The Zionist Project in Palestine: Colonial Settlement, Land Robbery and Ethnic Cleansing

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About 8,000 Jews were living in Palestine before 1882. Creation of a “Jewish State” in such a small country with such a small Jewish community, which owned virtually no land to settle on, was practically impossible.  Consequently, building an exclusive Jewish State in Palestine implied bringing Jews from the four corners of the world, acquisition of the land and ethnically cleansing it from its indigenous Arab population.

COLONIAL SETTLEMENT:

*Hovevei Zion*, the precursor of the Zionist Organization, sponsored the first wave of pioneer settlers, which started in 1882 and ended in 1903.  About 35,000 immigrants arrived in Palestine within this wave.  Almost half of them left within several years of their arrival.

Eliezer Ben Yehuda, a fanatical Zionist, was one of the settlers of the first wave. When his ship arrived in Jaffa in 1882, he found himself watching the Arab passengers on board and suddenly he realized that they were far more at home in the “Promised Land” than he was.  Eventually he found that he could not swallow his doubts so he left “Eretz Yisrael” and became a Territorialist, believing that the Jews should seek a country in a land other than Palestine.  (Karen Armstrong,*Holy War: The Crusades and their Impact on Today’s World.* Macmillan, London, 1988, pp. 60-64)

The second wave started in 1904 and ended with the break of WWI in 1914.  It brought about 40,000 immigrants to Palestine.  As with the first wave, nearly half of them left the country in later years.

According to Bar-Zohar, when the first immigrants from the Russian Zionist societies came to Palestine “it was no land flowing with milk and honey that greeted them…  The hard labor, malaria, and hunger claimed many victims.  Of those who survived, many decided to leave that accursed land on the first available ship.  Later, Ben-Gurion was to contend that of every ten immigrants who arrived with the Second *Aliyah*, nine later left the country”.  (Michael Bar-Zohar,*Ben-Gurion: A Biography.*  New York: Delacorte Press, 1977, pp. 13-14)

This 2nd wave included a number of Socialist Zionists.  Prominent among the new Socialist Zionist immigrants was Ben Gurion.  Another socialist Zionist, Yitzhak Ben Zvi (2nd President of the State of Israel) arrived in Palestine within this wave as well.

The 3rd wave, which started in 1919 and ended in 1923, brought another 40,000 settlers.  As conditions improved under the British Mandate in Palestine, few of them returned to their countries of origin.

The 4th wave, 1924 – 1929, brought     82,000 immigrants of who 23,000 left in later years.

In order to boost Jewish immigration to Palestine, the Zionist Organization entered into negotiations with the Nazis to facilitate emigration of German Jews.  As a result of these negotiations, an agreement was signed, which allowed tens of thousands of German Jews to immigrate to Palestine.  The 5th wave of Jewish immigrants, which took place during the period 1929-1939, brought 250,000 settlers and the 6th brought another 150,000 who arrived in Palestine between 1939 and 1948.  (For a detailed discussion of the Transfer Agreement, see: Edwin Black, *The Transfer Agreement: The Untold Story of the Secret Pact Between the Third Reich & Jewish Palestine.*  New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.  London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1984)

The total number of Jews in Palestine in 1946 was 608,225 and the total land owned by them was 1,585,365 donums, which represented less than 7% of the area of Palestine. (Walid Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest*, Appendix I, pp.841-843)

The ethnic cleansing operations perpetrated during the 1948 war and the Absentees Law as well as the Law of Return issued in 1950 facilitated confiscation of Arab homes and lands to build settlements for more colonial settlers who flooded Palestine following the creation of Israel.

LAND ROBBERY:

A pre-meditated and pre-planned campaign of land theft started shortly following the ethnic operations of 1948.  A law was passed in the Israeli Knesset in 1950, the “Absentees Property Law”.  According to this law, any body that was not present directly before, during or after the war was, regardless of the reason, defined as “absentee” and his land as surrendered.  Thus it was confiscated.

About 20 percent of the Palestinians in Israel were internally displaced in the 1948 war – in other words, while remaining in Israel, have been prevented from returning to their homes and villages.  These displaced persons were considered as “absentees” and became refugees in their own country while their lands were confiscated.

