

## **Zionism and the Nakba: The Mainstream Narrative, the Oppressed Narratives, and the Israeli Collective Memory**

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The Israelis call what happened in Palestine in 1948 “the War of Independence” (*Milhemet ha-‘atzma’ut*) whereas the Palestinians refer to it as “al-Nakba” (the catastrophe). The contrast between these two names is telling, for it reveals the presence of two conflicting memories of 1948, Jewish and Palestinian, which are not politically equal. While Israel has consistently justified the establishment of the Jewish state in its official narrative, it has rarely mentioned the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem and the destruction of over 400 Palestinian villages in 1948, thus deliberately denying Palestinian memories of the Nakba. Only in the late 1980s was this denial criticized and the rewriting of the 1948 history started by the New Historians, who dramatically shattered longstanding myths of the 1948 War and the Palestinian exodus.

Against this historical background, I try to explain how the Nakba has been addressed in the Israeli (Zionist) mainstream narrative in order to shed a light on the basic logic and assumptions underlying the mainstream narrative of the Palestinian exodus. I shall also explore the dissident narratives related to the Nakba, which have long been neglected due to their contradictions with the mainstream narrative, and reflect on the meaning of the new narratives from the late 1980s to the present.

### **1. The Mainstream Narrative and the Myths of 1948**

The Israeli mainstream narrative on 1948 can be summarized as follows: the Jews accepted the UN Partition Resolution on 29 November 1947, but the Arabs rejected it, demanding instead the establishment of an Arab state in all of Palestine. The Arabs further attacked the Jewish community in Palestine, which triggered a civil war. On 15 May 1948 the Arab states invaded Israel in an attempt to wipe out the new state. The Palestinians voluntarily “fled” their villages in accordance with orders given by the Arab armies, ignoring the Jewish call to them to stay put. There was no policy of expulsion on the Jewish side and the Palestinians became refugees of their own accord. The Arab states, furthermore, are responsible for perpetuating the refugee problem by refusing to absorb the refugees and by using the refugee problem for anti-Israel propaganda. Hence, Israel has no responsibility for the refugee problem, which is a

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product of the Arab-initiated war of aggression.

This argument is directly challenged by the New Historians. Although not in agreement on all issues, the New Historians have presented a totally different picture based on their research into newly declassified Hebrew archives. According to the picture, the Jews accepted the UN Resolution only for tactical reasons and had no intention of accepting a small Jewish state. For the Zionist leadership, the 1948 War was a war for territorial expansion and Judaization of the new state, as well as for self-defense. During the 1948 War many Palestinians were expelled by the Jewish forces and did not abandon their villages voluntarily, although the question of whether or not a comprehensive policy of expulsion existed still remains highly controversial.

Bearing in mind the myths surrounding the mainstream narrative described above, I shall first analyze three aspects of this narrative: omissions and silence, indirect justification, and direct justification of what happened to the Palestinians in 1948.

### **(1) Omissions and Silence**

Omissions and silence regarding the Nakba can be seen, for example, in official information pamphlets such as *Facts about Israel*. Quoting from its 1985 version, one finds a typical representation of the argument:

**Causes** (of the War of Independence): Arab rejection of November 1947 UN Partition Plan gives rise to escalating attacks on Jewish community in Palestine [...].

**Responses:** On 15 May 1948 the regular armies of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and a Saudi Arabian contingent invade the new state [...] IDF, although poorly armed and vastly outnumbered, repulse Arab assault.

**Outcome:** By July 1949 separate armistice agreements signed with Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, based on cease-fire lines. Armistice agreements intended to facilitate transition to permanent peace [*Facts about Israel* 1985: 39].

In the 1992 version of *Facts about Israel*, one finds the following:

The number of Arabs in the country dropped, as nearly 600,000 had left during the War of Independence and only about 167,000 chose to stay or had returned under a family reunification program. With the arrival of a further 300,000 Jews from Arab countries over the next few years, a virtual exchange of populations was effected between Jews from Arab lands and Arabs from Israel [*Facts about Israel* 1992: 36].

Here we should note that the word “refugees” cannot be found and that the words “left” and

“a population exchange,” which suggest voluntary evacuation, are used instead. Thus, both versions present the typical mainstream narrative in that they omit any direct reference to the Palestinian refugees and to the Nakba.

This silence is also conspicuous in the discourse of the Zionist political elite. Yitzhak Rabin, for example, who was a commander of the Palmach during the 1948 War, does not mention in his memoirs the expulsion of the inhabitants of Lydda and Ramle in July 1948, in which he played a direct role [Rabin 1979].<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Shimon Peres, who was one of the architects of the Yishuv settlement policy during the 1948 War, fails to mention the Nakba in his memoirs. Yet he does mention his 1992 visit to his hometown, Vishneva, Belorussia, and describes his experience of weeping in his innermost heart in front of his former house [Peres 1995: 42–43]. The contrast between his sensitive attitude toward the “European Jewish Nakba,” as it were, and his silence on the Palestinian Nakba is striking.

