within the designated UN Jewish state, these were operations conducted by a regime against its own citizens.

A Palestinian resident of the village of Tantura has described this new reality better than any historian. His village, situated 30 kilometres south of Haifa, on the coast, became, on 15 May 1948, part of the Jewish state, in virtue of UN partition resolution 181 (29 November 1947). On the 23 May [1948] this person, like many others, found himself in a prison camp in Umm Khaled (30 kilometres to the south of his village), and after being there for a year and half, was expelled to the West Bank. ‘A few days after my new state occupied my village, I became a prisoner of war rather than a citizen.’ He was a young boy—not an ‘enemy soldier’—at the time. He was, however, luckier than others of his age who were massacred in his village. Indeed his village Tantura was not a battlefield between two armies, but, rather, a civilian space invaded by military troops. Ethnic ideology, settlement policy and demographic strategy were the decisive factors here,

not the military plans. Massacres, whether premeditated or not, were an integral, and not an exceptional part of the ethnic cleansing act, even though history has taught us that, in most cases, expulsion was preferred to killing.

The evidence for historians in the archives of the regime committing the ethnic cleansing prevents a clear picture emerging, since the aim of the regime from the beginning was to obscure its intentions, and this is manifested in the language of the orders and that of the post event reports. This is why evidence of victims and victimisers—even if with hindsight—is so vital. In the case of the Tantura venture, for example, it was possible to reconstruct what happened mainly through the ‘bridging’ of the evidence provided by the collective and individual memories of victim and victimiser alike.

The ethnic cleansing paradigm also explains why expulsions, rather than massacres were of the essence of such crimes. As emerges from the evidence of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, within the general pattern of ethnic cleansing the sporadic massacres that were perpetrated were motivated more by revenge rather than by the acting out of a clear-cut plan. However, the scheme to create new ethnic realities was facilitated by these massacres, no less than if they had been the result of a policy of systematic expulsion.

The Jewish operation in 1948 fits into the definitions of ethnic cleansing contained in the UN reports on the Balkan wars of the 1990s. The UN council for human rights linked the wish to impose ethnic rule on a mixed area—the making of Greater Serbia—with acts of expulsion and with other violent mechanisms. The report defines acts of ethnic cleansing as including the separation of men from women, the detention of men, the blowing-up of houses and their re-population by another ethnic group later on. This was precisely the repertoire of the Jewish soldiers in the 1948 war.

Nakba memory in the public eye

That ethnic cleansing was perpetrated in 1948 and later is altogether denied both in and by Israel. The mechanism of denial is so forceful in Israel, and among its ardent supporters in the United States, that the perspective in this essay exposes much deeper questions. The most important question is the relevance of the Zionist ideology in general to the crimes committed in 1948. Others have shown already that the

massive expulsion was the inevitable outcome of a strategy dating back to the late 19th century.⁴

The ideology of ‘transfer’ emerged the moment the leaders of the Zionist movement realised that the making of a Jewish state in Palestine could not be achieved as long as the indigenous people of Palestine remained on the land. The presence of a local society and culture had been known to the founding fathers of Zionism even before the first settlers set foot on the land. Theodor Herzl, the founding father of Zionism, already predicted that his dream of a Jewish homeland in Palestine would necessitate expulsion of the indigenous population, as evidenced in one of his diary entries for 12 June 1895. Moving on from his comments on constituting a Jewish *society* in the land he got down to the question of forming a *state* for Jews. He wrote that, having occupied the land and expropriated the private property, ‘We shall endeavour to expel the poor population across the border unnoticed, procuring employment for it in the transit countries, but denying it any employment in our own country.’ Herzl added that both ‘the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly.’⁵ Ethnic cleansing was also in the minds of the leaders of the Second Aliya, a kind of Zionist Mayflower generation (Masalha 1992: 93-141).

Two means were used to alter the demographic and ‘ethnic’ reality of Palestine, and impose the Zionist programme on the local reality: the dispossession of the indigenous population from the land, and its re-populating with newcomers-i.e., expulsion and settlement. The colonisation effort was pushed forward by a movement that had not yet won regional or international legitimacy, and, therefore, that had to buy land, and create enclaves within the indigenous population. The British empire was very helpful in making this scheme into a reality. Yet, from the very beginning of the Zionist strategy, the leaders of Zionism knew that settlement was a very long and measured process, which might

4. See, in particular, Nur Masalha’s *Expulsion of the Palestinians: the Concept of ‘Transfer’ in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948* (1992), and his *A Land without a People. Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians 1949-96* (1997). Masalha’s later book, *Imperial Israel and the Palestinians: The Politics of Expansion, 1967-2000* (2000) is a comprehensive treatment of the imperial imperative within Herzlian Zionism. His most recent book, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (2003) exposes Israel’s pretence to innocence on the question of the Palestinian expulsees.