More significantly was the fact that Palestinian Arabs who were driven out or obliged to leave during the war in 1948 were not allowed to return to their homes and lands.  Those who tried to return were considered “infiltrators” and were shot to death by Unit 101 of the IDF, a company of paratroopers, which was formed under the command of Ariel Sharon.

Another law, “The Land Requisition Law”, was passed in 1953 to “legitimize” the expropriation of Arab lands.  According to this law acts of theft and robbery of land were legal.

Moshe Smilansky, one of the pilgrim fathers of Zionism, published an article stating that: “When we came back to our country after having been evicted two thousand years ago, we called ourselves ‘daring’ and we rightly complained before the whole world that the gates of the country were shut.  And now when they [Arab refugees] dared to return to their country where they lived for one thousand years before they were evicted or fled, they are called ‘infiltrees’ and shot in cold blood.  Where are, Jews?  Why do we not at least, with a generous hand, pay compensation to these miserable people?  Where to take the money from? But we build palaces…instead of paying a debt that cries unto us from earth and heaven…  And do we sin only against the refugees?  Do we not treat the Arabs who remain with us as second-class citizens?  Did a single Jewish farmer raise his hand in the parliament in opposition to a law that deprived Arab peasants of their land? How does sit solitary, in the city of Jerusalem, the Jewish conscience!”  (*From Haven to Conquest,*p. 834)

ETHNIC CLEANSING:

Subjecting Palestinian Arabs to ethnic cleansing was an integral part of the implicit and explicit political Zionist thought and parlance all along.

In his diaries, Herzl made it clear that “the existing landed property was to be gently expropriated, any subsequent resale to the original owners was prohibited, and all immovables had to remain in exclusively Jewish hands.  The poor population was to be worked across the frontier ‘unbemerkt’ (surreptitiously)…  This population was to be refused all employment in the land of its birth… In 1901, the 5th Zionist Congress founded the Jewish National Fund.  According to the by-laws of the JNF, acquired land became inalienable Jewish property and could no longer be sold or leased to non-Jews…”  (Documented article published by L.M.C. Van Der Hoeven Leonhard in *Libertas*, (Holland) Lustrum, number 1960, pp. 1-5, reproduced in Walid Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest*, pp. 115-124.  See also, Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999*.  New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, pp. 21-22)

David Ben-Gurion believed that the Zionists had to exert pressure to force the British to act.  But if necessary, he wrote in his diary, “We must ourselves prepare to carry out the removal of the Palestinians”. (Michael Palumbo, *The Palestinian Catastrophe*, p. 4, citing Ben-Gurion’s Diary – published in Hebrew – vol. IV, p. 299)

In a report to the Jewish Agency Executive on 12 June 1938, Ben-Gurion stated “I am for a compulsory transfer; I don’t see anything immoral in it…”  (Simha Flapan, *Zionism and the Palestinians,* London: Croom Helm, 1979, p. 263)

Encouraged by the possibility of establishing a Jewish state as a result of the partition plan proposed by the Peel Commission in its report published in July 1937, a “Population Transfer Committee” was appointed by the Jewish Agency to come up with plans to rid the Jewish State of its Palestinian Arabs.  Joseph Weitz, director of the Jewish National Fund, who served on the Population Transfer Committee, developed a plan for this purpose.  In his report, Weitz wrote that the transfer of the Arab population from the Jewish areas “does not serve only one aim – to diminish the Arab population.  It also serves a second purpose by no means less important, which is to evacuate land now cultivated by Arabs and thus release it for Jewish settlement.”  (Michael Palumbo, *The Palestinian Catastrophe*, p. 4, citing CZA, Minutes of the Population Transfer Committee, 22 Nov., 1937)

The Peel Commission’s partition plan, which proposed to divide the country between the “Jewish colonists and the indigenous Arab population” was discussed in the meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive held on 12 June 1938.  Partition as proposed by the Peel Commission would leave over 200,000 Arabs in the proposed “Jewish State”.  The Jewish Agency Executive was discussing the problem of how best to get rid of these Arabs.  The seventy-five year old Zionist leader, Menahem Ussishkin, stated that “There is no hope that this new Jewish State will survive, to say nothing of develop, if the Arabs are as numerous as they are today.”  Berl Katznelson of Ben-Gurion’s Mapai party saw only disaster in a Jewish State with a large Arab minority and proposed a development plan to eliminate the Palestinian Arabs.  He urged negotiations, with neighboring Arab States that might be persuaded to receive the expellees. (Michael Palumbo, *The Palestinian Catastrophe,* pp. 1-2, citing CZA, Executive Proceedings, 12 June 1938)

Other “Transfer Committees” were appointed during the 1948 war.  An unofficial “self-appointed” committee, headed by Joseph Weitz, started its activities as of the end of March 1948.  After the creation of the state of Israel the Provisional Government appointed an official committee the recommendations of which were submitted to Ben-Gurion in due course and were being implemented under the cover of war.