In the writings of Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, former commanders of the Revisionist Zionist undergrounds, Irgun and Lehi, respectively, both men are exclusively concerned with the ideology and struggles of their own organizations and are totally indifferent to the Nakba (The Deir Yassin Massacre, for example, is justified by Begin, and not mentioned by Shamir). This also applies to Ariel Sharon, a Haganah commander during the 1948 War, who, in his autobiography, exclusively wrote about military operations [Begin 1964; Shamir 1994: Ch. 3–4; Sharon and Chanoff 2001: Ch. 3–5].

Silence on the Nakba is also part of everyday life in Israel. Since the 1950s the depopulated Arab villages were bulldozed, new settlements built or existing ones expanded on the sites of those villages, and the names of places Hebraized. The Jewish National Fund (JNF) concealed the sites of the villages by planting forests on them or by turning them into natural parks for visitors and tourists. Since the JNF website and the information boards in the natural parks never mention the origin of the parks or the forests, ordinary Jewish families often picnic there without knowing the tragic history behind them. Not many people dare to ask the origin of the white debris scattered among the thriving grass. As Oz Shelach, a New-York based Israeli novelist, describes:

A Professor of history from Bayit va-Gan took his family for a picnic in a quiet pinewood near Giv’at Shaul, formerly known as Deir Yassin [...]. The professor did not talk of the village, origin of the stones. He did not talk of the village school, now a psychiatric hospital, on the other side of the hill. He imagined that he and his family were having a picnic, unrelated to the village, enjoying its grounds outside

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, a frank description of the episode was provided by Rabin, who stated in the original Hebrew version of his memoirs, *Pinkas Sherut*, that what had occurred in Lydda and Ramle had been an expulsion. The relevant passage was, however, excised by Israeli government censors [Morris 1994: 4].

history [Shelach 2003: 1].

## **(2) Indirect Justification**

In his voluminous memoirs translated into English entitled *Israel: A Personal History*, David Ben-Gurion does not make any reference to Israeli atrocities in 1948 such as the Deir Yassin Massacre or the expulsion of 50,000 Arabs from Lydda and Ramle. Instead he depicts the Arabs solely as “victimizers” and “savage enemies” trying to wipe out the Jewish state, emphasizing the casualties and material damages that the Jews suffered in the Arab-initiated “war of aggression.” Although it is briefly mentioned, the Palestinian exodus is naturally downplayed, mentioned simply as an outcome of the war [Ben-Gurion 1971: Ch. 2–3]. Because of this the reality of great human suffering accompanying the Nakba and the victimizing acts of the Zionist forces never occur to the average English-speaking reader.

Basically, Ben-Gurion’s published diary in Hebrew of the 1948 War entitled *Yoman ha-Milhamah* has similar descriptions. A great part of this diary is devoted to daily developments and administrative details, with no reference to the Deir Yassin Massacre, and with only brief comments on the 30,000 refugees from Lydda and Ramle and on the plunder of these two towns by IDF soldiers [Ben-Gurion 1982: 347–348, 589]. It should be noted, however, that Ben-Gurion’s diary does include some highly significant and controversial statements made by him hinting at his policy of expulsion, to which I shall return.

Though Ben-Gurion’s political opponent, Begin presents a similar narrative on the 1948 War. In his memoirs, *The Revolt*, Begin shows his deep contempt for the Arabs and contrasts Irgun’s “heroism” with Arabs’ “cowardice” and “atrociousness.” He makes no reference to Irgun’s atrocities except the apologetic note regarding the Deir Yassin Massacre, thus leading its readers to draw the “logical” conclusion that, since the Arabs are “murderers,” they do not deserve sympathy for “fleeing” their homeland.

Interestingly, the Japanese translators of the above works by Ben-Gurion and Begin present strikingly contrasting views on the Israeli mainstream narrative in their preface and afterword. Kazuo Nakatani, Ben-Gurion’s translator and a journalist, says, while “the drama of the rebirth of Israel is the most moving story throughout modern history,” this book “is full of cruel pride that a victim has when he is about to turn into a victimizer” and points out “the deliberate omissions” in the book, the most glaring being the absence of any “reference to the treatment of the Palestinian refugees.” He therefore recommends reading related books written from an Arab viewpoint “in order to fill up the omissions and put things in perspective” (He further asserts that the “Jewish nation” has never existed, which shows that he was not free from prejudice against the Jews in the Arab world and parts of Europe).<sup>2</sup> In contrast to Nakatani is Yoshito Takigawa, who translated Begin’s memoirs. Takigawa has

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<sup>2</sup> Kazuo Nakatani, ‘Maegaki’ (Preface) to the Japanese version of *Israel: A Personal History* [Nakatani and Irisawa 1972: 7–8, 2].

absorbed the Israeli mainstream narrative and criticizes the widespread “myth that the Jews ousted the Palestinians to establish the state [...]”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, in Japan—a neutral country in terms of the Palestine Conflict—there have long existed two contrasting attitudes: one that uncritically accepts the Israeli mainstream narrative and another that challenges this narrative from an Arab perspective.

### **(3) Direct Justification**

Direct justification is often accompanied by the following arguments: (a) the Palestinians “fled” of their own accord (the theory of voluntary evacuation), (b) the Palestinians, who initiated the war, and the Arab countries, which invaded Israel and refused to absorb the refugees, are both responsible for generating and perpetuating the refugee problem (the theory of Arab responsibility), or (c) the “population exchange” between Israel and the Arab countries in 1948 was effected by the Palestinian Arab exodus and the influx of Jewish immigrants from the Arab world (the theory of population exchange).