5. This is Michael Prior’s translation of ‘Die arme Bevölkerung trachten wir unbemerkt über die Grenze zu schaffen, indem wir in den Durchzugsländern Arbeit verschaffen aber in unserem eigenen Lande jederlei Arbeit verweigern’ (Prior 1999: 9)

not be sufficient to realise the revolutionary dreams of the movement, and its desire to alter the realities on the ground, and impose its own interpretation on the land's past, present and future. To achieve that, the movement needed to resort to more telling means, such as ethnic cleansing and transfer.

As means of judaizing Palestine transfer and ethnic cleansing which would be possible to achieve as suitable 'historical opportunities' presented themselves-had been closely associated in Zionist thought and practice. Appropriate circumstances could include the indifference of the international community, or the presence of such 'revolutionary conditions' as war would provide. The link between purpose and timing had been elucidated very clearly in a letter David Ben-Gurion had written to his son Amos on 5 October 1937:

We must expel Arabs and take their places ... and if we have to use force-not to dispossess the Arabs of the Negev and Transjordan, but to guarantee our own right to settle in those places-then we have force at our disposal (in Teveth 1985: 189).

This notion re-appeared ever after in Ben-Gurion's addresses to his MAPAI party members throughout the Mandatory period (see, e.g., Masalha 1992), right up to the time when such an opportune moment arose-in 1948.

It is not surprising to read in the Israeli press today, then, that Ariel Sharon considers himself to be the new Ben-Gurion, who is about to settle the Palestine question once and for all. While the media in the West may be misled to believe that this is part of a newly adopted discourse of peace on the part of a past warmonger, it is, in fact, an ever-loyal contemporary representation of a Ben-Gurionist's search for yet another revolutionary moment, that would enable to further, if not to complete, the process of de-arabizing Palestine and judaizing it, which had begun already in 1882.

The struggle against Nakba denial

Nakba denial in Israel and the West was helped by the overall negation of the Palestinians as a people-the notorious statement of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1970 epitomised this attitude. Towards the end of the 1980s, as a result of the first *Intifada*, the situation

improved somewhat, with the humanisation of the Palestinians in the Western media, with the result that they could be introduced into the field of Middle Eastern studies as a legitimate subject matter. In Israel itself, even in those years, Palestinian affairs, academically or publicly, were discussed only by academics who in the past had been intelligence experts on the subject, and who still had close ties with the security services and the IDF (Israeli Defense Force). This Israeli academic perspective effectively erased the *Nakba* as a historical event, and prevented local scholars and academics from challenging the overall denial and suppression of the catastrophe in the world outside the ivory towers of the universities.

The mechanisms of denial in Israel are very effective, because it is a comprehensive means of indoctrination, covering the whole of a citizen's life from the cradle to the grave. It ensures the state that its people do not get confused by facts and reality, or, at least, that they view reality in such a way that it does not create any moral problems.

Nevertheless, already in the 1980s, cracks were beginning to appear in the wall of denial. Even in Israel and the West, the wide exposure in the world media of Israeli war crimes ever since 1982 raised troubling questions about Israel's self-image of being 'the only democracy in the Middle East', or as a community belonging to the world of human and civil rights and universal values. But it was the emergence of critical historiography in Israel in the early 1990s-the so-called 'new history'-which relocated the *Nakba* at the centre of the academic and public debate about the conflict. This 'new history' in effect legitimised the Palestinian narrative, after it had been portrayed for years as sheer propaganda by even Western journalists, politicians and academics.

The challenge to the hitherto hegemonic Zionist presentation of the 1948 war appeared in various areas of cultural expression-in the media, academia and popular arts. It affected the discourse both in the US and Israel; but it never entered the political arena. The celebrated 'new history', in fact, was no more than a few books on 1948 written by professionals in English-e.g., Flapan 1979 and 1987; Kimmerling 1983; Masalha 1992; Morris 1987, 1990, and 1993; Pappé 1988 and 1992; Segev 1986 and 1993; Shahak 1975; Shapira 1992; Shlaim 1988-only some of which were translated into Hebrew. These, nevertheless, made it possible, for anyone wishing to do so, to learn how the Jewish state had been built on the ruins of the indigenous people of Palestine, whose livelihood, houses, culture and land had been systematically destroyed.