One of the key questions from June 1967 onwards was not whether Israel should maintain a presence in the newly acquired territories, but how it could be maintained without adding over one million Palestinians to the Arab minority of Israel.  The old Zionist dilemma of non-Jews in a Jewish state had to be resolved.  Against this background of Zionist expansionism, transfer ideas were revived in public debates, in popular songs, in articles in the Hebrew press and, most importantly, in cabinet discussions and government schemes and policies.  (Nur Masalha, *A Land Without a People: Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians 1949 – 96.*  London: Faber and Faber ltd., 1997, pp. 60 – 61)

New proposals for ethnic cleansing were outlined in an article entitled “*A Strategy for Israel in the 1980s*”*,* which appeared in the World Zionist Organization’s periodical *Kivunim* in February 1982.  The article was written by Oded Yinon, a journalist and analyst of Middle Eastern affairs and former senior Foreign Ministry official.

In his article, Yinon called for Israel to bring about the dissolution and fragmentation of the Arab states into a mosaic of ethnic groupings.  He called for a policy of Israel that aims at bringing about “the dissolution of Jordan; the termination of the problem of the [occupied] territories densely populated with Arabs west of the [River] Jordan; and emigration from the territories, and economic-demographic freeze in them.”  He added, “we have to be active in order to encourage this change speedily, in the nearest time”.

Yinon believed, like many advocates of transfer in Israel, that “Israel has made a strategic mistake in not taking measures [of mass expulsion] towards the Arab population in the new territories during and shortly after the [1967] war…. Such a line would have saved us the bitter and dangerous conflict ever since which we could have already then terminated by giving Jordan to the Palestinians.”

Moreover, Yinon suggested to encompass the whole Arab world, including the imposition of a *Pax Israela* on, and the determination of the destiny of, Arab societies: re invading Sinai and “breaking Egypt territorially into separate geographical districts.”  As for the Arab East: “…the total disintegration of Lebanon into five regional, localized governments as the precedent for the entire Arab world…the dissolution of Syria, and later Iraq, into districts of ethnic and religious minorities….”  (Ibid, pp. 196 – 198, citing Oded Yinon, *A Strategy for Israel in the 1980s,*[Hebrew], *Kivunim,* Jerusalem, No. 14, February 1982, pp. 53 – 58)

Failure of the different efforts to “transfer” all the Palestinians did not mean that such efforts were abandoned.  Benjamin Netanyahu told Bar-Ilan University students on 16 November 1989 that the government had failed to exploit internationally favorable situations, to carry out “large-scale” expulsions at a time when “the damage [to Israel’s public relations] would have been relatively small…”  Netanyahu was referring to the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 when world attention and the media were focused on China.  He added, “I still believe that there are opportunities to expel many people.”   Netanyahu later denied making the remarks but the*Jerusalem Post* presented a tape recording of his speech. (Ibid, p. 190, citing *The Jerusalem Post,*19 November, 1989; Michael Palumbo, *Imperial Israel: The History of the Occupation of the West Bank and* Gaza, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1990 pp. 302 – 303)

After decades of Zionist efforts, Arab “demographic threat” was still haunting Israel.  A conference was held on 19-20 December 2000 at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya to deal with the issue.  The conference was the first of what became a series of annual conferences dealing with the strength and security of Israel.  A major part of the recommendations was related with the ‘demographic threat’ posed by the Arab citizens of Israel.  (For a detailed account on the conference and its recommendations see: *The Herzliya Conference on the Balance of National Strength and Security in Israel*, Journal of Palestine Studies, # 121, Volume XXXI, Number 1, Autumn 2001, pp. 50-61)