#### **(a) The Theory of Voluntary Evacuation**

According to this theory, the Palestinians voluntarily left their villages in accordance with orders given by the Arab armies, and ignored the Jewish calls for them not to evacuate. The most important implication of this theory is that there was no Jewish policy of expulsion. Here the word “fled” plays a key role in arousing the image of the Palestinians’ voluntarily abandoning their homeland. This theory was fully explained by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett at a cabinet meeting on 16 June 1948 and shared by influential Israeli politicians regardless of their political views. As Shimon Peres, a former prime minister and a well-known Labor Party “dove,” wrote:

[...] Most of the Arabs living in the regions that passed to Israeli control fled their homes, even before the state established its various institutions and the Israel Defense Forces. Since that time, Israel and the Arab states have been at loggerheads over responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian Refugee problem. The Arab side claims that Israel is responsible, since it now holds the lands where these refugees lived before the war and since, they claim, Israel’s forces drove these people from their homes. On its part, Israel rejects this claim, and its spokespeople laid the responsibility on Arab leaders, since they called upon the inhabitants to leave the battle zones. Their vain hope was that they would quickly win the war, wipe Israel off the map, and let the local population return.

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<sup>3</sup> Yoshito Takigawa, ‘Atogaki’ (Afterword) to the Japanese version of *The Revolt* [Takigawa 1989: vol.1, p.314]

However, Arab luck did not hold: Israel won the war and the local inhabitants were left outside [...]. [Peres and Naor 1993: 186]

In his book, *A Place among the Nations*, Benjamin Netanyahu, a former prime minister and the current Likud leader, also refuted “the idea that Israel expelled the refugees.” In 1948, he asserted, the Palestinians left although “the Jews pleaded with their Palestinian Arab neighbors to stay,” as they did in Haifa, Tiberias, and other places [Netanyahu 1993: 142].

(b) The Theory of Arab Responsibility

Peres went on to blame the Arab countries for generating and perpetuating the refugee problem:

[...] Should Israel be held responsible for the fact that Arab countries did not absorb their Arab refugees in the same spirit of self-sacrifice and brotherhood that Israel displayed toward Jewish war refugees?

[...] As one who was close to Ben-Gurion and his generation of leaders, I know that he, as Prime Minister and Defense Minister during the War of Independence, never gave an order to expel people from their lands and homes. I have reason to believe that the Israel Defense Forces never had a “transfer” strategy. What transpired was the unplanned result of the tragic circumstances of the war, amid calls by Arab leaders to flee. About six hundred thousand Palestinians fled from Israel during the 1948 War of Independence, while we absorbed an equivalent number of Jewish refugees who fled here from the Arab countries [...]. The Jewish refugees from Arab countries were immediately absorbed in Israel as full citizens with equal rights, while the Palestinian refugees were kept in refugee camps, and no state except Jordan granted them citizenship.

The leaders of the Arab countries—a part from Jordan, under the leadership of King Hussein—have chosen to prolong the refugee problem for forty-six years, while repeatedly rejecting programs to rehabilitate the refugees in their temporary dwelling places. The reasons for this were that the countries involved feared disruption and the introduction of revolutionary ideas into their lands. They also sought to use the prolonged refugee problem as political capital in their struggle against Israel. The Palestinians paid—and continue to pay—the price, and have become a nation of refugees [Peres and Naor 1993: 186–187].

Interestingly, Peres’ criticism of the Arab states’ refusal to absorb the refugees was totally shared by the former Likud leader, Shamir, who formed the national unity government

with Peres in the 1980s. Meanwhile, Ben-Gurion, as early as the aforementioned cabinet meeting on 16 June 1948, stated, “We did not start the war. The Arabs attacked us in Jaffa, Haifa, etc.; and I do not want those who fled to return.” [*Protocol of the Cabinet Meeting of 16 June 1948*] His emphasis on the Palestinians’ own responsibility is also shared by one of his disciples, Ariel Sharon. “They had become refugees in a war they themselves had made,” [Sharon and Chanoff 2001: 259] he later explained in his autobiography.

### (c) The Theory of Population Exchange

This theory is found, for instance, in the aforementioned 1992 version of *Facts about Israel* (already quoted) and Netanyahu’s aforementioned book, *A Place among the Nations*. In this book Netanyahu argues: “There was, in fact, an even exchange of populations between the Arab and the Jewish states as a consequence of the Arabs’ war against Israel and their expulsion of the Jews from their lands.” Citing the examples of European population exchanges in the interwar period and the Indo-Pakistani *de facto* population exchange at the time of the separate independence of the two countries, he argued that, since Israel took in Jewish refugees from the Arab states, it is unjust for the Arab states to demand that Israel also resettle all the Arab refugees. “Such exchanges of population have occurred a number of other times this century: Millions of people were exchanged between Bulgaria and Greece in 1919, between Greece and Turkey in 1923, between India and Pakistan in 1947, and so on. In none of these cases has anyone ever seriously suggested reversing the exchanges, let alone reversing only one side of them” [Netanyahu 1993: 228].

The origin and the historical background of the theory of population exchange will be examined later.