Public response in Israel at the time moved between indifference and the total rejection of the findings of the ‘new historians’. It was only through elements of the media and the educational system that people were stimulated, somewhat hesitantly, to take a new look at the past. Meanwhile, however, from above, the establishment did everything it could to quash these early buds of Israeli self-awareness, and the recognition of Israel’s role in the Palestinian catastrophe, a recognition that would, in the event, have helped Israelis considerably to understand better the continued deadlock in the peace process.

Outside the academic world, in the West in general, and in the US and Israel in particular, this shift in the academic perception had very little impact on the mainstream media and the political scene. In both America and in Jewish Israel, terms such as ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘expulsion’ are still today totally alien to politicians, journalists and common people alike. The relevant chapters of the past that would justify categorically the application of such terms to Israeli origins are either distorted in the recollection of people, or are totally absent.

A brief look at Western public opinion is illuminating. One notes that new initiatives were taken in several European countries in the course of the 1990s to relocate the history and future refugees. It is too early yet to judge how much such efforts—undertaken in the main by pro-Palestinian NGOs—would affect the policies of the various governments. Even in the United States there were signs of movement in a similar direction, when, in April 2000, the first ever American ‘Right of Return’ conference was convened, with some 1,000 representatives from all over the country in attendance.⁶ But, so far, such efforts have failed to impinge upon Capitol Hill, the *New York Times*, or the White House, irrespective of who was in office over the last fifteen years. However, the events of 11 September 2001 have so far put an end to the new trend, and have promoted the revival of anti Palestinianism in the US.

NAKBA DENIAL AND THE PALESTINE-ISRAEL PEACE PROCESS

But even before the U-turn in American public opinion after 11 September 2001, the movement of academic critique in Israel and the West, with its fresh view on the 1948 ethnic cleansing, was not a particularly impressive player on the stage. It made no impact whatsoever

6. The conference papers, with a number of additional invited papers, were published in Aruri 2001.

on the Palestine/Israel peace agenda, even though Palestine was the focus of peace efforts precisely at the time when the fresh voices were being heard. At the centre of these peace efforts was the Oslo Accord that began to roll in September 1993. The concept behind this process, as in all previous peace endeavours in Palestine, was a Zionist one. Hence, the peace process of the 1990s, the Oslo Accord, was conducted according to the Israeli perception of peace, from which, of course, the *Nakba* was totally absent. The Oslo formula was architected by Israeli thinkers from the Jewish peace camp, people who ever since 1967 had played an important role in the Israeli public scene. They were institutionalised in an extra-parliamentary movement 'Peace Now', and had several parties on their side in the Israeli parliament. In all their previous discourses and plans these 'Peace Now' people had totally evaded the 1948 issue, and had sidelined the refugee question. They did the same in 1993, and this time with the dire consequences of raising hopes of peace, as they seemed to find a Palestinian partner which would embrace a concept of peace that altogether buried 1948 and its victims.

With the final stages approaching, the Palestinians realised that, in addition to not witnessing a genuine Israeli withdrawal from the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, there was no proposed solution to the refugee question on offer. In frustration they rebelled. The climax of the Oslo negotiations at Camp David—the summit meeting between the then Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Barak, and Yasir Arafat in the summer of 2000—gave the false impression that nothing less than the end of the conflict was on offer. The somewhat naive Palestinian negotiators put the *Nakba*, and Israel's responsibility for it, at the top of the Palestinian list of demands. This, of course, was totally rejected by the Israeli team which succeed in enforcing its point of view on the summit. But to the Palestinian side's credit, we can acknowledge that, at least for a while, the catastrophe of 1948 was brought to the attention of a local, regional, and, to a certain extent global, audience. Yet, it is clear that the continued denial of the *Nakba* in the peace process was the main explanation for the failure of the Camp David summit, the consequence of which was the second uprising in the occupied territories.

Clearly, it was necessary to remind those concerned with the Palestine question, not only in Israel, but also in the US, and even in Europe, that the Palestine/Israel conflict involved more than the future of the occupied territories. It also had to contend with the fact of the Palestinian refugees, who had been forced from their homes in 1948. The Israelis had succeeded earlier in sidelining the issue of the refugees' rights from

the Oslo Accords, an aim facilitated by ill-managed Palestinian diplomacy and strategy.

