

# The Nakba — Israel's 'War of Independence' and Palestine's catastrophe



## The beginnings: Ottoman Palestine and British duplicity

**P**alestine was a part of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire until 1918 when that empire fell at the end of the first World War. Just prior to this, in 1916, the British Government had made a secret agreement with France (the Sykes-Picot Agreement) to share the Ottoman Empire between the two countries, part of Britain's share being Palestine. At the same time, Britain promised the largely 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

**T**he European Zionist enterprise had its roots in the 19th century; it was partly a religious and partly a militaristic and nationalist movement to establish

a Jewish state in Palestine. Thus there were two peoples who claimed the same land: the Palestinians who have lived there for centuries and the Zionists who claimed that God had given the land to them and that they needed it as a refuge from anti-semitism. Moreover, the Zionist ambition was to achieve a purely Jewish state in which Arab citizens would not be welcome — a policy we now identify as racism.

The Zionist leadership knew that the land was already populated and realised that the Palestinians were not about to give their land away voluntarily. The policy was therefore to seize the land by force and drive out or kill the indigenous population — a policy we now call ethnic cleansing.

## Colonial rule under the British Mandate

**F**rom 1918 to 1948 Britain held a mandate, first from the League of Nations and then from the United Nations, to govern Palestine as a British colony. During this time the country developed considerably in comparison with the surrounding countries; educational and medical services were established; roads, railways and mail services were greatly improved. There was an active agricultural economy which, by 1935, was exporting 65% of its produce and was relatively prosperous. At first, Britain's declared aim was to create an integrated Arab /Jewish society but at the same time it supported the Zionist plan to create an exclusively Jewish state and it

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.

tolerated large-scale Jewish immigration. This created intense resentment in the Arab population. Eventually, but inevitably, resentment erupted in violence between the Arab majority population and the Jewish minority population.

When severe violence erupted in 1936 it was brutally repressed by the British, who by this time had concluded that its stated objective of peaceful

coexistence between Jews and Arabs 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 Jews 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 Hitler. After the War the political problem was handed over to the United Nations which, in 1947, produced a partition plan. The population of Mandate Palestine in 1948 was 1,750,000, of which only 31% were Jewish, and Jews owned no more than 6% of the land. However, 55% of the land was awarded to the Jews, leaving just 45% for the Palestinian state.

## The Unilateral Declaration of the State of Israel

The UN partition plan was accepted by the Zionists (though only as a temporary tactical measure) but was rejected outright by the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab countries. The plan itself was illegal because the inhabitants of the land concerned had not been consulted: had they been, the plan would certainly have been rejected. From March 1948 the Zionists put a carefully prepared plan into effect (Plan D), the purpose of which was to seize all the military hardware and installations left by the British, 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 therefore was both immoral and illegal.

### 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.”*

Israel declared itself an independent state on May 14, 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.

## 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, Jewish military units began the process of ethnic cleansing. A month later the first Palestinian village was erased. Violence between the two groups gradually increased and as many as 70,000 Palestinians had fled their homes before full-scale military activity began in March 1948, when Plan D was fully implemented.

Details of the Israeli atrocities indicate that they were as inhuman and violent as those that have been roundly condemned by the International Community in other conflicts. On April 9, 1948, Zionist forces that included the notorious Stern Gang and Irgun units entered the village of Deir Yassin and sprayed the houses with machine-gun fire, killing many of the inhabitants. The survivors were then collected together and murdered in cold blood. The death toll included 30 babies. Between 100 and 200 Palestinians were murdered at Deir Yassin (the Irgun boasted of 256) and the village was razed to the ground. The scale of this operation was loudly (and proudly) proclaimed by the Zionists in order to demonstrate to other Palestinians just what would happen to them if they did not take flight.

Menachem Begin, head of the Irgun terrorist organization and later a Prime minister of Israel exulted:

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

In other villages the inhabitants were allowed to leave their houses, but not to take their possessions with them, before their homes were blown up and their village flattened. There were many other brutal massacres, for example on May 22, 200 men between the ages of 13 and 30 were murdered in cold blood at Tantura.



Refugees crossing the Jordan river in 1948

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.”*

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 Jewish 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 or killed, reducing the Arab population from 45% to just 4%.