## 2. Basic Assumptions Supporting the Mainstream Narrative

There are several basic assumptions that have supported the mainstream narrative of the justification of the 1948 Palestinian exodus. These assumptions stemmed mainly from the Labor Zionist Movement from the Second Aliyah (1904–1914) onward, which faced the Arab majority in Palestine in the process of building the Yishuv and struggled for the creation of a Jewish majority and for the legitimate ownership of the country. Since the Jews were a minority, they desperately needed logic to justify Jewish ownership of Palestine and to deny, even if implicitly, Arab ownership. These assumptions are as follows: (1) “most of Palestine was uninhabited, uncultivated, barren wilderness, but the Jews cultivated and made it flourish”(the theory of “uninhibited, barren land”), (2) “the Palestinian Arabs are part of the greater Arab nation and lack their own nationalism”(the theory of “the greater Arab nation”), (3) “the Palestinian Arabs are rioters, pogromists, and enemies”(the theory of “rioters and

pogromists”), (4) “Jews returned to their homeland after 2000 years of exile”(the theory of the negation of Diaspora), and (5) “a population exchange/transfer is a justifiable, universal solution to minority questions”(the theory of the justification of population exchange / transfer).

### **(1) The Theory of “Uninhabited, Barren Land”**

Ben-Gurion, for instance, argued in 1919 that, since “the most part of the country is uninhabited and uncultivated,” it is a civilizational obligation for the Jews to reclaim that barren land and make it fertile. And, since even the already cultivated land was not sufficiently cultivated, Palestine was sure to have more economic potential. He went on to say that the Palestinian Arabs, who were unable to achieve this potential, were not, therefore, entitled to occupy Palestine alone [Ben-Gurion 1931: 150–151]. Aharon David Gordon, a spiritual leader of the Labor Movement, implied that the Jews had a greater right of ownership of Palestine, to the cultivation of which they were ready to devote their own labor. “The country will belong more to that side which is able, willing, to suffer and work for it the more [...]. And here again you see the place of labor in our revival and redemption.”[Frankel 1981: 379–380] Thus the Labor leaders, either implicitly or explicitly, justified the Jewish acquisition of Palestine through “labor” and, thereby, as a corollary, denied Palestinian Arab ownership of Palestine.

### **(2) The Theory of “the Greater Arab Nation”**

In his articles written in Russia as early as 1905 and 1906, Ber Borochov, one of the main architects of Socialist Zionism, pointed out the racial proximity of the Palestinian Arab peasants and the Jews, and the Palestinian inhabitants’ lack of homogeneity. Hence his prediction: “They [the Palestinian inhabitants] are not a nation and will not become one nation for a long time in the future”[Gorny 1987: 66–67].

This denial of Palestinian Arab nationalism was inherited by the Labor Movement and later passed on to the Israel Labor Party. Ben-Gurion argued in an article written during World War I that, since Palestinian Arab peasants were not Arabs but the descendants of ancient Hebrews, they had nothing to do with nationalism [Ben-Gurion 1931: 13–25, 30, 55–56]. Influenced by Ben-Gurion, the Labor Movement in Palestine generally regarded the Palestinian Arabs as a people divided among effendis, workers, and peasants and as part of the greater Arab nation, thus lacking their own nationalism. This theory of “the greater Arab nation” enabled Zionists to avoid the moral dilemma of depriving the Palestinian Arabs of their only homeland, and led to the critical conclusion that “the Palestinian Arabs also have homelands outside Palestine.”



### **(3) The Theory of “Rioters and Pogromists”**

Not only the Revisionist Zionists led by Jabotinsky, but also the Labor Zionists led by Ben-Gurion, constantly presented the anti-Zionist Palestinian Arab nationalists as “rioters” and “pogromists,” contrasting them with the Jewish “victims” suffering from “Arab pogroms.” Zionists, in general, tended to compare the situations in Russia and Eastern Europe to that in Palestine and downplay the anti-Zionist, nationalist actions of the Arabs simply as “pogroms.” The inhuman Palestinian Arab image presented by Zionists prepared them to justify the 1948 exodus.

### **(4) The Theory of the Negation of Diaspora**

Regardless of right and left affiliation, Zionists tend to emphasize the direct connection between ancient Judea and modern “Eretz Yisrael” (the Land of Israel) and negate the 2,000-year Diaspora (exile), which occurred between ancient and modern times. Exalting the heroes of Masada, who killed themselves after a heroic battle against the Roman Empire, and Bar-Kochba, who also lost his life in a rebellion against Rome, Zionists have identified themselves with those ancient heroes and viewed the Jewish acquisition of “Eretz Yisrael” as a legitimate milestone on the road to the resurrection of their glorious national past [Zerubavel 1995: Ch.2, 4, 5]. The negation of Diaspora which accompanies this discourse is deeply related to the historical context in which Zionism emerged as the antithesis of “Diaspora.” This negation has led to the Zionist blindness to the continuous presence of the Arabs in Palestine between ancient and modern times. The beautification of Masada and Bar-Kochba, which had already begun in the pre-state Yishuv, was incorporated into Israeli school education after 1948 and has become a crucial part of the Israeli collective memory, playing a significant role in strengthening patriotism and in keeping the presence and exodus of the Palestinian Arabs entirely absent from the consciousness of ordinary Jewish citizens.