Indeed, the *Nakba* had been so efficiently kept off the agenda of the peace process that when it suddenly appeared on it, the Israelis felt as if a Pandora's box had been prised open in front of them. The worst fear of the Israeli negotiators was that there was a possibility that Israel's responsibility for the 1948 catastrophe would now become a negotiable issue, and this 'danger' was, accordingly, immediately confronted. In the Israeli media and parliament (Knesset), a consensual position was formulated: no Israeli negotiator would be allowed even to discuss the right of return of the Palestinian refugees to the homes they had occupied before 1948. The Knesset passed a law to this effect, and Barak made a public commitment to it on the stairs of the plane that was taking him to Camp David.

It can be seen, then, that a public debate on the issue of the *Nakba*, whether conducted in Israel itself or in the US, its imperial protector, could open up questions concerning the moral legitimacy of the Zionist project as a whole. The mechanism of denial, therefore, was crucial, not only for defeating the counter-claims made by Palestinians in the peace process, but, far more importantly, for disallowing any significant debate on the very essence and moral foundations of Zionism. But after the horrid events of 11 September 2001 and the outbreak of the second *Intifada*, with its waves of suicide bombers, the cracks that had already appeared in academia and were beginning to break into public discourse began immediately to 'close-up'. Soon the practice of past denials re-emerged in Israel, with added strength and conviction.

In the US, an unholy coalition of nee-conservatives, Christian Zionists and AIPAC-the main pro-Israeli Jewish lobby in the States has had, since 2001 in particular, a firm hold over the American media's presentation of the conflict in Palestine. That coalition's portrayal of the conflict-an altogether innocent, civilised society under siege by terrorists-enables Israel to get away with both its past behaviour and its present policies, which, if perpetrated by any other state would surely merit for it the designation 'pariah state'.

FUTURE PROSPECTIVE

As I review the attempts that I have made--I have been involved personally in the struggle against *Nakba* denial in Israel, and, together with

others, have attempted to bring the *Nakba* onto the Israeli public agenda—a very mixed picture emerges. I detect serious cracks in the wall of denial and repression that surrounds the issue of the *Nakba* in Israel, that have come about as a result of the debate on the ‘new history’ in Israel, and of the new political agenda of the Palestinians in Israel. The new atmosphere has also been helped by a clarification of the Palestinian position on the refugees issue towards the end of the Oslo Peace Process. As a result, notwithstanding more than fifty years of systemic government suppression, it is becoming more and more difficult in Israel to deny the expulsion and destruction of the Palestinians in 1948. However, this relative success has also brought with it two negative reactions, which were formulated after the outbreak of the *Aqsa Intifada*.

The Israeli political establishment was the first to react. The Sharon government, through its minister of education, has undertaken the systematic removal of any textbook, or school syllabus, that refers to the *Nakba*, even marginally. Similar instructions have been given to the public broadcasting authorities. The second reaction has been even more disturbing, and has encompassed wider sections of the public. Although a very considerable number of Israeli politicians, journalists and academics have ceased to deny what happened in 1948, they have nonetheless also been willing to justify it publicly, not only in retrospect, but also as a prescription for the future. Thus, the idea of ‘transfer’ has entered Israeli political discourse openly for the first time, portraying ‘population transfer’ as legitimate, being the most effective means of dealing with the Palestinian ‘problem’.

Indeed, if I were asked to nominate what best characterises the current Israeli response to the *Nakba*, I would stress the growing popularity of the transfer option in the Israeli public mood and thought. The *Nakba*—the expulsion of the Palestinians from Palestine—now seems to many in the centre of the political map as an inevitable and justifiable consequence of the Zionist project in Palestine. If there is any lament, it is that the expulsion was not completed. The fact that even an Israeli ‘new historian’ such as Benny Morris now subscribes to the view that the expulsion was inevitable, and should have been more comprehensive in 1948, helps to legitimise future Israeli plans for further ethnic cleansing.

‘Population Transfer’ is now the official, moral option recommended by one of Israel’s most prestigious academic centres, the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Herzliya, which advises the government.

It has appeared as a policy proposal in papers presented to their government by senior Labour Party ministers. It is openly advocated by university professors, media commentators, and very few now dare to condemn it. This is manifestly true of historians, Professor Benny Morris of Beer Sheba University and Professor Yoav Gelber of Haifa University, and of geographer Professor Arnon Sofer of Haifa University, and indirectly the case also with Professor Shlomo Aviner of Hebrew University, as well as of Ephraim Sneh of the Labour Party, who suggest the annexation of the Palestinian parts of Israel to a Palestinian state. And, lately, even the leader of the majority in the American House of Representatives, Dick Armey, has openly endorsed it (2 May 2002).

