



معهد مواطن للديمقراطية وحقوق الإنسان
Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights



جامعة بيرزيت
BIRZEIT UNIVERSITY

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Ethnic Cleansing and the Nakba

Author: Ilan Pappé

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Ethnic cleansing today is designated by international law as a crime against humanity, and those who perpetrate it are subject to adjudication: a special international tribunal has been set up in The Hague to prosecute those accused of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and a similar court was established in Arusha, Tanzania, to deal with the Rwanda case. The roots of ethnic cleansing are ancient, to be sure, and it has been practiced from biblical times to the modern age, including at the height of colonialism and in World War II by the Nazis and their allies. But it was especially the events in the former Yugoslavia that gave rise to efforts to define the concept and that continue to serve as the prototype of ethnic cleansing. For example, in its special report on ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the U.S. State Department defines the term as “the systematic and forced removal of the members of an ethnic group from communities in order to change the ethnic composition of a given region.”ⁱ

A congressional report prepared in August 1992 for the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee had described ethnic cleansing in Serbia as the “process of population transfers aimed at removing the non-Serbian population from large areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” noting that the campaign had “substantially achieved its goals: an exclusively Serb-inhabited region . . . created by forcibly expelling the Muslim populations that had been the overwhelming majority.” According to this report, the two main elements of ethnic cleansing are, first, “the deliberate use of artillery and snipers against the civilian populations of the big cities,” and second, “the forced movement of civilian populations [entailing] the systematic destruction of homes, the looting of personal property, beatings, selective and random killings, and massacres.”⁵

Similar descriptions are found in the UN Council for Human Rights (UNCHR) report of 1993, which was prepared in follow-up to a UN Security Council Resolution of April 1993 that reaffirmed “its condemnation of all violations of international humanitarian law, in particular the practice of ‘ethnic cleansing.’”ⁱⁱ Showing how a state’s desire to impose a single ethnic rule on a mixed area links up to acts of expulsion and violence, the report describes the unfolding ethnic cleansing process where men are separated from women and detained, where resistance leads to massacres, and where villages are blown up, with the remaining houses subsequently repopulated with another ethnic group.

In addition to the United States and the UN, academics, too, have used the former Yugoslavia as the starting point for their studies of the phenomenon. Drazen Petrovic has published one of the most comprehensive studies of ethnic cleansing, which he describes as “a well-defined policy of a particular group of persons to systematically eliminate another group from a given

territory on the basis of religious, ethnic or national origin. Such a policy involves violence and is very often connected with military operations.”ⁱⁱⁱ Petrovic associates ethnic cleansing with nationalism, the creation of new nation-states, and national struggle, noting the close connection between politicians and the army in the perpetration of the crime: the political leadership delegates the implementation of the ethnic cleansing to the military level, and although it does not furnish systematic plans or provide explicit instructions, there is no doubt as to the overall objective.

Given this context in the 1990s, the concept of “ethnic cleansing” began to take form in scholarship on Israeli history. The descriptions of ethnic cleansing almost exactly mirror what happened in Palestine in 1948. The master plan prepared by the Zionist leadership for taking over Palestine on the eve of the Nakba, the infamous Plan D, constitutes a veritable repertoire of the cleansing methods described in the various reports on ex-Yugoslavia, setting the background for the massacres that accompanied the expulsions. Indeed, if we never have heard about the events in the former Yugoslavia of the 1990s and were aware only of the Palestine case, we would be forgiven for thinking that the Nakba had been the inspiration for the descriptions and definitions above, almost to the last detail.

Yet when it comes to the dispossession by Israel of the Palestinians in 1948, there is a deep chasm between the reality and the representation. This is most bewildering, and it is difficult to understand how events perpetrated in modern times and witnessed by foreign reporters and UN observers could be systematically denied, not even recognized as historical fact, let alone acknowledged as a crime that needs to be confronted, politically as well as morally. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the ethnic cleansing of 1948, the most formative event in the modern history of the land of Palestine, has been almost entirely eradicated from the collective global memory and erased from the world’s conscience.

When even a measure of Israeli responsibility for the disappearance of half the Arab population of Palestine is acknowledged (the official government version continues to reject any responsibility whatsoever, insisting that the local population left “voluntarily”), the standard explanation is that their flight was an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product of war. But what happened in Palestine was by no means an unintended consequence, a fortuitous occurrence, or even a “miracle,” as Israel’s first president Chaim Weizmann later proclaimed. Rather, it was the result of long and meticulous planning.