### **(5) The Theory of “the Justification of Population Exchange/Transfer”**

As mentioned above, population exchange is often cited in direct justification of the 1948 exodus. The origin of the assumption that population exchange or transfer is a justifiable, universal solution can be found during the Mandate period. The idea of transferring the Arab inhabitants from Palestine to Transjordan or Iraq surfaced in the Zionist Movement as the Palestinian Arab national movement intensified against the backdrop of the mass influx of Jewish immigrants in the 1930s, with the prospect of the Jewish-Arab reconciliation gradually fading away.

The Zionist transfer argument was not born out of vacuum. Since the end of the nineteenth century there had been a practice of Arab population transfers, albeit on a small scale: the Jewish settlers often transferred or ousted Palestinian Arab tenants from land

purchased from absentee landlords. “Avodah Ivrit,” or “Hebrew Labor,” the practice of employing only Jewish workers, which formed the exclusivist movement of “Qibbush ha-Avodah,” or “the Conquer of Labor,” spread throughout *Kibbutzim* and urban Jewish workplaces in the 1920s and 1930s. The transfer argument was based on these undeniable daily realities of Jewish-Arab separation that rapidly crystallized in Mandatory Palestine.

The transfer argument was also inseparably connected to the minority questions in Europe and the Middle East during the interwar period. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed, with many independent national states emerging in the former territories of these multinational empires. As a result, many minority questions were generated and became critical issues in international relations. It was against this backdrop that population exchange or transfer was widely advocated in Europe and carried out as an “efficient” solution to these questions.

In addition to this general international background, the Peel Commission Report of 1937 particularly stimulated the Zionist transfer argument and brought it out into the open. This Report recommended to the British government the partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states and a population exchange between them based on the Greco-Turkish precedent of the 1920s, as a solution to the Palestine problem which had deteriorated because of the Arab Rebellion in 1936. From that time onward, Ben-Gurion’s statements strongly implied that the transfer of Arabs from Palestine was intended to make the country ethnically pure as well as to make room for Jewish immigrants. Thus, from the late 1930s to the 1940s, the Arab population transfer was justified on the basis of many precedents: the Greco-Turkish population exchange, the German minorities problem in the Baltic states and in the Sudeten region, the forced migration of the Volga Germans under the Stalin government, and the Hindu-Muslim *de facto* population exchange as a result of the separate independence of India and Pakistan in 1947. It should be noted that in June 1938 the consensus for “compulsory” transfer was reached within the Jewish Agency Executive, chaired by Ben-Gurion, despite the initial tendency of its members to advocate only “voluntary” transfer. This distinction between “voluntary” transfer and “compulsory” transfer widely accepted in the Zionist circle in the late 1930s is presumably the origin of the characteristic distinction still made in Israel between “voluntary” evacuation and “compulsory” evacuation in discussing the 1948 exodus.

Not only being inspired by the precedents set in Europe and Asia, the Zionists were also supported by an international atmosphere that advocated population transfers. Against the backdrop of the Western sympathy toward the Jewish people aroused by the Holocaust, in 1944 the British Labour Party adopted a resolution that supported the transfer of the Arab population from Palestine, and in a public statement in July 1948, the then Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin mentioned population transfer as a “stable solution” to the Palestine problem [Masalha 1993: 157–161; Morris 2004: 39]. Furthermore, in 1945, former U.S. President

Herbert Hoover submitted to the White House a plan to transfer the Palestinian Arabs to Iraq. Even some Arab leaders unofficially supported transfer; among others, King Abdullah of Transjordan was interested in the partitioning of Palestine between Transjordan and a Jewish state, and backed a transfer in that context [Morris 2004: 57–58].

Among the figures who apparently played significant roles in incorporating the transfer/population exchange argument into the Zionist mainstream narrative of the justification of the 1948 exodus are Yosef Weitz and Joseph Schechtman. The director of the JNF Land Department and deeply involved in the planning of transfers, Weitz is particularly known for his meticulously kept diary in Hebrew, which reveals a dark desire of the Zionist officials for an ethnically pure Jewish state [Weitz 1965].

Jabotinsky's close associate and a historian, Schechtman was elected as a Revisionist representative to the Jewish Agency Executive in August 1948 and submitted to the Transfer Committee, which had already been set in motion under the Israeli government, a plan to transfer the Palestinian Arabs mainly to Iraq and to transfer Jews from the Arab countries to Israel. Interestingly, in his 1946 book entitled *The European Population Transfers 1939–1945*, Schechtman analyzed in detail the transfers of German minorities during World War II from the South Tyrol, the Baltic states, the Soviet-incorporated Polish provinces, Bessarabia, northern Bukovina, Rumania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria, and other transfer precedents (the transfer of Swedes from Estonia, the population exchanges between Bulgaria and Rumania and between Hungary and Rumania, and so on), suggesting that such exchanges were the most realistic and effective solution to minority questions [Schechtman 1946]. He argued this, obviously with the eventual fate of the Palestinian Arabs in his mind.