Thus, the circle is being closed, almost before our very eyes. When Israel took almost 80 percent of Palestine in 1948, it did so through settlement, and the ethnic cleansing of the original Palestinian population. The country now has a prime minister who enjoys wide public support, and who wants to determine by force the future of the remaining 20 percent. He has, as did all his predecessors, from Labour and Likud alike, resorted to settlement as the best means for doing this, adding, as his unique contribution, the destruction of an independent Palestinian infrastructure. He senses-and he may not be wrong in this-that the public mood in Israel would allow him to go even further, should he wish to do so. He could emulate the ethnic cleansing of 1948, this time not only by driving the Palestinians out of the occupied territories, but, if necessary, also the one million Palestinians living within the pre-1967 borders of Israel.

In such an atmosphere, then, the *Nakba* is not so much denied in Israel, as cherished. Nevertheless, the full story of 1948 needs to be told to the Israelis, as there may still be some among that state's population who are sensitive about their country's past and present conduct. This segment of the population should be alerted to the fact that horrific deeds were concealed from them about Israeli actions in 1948, and they should be told, too, that such deeds could easily now be repeated, if they, and others, do not act to stop them before it is too late.

The struggle against the denial of the *Nakba* in Israel is now very much the agenda of certain Palestinian groups, both inside and outside Israel, committed to the cause. Since the fortieth anniversary of the *Nakba* in 1988, the Palestinian minority in Israel has associated, in a way that it never did previously, its collective and individual memories of the catastrophe with the general Palestinian situation, and with

their predicament in particular. This association has been manifested through an array of symbolic gestures, such as memorial services during *Nakba* commemoration day, organised tours to deserted or formerly Palestinian villages in Israel, seminars on the past, and extensive interviews with *Nakba* survivors in the press.

In Israel itself, through its political leaders, NGOs and the media, the Palestinian minority has been able to force the wider public to take notice of the *Nakba*. This re-emergence of the *Nakba* as a topic for public debate will also disable any future peace plans that will be built on *Nakba* denial, including, of course, the various plans and initiatives of 2003: the Road Map, the Ayalon-Nusseibeh initiative, and the Geneva Accords.

REFERENCES

- Aruri, Naseer (ed.). 2001. *Palestinian Refugees and their Right of Return*. London and Sterling VA: Pluto Press
- Benvenisti, Meiron. 2000. *Sacred Landscape.-The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Flapan, Simha. 1979. *Zionism and the Palestinians 1917-1947*. London: Croom Helm
- Flapan, Simha. 1987. *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*. London and Sydney: Croom Helm
- Karni, Ghada and Eugene Cortran (eds). 1999. *The Palestinian Exodus, 1948-1988*, London: Ithaca
- Kimmerling, Baruch. 1983. *Zionism and Territory. The Socio-Territorial Dimensions of Zionist Politics*. Berkeley: University of California, Institute of International Studies (Research Series, No. 51)
- Masalha, Nur. 1992. *Expulsion of the Palestinians: the Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948*. Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies
- Masalha, Nur. 1997. *A Land without a People. Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians 1949-96*. London: Faber and Faber
- Masalha, Nur. 2000. *Imperial Israel and the Palestinians: 71, e Politics of Expansion, 1967-2000*. London: Pluto
- Masalha, Nur. 2003. *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. London and Sterling VA: Pluto Press

- Morris, Benny. 1987. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Morris, Benny. 1990. *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Morris, Benny. 1993. *Israel's Border Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Pappé, Ilan. 1988. *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1948-1951*. London: Macmillan
- Pappé, Ilan. 1992. *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948-1951*. London and New York: I B Tauris
- Prior, Michael. 1999. *Zionism and the State of Israel: A Moral Inquiry*. London and New York: Routledge
- Segev, Tom. 1986. *The First Israelis* (English Language Editor, Arlen N. Weinstein).
– New York: The Free Press/London: Collier Macmillan
- Segev, Tom. 1993. *The Seventh Million. The Israelis and the Holocaust*. (trans. by Haim Watzan). New York: Hill and Wang
- Shahak, Israel. 1975 (2nd ed.). *Report: Arab Villages destroyed in Israel*. Jerusalem: Shahak
- Shapira, Anita. 1992. *Land and Power. The Zionist Resort to Force*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Shlaim, Avi. 1988. *Collusion across the Jordan. King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Teveth, Shabtai. 1985. *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press