A witness to the flight from Haifa reported:

*“Men stepped on their friends and women on their own children. 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.”*

A similar fate befell Jaffa. The Galilean town of Safad had been home to 9,500 Arabs and 2,400 Jews, but the entire Arab population was driven out. Similar stories were repeated throughout Palestine. By the time the Mandate was over one 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; they were no match for the well-trained and well-armed Israeli forces.

By the time that a final cease-fire had been established in 1949 Israel had acquired 78% of Palestine, from which it had expelled over 750,000 Palestinians, and more than 400 Palestinian villages had been erased.

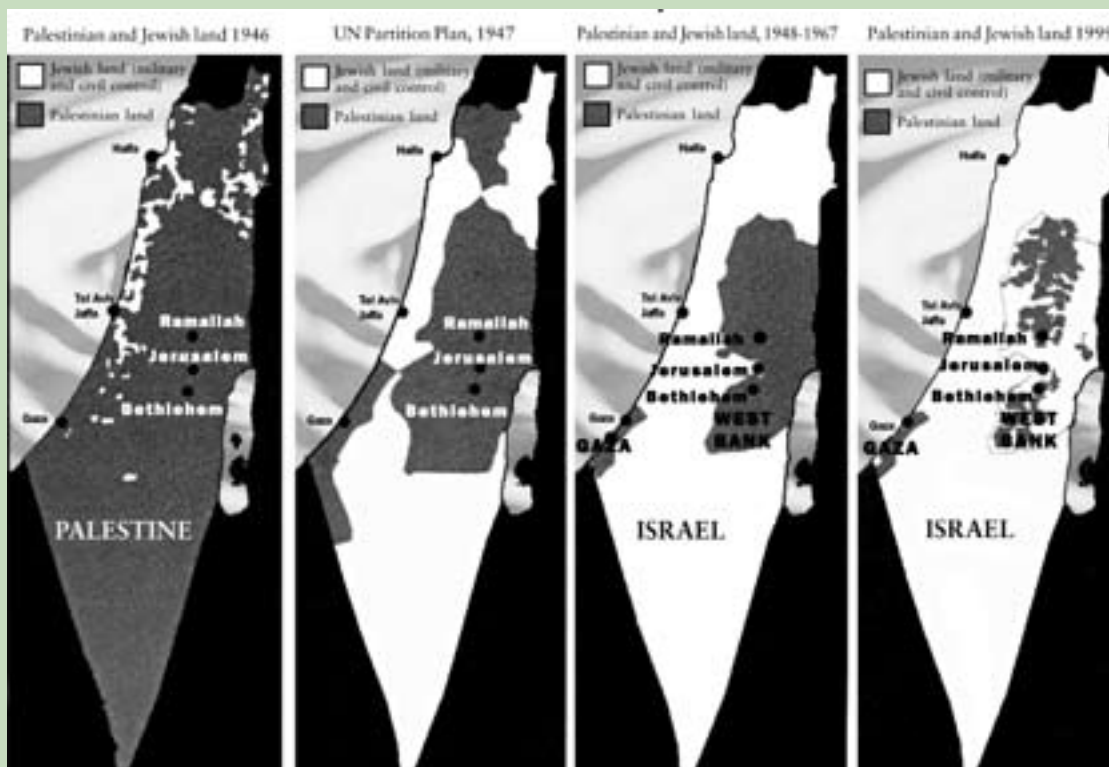
## Refugees from the Nakba

Many of the three quarters of a million 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, which they can see being used by the people whose armies drove them out. Israel has continued to maintain its ruthless quest

for land without Arabs: in June 1967 it occupied the remainder of Mandate Palestine — the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza — and proceeded to confiscate Palestinian land, to create further huge Jewish settlements. Each home demolition and each land grab increases the number of Palestinian refugees.

Palestinians are gradually being expelled from Jerusalem, despite its designation as an international *corpus separatum* by the UN, and

## 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*

Israel has walled the city off from the rest of the West Bank.

Gaza has been converted into the largest prison camp in history, with frequent violent incursions by the Israeli army. In the worst onslaught since 1948, in December 2008 – 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; Israel has subsequently blocked the entry of building materials, fuel and other essential goods. Teams of international lawyers are currently collecting evidence for war crimes tribunals against Israeli military and political leaders.

## The Nakba continues

Israel continues to refuse to allow the 2–3 million Palestinians who are now refugees in the surrounding countries 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 members of Netanyahu's government have openly

## 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...”*

stated that Palestinian Arab 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.

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### 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 supporting the occupation
- 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 Euro MP 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)*

*For boycott information:*  
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