Furthermore, in his book entitled *Population Transfers in Asia*, which was published in 1949, when the Palestinian refugees had already been generated, Schechtman, citing the Hindu-Muslim population exchange involving more than 11 million people, the “repatriation” of the Armenian refugees to Soviet Armenia, and the transfer of the Assyrian minority in Iraq, examined in detail the economic and demographic capacity of the Arab countries to absorb the Palestinian refugees. Underlying these studies were the aforementioned theory of “greater Arab nation” and a strong desire for Jewish-Arab separation. This desire was clearly expressed in the following passage: “[...] since no constructive and peaceable solution of the Palestine problem can be achieved by either a Jewish State with an Arab minority or an Arab state with a Jewish minority, and since no mass transfer of Palestine's 700,000 Jews to other countries is practicable, the only workable alternative remains an organized exchange of population between Palestine and the Arab states [...]” [Schechtman 1949: 99]. Here one can clearly see Jabotinsky's influence. Until his death in 1940, Jabotinsky had tried to justify the Jewish-Arab separation and the evacuation of the Palestinians by stressing the Jewish “tragic necessity” of having a homeland [Jabotinsky 1940: 220–223].

Finally, in his 1952 book entitled *The Arab Refugee Problem*, he clearly pointed out that a population exchange could be expected between Iraqi Jews and the Palestinian refugees, while he dwelt on how Hindu and Muslim refugees were using properties abandoned by their former Muslim and Hindu owners, respectively, on the basis of the laws of both countries regarding abandoned properties. Citing this reality of the Indo-Pakistani population exchange and the laws of both countries regarding abandoned properties, Schechtman was obviously attempting to justify the Israeli act of forfeiting, on the basis of the equivalent law, the abandoned properties of the Palestinian refugees and allowing the Jewish immigrants to use them [Schechtman 1952: 91, 98–102]. By strongly advocating population exchange as a workable solution to minority problems, Schechtman contributed, in a significant way, to the shaping of the mainstream narrative of the justification of the 1948 exodus.

### **3. The Shaping of the Mainstream Narrative**

As early as April 1948, the Zionist leaders such as Ben-Gurion, Sharett, and Golda Meir regarded the evacuation of the refugees from Tiberias, Haifa, Jaffa, and other places as a “far-from-understandable phenomenon,” thereby emphasizing the unpredictability of the event. As a logical extension of this attitude, the view that the refugees voluntarily “fled” was to be fully expressed, almost for the first time in public, by the supreme political echelons of the State of Israel. At the aforementioned Cabinet meeting on 16 June 1948, where the highly important military and political issues were discussed, Sharett stated:

[...] I am particularly amazed by the flight of the Arabs. This is a more extraordinary episode in the annals of this country than the establishment of a Jewish state [...]. This transformation has occurred in the course of a war initiated by the Arabs. Moreover, the Arabs fled; they were not driven out. This is one of those revolutionary events that alter the course of history. There can be no return to the status quo ante, just as there was no such return after the war between Turkey and Greece. [...] Our compensation for Arab land and property can be used to resettle them in other countries. But they will not return. This is our State, and we will not allow that to happen [...].<sup>4</sup>

Later, on various other occasions, Sharett would reiterate the same argument. In a speech before the Knesset on 19 March 1951, for instance, he mentioned “the Arabs who left the territory of Israel and abandoned their property there as a result of a war of aggression by the

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in [Ben-Gurion 1971: 149].

Arab world against our state.” A similar expression was found in his foreign policy statement in the Knesset on 4 November 1951. He said, “[...] it must be clearly understood that the problem of abandoned lands was a legacy of the war which was forced on Israel.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, in retrospect, Sharett’s statement at the Cabinet meeting on 16 June 1948 may be regarded as one of the earliest official narratives that denied Israeli responsibility for the Nakba, for the reason that the refugees had not been driven out but had fled “in the course of a war initiated by the Arabs.” In a statement following that of Shertok at the above-mentioned Cabinet meeting, Ben-Gurion also strongly opposed the return of the refugees, saying:

[...] If war does begin again, we will be fighting for our lives. We cannot allow the Arabs to return to those places that they left. [...] We did not start the war. The Arabs attacked us in Jaffa, Haifa, etc.: and I do not want those who fled to return [...]. While I oppose the return of the Arabs, I am for a pact with the Arab states after the war [...].<sup>6</sup>

In retrospect, the Cabinet meeting of 16 June 1948, at which a consensus was reached concerning the blocking of the refugees’ return, marked a watershed in the formation of the mainstream narrative of the justification of the 1948 exodus, to which Israel was to hold fast both domestically and internationally. Supported by the aforementioned basic assumptions in the pre-state period, this narrative became a crucial part of the Israeli collective memory. As a powerful, convenient, and indispensable medium of justifying the establishment of their state, this narrative was embraced by, and became overwhelmingly dominant among, political elites, army officials, and the Jewish general public in Israel.

#### **4. The Dissident Narratives Related to the Nakba**

I shall now deal with the dissident Zionist narratives which have long been ignored due to their divergence from, or disharmony with, the mainstream narrative. Interestingly, these dissident narratives often emerged from leading political figures such as Ben-Gurion, Sharett, and Dayan, the very architects of the mainstream narrative. Furthermore, some of the relatively easily accessible documents include elements that are significantly disharmonious with the accepted mainstream narrative. Curiously, these elements have often been overlooked by researchers. These facts themselves eloquently demonstrate the dominant power of the mainstream narrative and the difficulty of voicing dissident views in a predominantly Zionist social context.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in [Schechtman 1946: 112, 110].

<sup>6</sup> Cited in [Ben-Gurion 1971: 150–151].

Dayan, a hero of the 1967 War, born and raised in the vicinity of an Arab village and well-versed in Arabic, once presented such a dissident narrative. In a 1969 lecture given at the Technion Institute of Technology, Haifa, he said:

Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of those Arab villages, and I do not blame you because geography books no longer exist. Not only do the books not exist, the Arab villages are not there either. Nahlal arose in the place of Mahlul; Kibbutz Gvat in the place of Jibta; Kibbutz Sarid in the place of Huneifis; and Kefar Yehushu'a in the place of Tal al-Shuman. There is not one single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population [Ha-'aretz 1969 (Apr. 4)].

Dayan's above narrative is idiosyncratic in that it presented the Palestinian, or dissident Jewish, memory of the Nakba. A candid recognition of the hitherto buried Palestinian memory, it obviously diverged from the mainstream Zionist narrative. It certainly drew public attention to the extent of being quoted in *Ha-'aretz*, one of the leading Israeli newspapers, but it did not have any real impact capable of changing the mainstream narrative.

The Israeli collective memory and mainstream narrative regarding the 1948 exodus have oppressed and silenced dissident memories and narratives, Jewish or Palestinian, including Dayan's. Let us look further into such dissident, therefore forgotten Zionist narratives both prior to and after 1948. Ben-Gurion in the 1920s, for example, advocated Jewish-Arab harmony through class solidarity and demanded that Zionism be ethical in its relations with the Arabs:

Eretz Yisrael is not a land without inhabitants. Within its boundaries [...] live a little over one million inhabitants. On the west bank of the Jordan River alone live about 750, 000 inhabitants. We should not infringe on those inhabitants' rights at any cost. Only dreamers like Zangwill believe that Eretz Yisrael will bring about a further right to oust non-Jews from the country. [...] Even if we assume that this right is granted to us, the Jews have no authority or ability to exercise it. It is not desirable, nor feasible to expel the current inhabitants from the country. This is not an aim of Zionism[...] [Ben-Gurion 1931: 131–132].

This narrative is dissident in that it contradicts the assumption supporting the mainstream narrative that “most of Palestine was uninhabited.” Also strikingly dissident is Ben-Gurion's recognition of the Palestinian national movement immediately after the 1929 Arab Riots:

[...] if we judge the Arabs and their movement with our own yardstick, we will be wrong. Every nation has its own suitable national movement. The clear sign of a political movement is that it knows how it gathers the masses around itself. From this point of view, there is no doubt that a political movement is just in front of us. So, let us not downplay it [Ben-Gurion 1931: 180].

This recognition was deepened by the 1936 Arab Rebellion:

I want to destroy first of all the illusion among our comrades that the [Arab] terror is a matter of a few gangs, financed from abroad [...]. We are facing not terror but a war. It is a national war declared upon us by the Arabs [...]. This is an active resistance by the Palestinians to what they regard as a usurpation of their homeland by the Jews—that is why they fight. Behind the terrorists is a movement, which though primitive is not devoid of idealism and self-sacrifice [...]. In our political argument abroad, we minimize Arab opposition to us. But let us not ignore the truth among ourselves [...] (Mapai Political Committee, 1938).<sup>7</sup>

Both of these statements contradict the assumption supporting the mainstream narrative that “the Palestinians are part of the greater Arab nation and do not have their own nationalism.”

The most heretical, but unknown narrative presented by Ben-Gurion, however, may be his “Palestine Federation Plan,” which he submitted to his party soon after the 1929 Arab Riots. This detailed plan was intended to bring about Jewish-Arab coexistence in one federation based on territorial and cultural autonomies [Ben-Gurion 1931: 189–196], but was vehemently opposed by his party, Mapai, and shelved in 1930. The plan was quickly pushed into oblivion partly because it contradicted the assumption supporting the mainstream narrative that “the Palestinians are rioters and enemies” let alone political partners.

Ben-Gurion abandoned his effort to achieve Jewish-Arab coexistence in the 1930s and apparently reached, by the end of the 1930s, a conclusion that the Jews should expel the Palestinians. A letter to his son, Amos, in October 1937 reveals his desire for expulsion [Ben-Gurion 1974: 331], which seemed to turn into a policy of expulsion in 1948. During the Party Council of February 1948, after expressing his satisfaction with the Judaization of Western Jerusalem, he predicted: “What happened in Jerusalem or Haifa is likely to happen in many parts of this country [...]. After the battles of 6, 8, or 10 months [...] the demographic composition of this country will change greatly” [Ben-Gurion 1981: 210–211]. Even this statement, which is found in his aforementioned War Diary, seemed to have long

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in [Flapan 1979: 141–142].

been unheeded, presumably because it came to be regarded as dangerous to the mainstream narrative that “there was no policy of expulsion.”

All this also applies to Sharett, who grew in the vicinity of an Arab village and was well-versed in the Arab language and culture. Charged with negotiating with the Arabs as the director of the Jewish Agency Political Department, he clearly foresaw the human suffering that the establishment of a Jewish state would inevitably inflict on the Palestinians. He even predicted unprecedented bloodshed during the process of transferring the Palestinians.<sup>8</sup> Not only his insights into the human suffering of the Palestinians, but also his “radical” ideas concerning the Palestinians during the Lausanne Conference in 1949, failed to find a place in the mainstream narrative. Strongly pressured by the Americans, Sharett proposed to the Palestine Conciliation Committee (PCC) that Israel accept 100,000 refugees under certain conditions and he even considered the possibility of a Palestinian State on the West Bank. Both of the ideas were, however, aborted for differing reasons. These options offered by Sharett were never mentioned in the memoirs of the Israeli politicians, obviously because they diverged from the mainstream narrative that “Israel was not responsible for the refugees, who voluntarily fled in a war of aggression initiated by the Arabs.” Sharett himself, who in 1950s clashed with Ben-Gurion over policy toward the Arabs and was eventually ousted from the government, was ignored by the mainstream narrative and deliberately pushed into oblivion in the Israeli collective memory.

Other important dissident narratives came from Mapam, the leftist wing of the Labor Movement and one of the governing parties during the 1948 War. Comprising the Ha-shomer Ha-zair people, who had long advocated bi-nationalism, Mapam played a significant role in criticizing Israeli expulsions and atrocities during the war. The Mapam leaders, however, gradually reconciled themselves, in the period between 1947 and 1949, with the Jewish occupation and development of the abandoned Arab lands, due initially to the emergencies caused by the war and due later to the necessity of absorbing Jewish immigrants and of agricultural development. This change in Mapam went hand in hand with the process under which the memory of the Nakba was oppressed in the Israeli collective memory. Meanwhile, as the prestige of the Kibbutzim heightened because of their wartime roles in heroic defense and the border demarcation of the emerging state [Near 1997: 161, 166], their exclusivist role in expelling the Palestinians was steadily forgotten in the Israeli collective memory.

## **5. The New Narratives from the 1980s Onward**

Against the backdrop of soul-searching in the wake of the Lebanon War and the

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, his statement at the Mapai Central Committee, 5–6 February 1937 (cited in [Ben-Gurion 1974: 67–68]).



declassification of official documents, the New Historians began the rewriting of the history of 1948. In this last section I shall just briefly discuss the meaning and the prospects of the new narratives on the 1948 exodus, which emerged from the 1980s onward.

The research that the New Historians carried out into newly declassified documents shattered many myths about the 1948 exodus and seriously challenged the mainstream narrative, with dissident, hitherto oppressed Jewish and Palestinian narratives and memories surfacing to claim their deserved status. Benny Morris, who was at the center of the new narratives, followed a very interesting process. He concluded that there was no premeditated, comprehensive policy of expulsion.<sup>9</sup> Although this conclusion was in harmony with the official narrative, it essentially contradicted his own findings. He could be an example of a Zionist academic who tries hard to reconcile his conclusions with the old mainstream narrative despite the fact that they seriously conflict with his academic findings. Moreover, as Morris' interview by *Ha-'arezt* on 9 January 2004 revealed, his real stance proved to be more radical; he justified the "ethnic cleansing" in 1948 and said that if Ben-Gurion "had carried out a full expulsion rather than a partial one, he would have stabilized the State of Israel for generations"[Shavit 2004 (Jan.9)].

Morris' outright justification of the ethnic cleansing of 1948 may be viewed as part of a general picture in which the hitherto oppressed narrative, which had been marginalized as one of extremists, violently erupted against the backdrop of the newly intensified Palestinian Conflict from 2000 onward. Meanwhile, there emerged another diametrically opposed narrative that also acknowledges the ethnic cleansing of 1948 but demands that Israel take moral responsibility for perpetrating it. This narrative, strongly presented by Ilan Pappé and others, is certainly groundbreaking compared to the Israeli mainstream narrative, which denies Israeli responsibility for the Nakba.<sup>10</sup> We should note, however, that this narrative also has its shortcomings. It tends to oppress positive memories about the Zionists' search for coexistence—mainly through socialism—and their deep moral dilemma, which did exist, even if without any fruitful results, in the 1920s and 1930s [Mori 2002: Ch. 2–3].

The monolithic Israeli collective memory shaped by the mainstream narrative is now waning and being replaced by multiple Jewish and Palestinian memories, a phenomenon which marks a turning point in the Israeli perception of the Nakba. Shattering the myths about the Palestinian exodus and recognizing the legitimacy of hitherto silenced Palestinian narratives are certainly significant steps forward in the reconciliation of the two peoples. To look at it from a different angle, such awareness of the deliberate obliteration of the memories

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, [Morris 2004: 588]. Here one can see that the conclusion reached by Morris in the old version of this book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (published in 1987)[Morris 1987], remains basically unchanged.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, [Pappé 2006].

of the Palestinian villages as is shown, for instance, by the writer Oz Shelach and the Israeli grassroots organization “Zochrot” deserves note, as a yardstick for gauging whether the nation is mature enough to view the dark sides of its history in the correct perspective. It is yet to be seen, however, if the current chaotic situation after the opening of “Pandora’s Box,” with the apparently unbridgeable rupture between those who justify the ethnic cleansing of 1948 and those who emphasize Israeli moral responsibility for the ethnic cleansing but deny their own positive memories, will really be conducive to a genuine, long-enduring reconciliation and a constructive future.

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