The potential for a future Jewish takeover of the country and the expulsion of the indigenous Palestinian people had been present in the writings of the founding fathers of Zionism, as scholars later discovered. But it was not until the late 1930s, two decades after Britain’s 1917 promise to turn Palestine into a national home for the Jews (a pledge that became enshrined in Britain’s Mandate over Palestine in 1923), that Zionist leaders began to translate their abstract vision of Jewish exclusivity into more concrete plans. New vistas were opened in 1937 when the British Royal Peel Commission recommended partitioning Palestine into two states. Though the territory earmarked for the Jewish state fell far short of Zionist ambitions, the leadership responded favorably, aware of the signal importance of official recognition of the principle of Jewish statehood on even part of Palestine.

Several years later, in 1942, a more maximalist strategy was adopted when the Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion, in a meeting at the Biltmore Hotel in New York, put demands on the table for a Jewish commonwealth over the whole of Mandatory Palestine. Thus, the geographical space coveted by the movement changed according to circumstances and opportunities, but the principal objective remained the same: the creation in Palestine of a purely Jewish state, both as a safe haven for Jews and as the cradle of a new Jewish nationalism. And this state had to be exclusively Jewish not only in its sociopolitical structure but also in its ethnic composition.

In this sense, the Zionist movement was a typical settler colonial movement motivated by what the late scholar, Patrick Wolfe, called the logic “of the elimination of the native”; or put differently it was a classical colonial project of displacement and replacement.

Since 1937, the Zionist movement, led by Ben-Gurion, wasted no time in preparing for the eventuality of taking the land by force if it were not granted through diplomacy. These preparations included the building of an efficient military organization and the search for more ample financial resources (for which they tapped into the Jewish Diaspora). In many ways, the creation of an embryonic diplomatic corps was also an integral part of the same general preparations aimed at creating by force a state in Palestine. It should be remembered that this part of the preparations was done with the knowledge, and quite often help, of the British Mandatory authorities.

Another important side of the preparations for the 1948 ethnic cleansing was the accumulation by the Zionist intelligence service of the village files. A detailed information on every village in Palestine. The idea of collecting information that would be useful in the future, arose during the Arab Revolt (1936-1939), when Zionist troops joined the British in attacking Arab villages and carrying out punitive raids. The task was first given to the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and then passed on to the intelligence service. By the mid-1940s, the Zionist military command had files on almost every village in Palestine. Precise details were recorded about the topographic location of each village, its access roads, quality of land, water springs, main sources of income, its sociopolitical composition, religious affiliations, names of its mukhtars, its relationship with other villages, the age of individual men (16–50), and much more. An important category was an index of “hostility” (toward the Zionist project, that is) as determined by the level of the village’s participation in the 1936–39 Arab Revolt. The material included lists of everyone involved in the revolt and the families of those who had lost someone in the fight against the British. Particular attention was given to people alleged to have killed Jews. In 1948, the “men” of military age included even those who were children at the age of 10 or 12 and they were either sent to prison camps, after occupation, expelled or in some cases massacred.

The village files were incorporated in 1946 into a master plan called Plan C (Gimel) which began to chart the operational side of the future ethnic cleansing. It was still elusive and not detailed as the future of Mandatory Palestine was not decided yet. Once the British announced their decision to leave Palestine in February 1947, the Zionist military and political leadership moved one step further in planning the mass expulsion of the Palestinians from any part of historical Palestine that would become the Jewish state.

The UN partition resolution of 29 November 1947 and the secret talks with the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan helped to chart the territorial priorities of the future Jewish state. First, it was understood that what would today be the West Bank would not be part of the future Jewish State due to a tacit understanding with the Hashemite Kingdom. Secondly, it was decided that until the end of the Mandate (15 May 1948), the parts accorded to the Zionist movement in the UN partition resolution would be first be cleansed from their Palestinian residents. This operation began in earnest after the Zionist leadership adopted on 10 March 1948 another master plan for the future of Palestine, plan D (Dalet). This plan was translated into operational commands that designated clearly for each military unit in the Zionist military organizations, which became the IDF on 15 May 1948, which villages and towns that should occupy, demolish, and expel.

Under the eyes of the British, who were still responsible for law and order until 15 May 1948, the ethnic cleansing operation of that face took place in the months of February to May 1948, namely before any Arab armies entered Palestine to help the small Palestinian para-military units, led by commanders such as Abdul Qader al-Husayni and aided by Jaysh al-Inqaz, led by

Fawzi al-Qawqji. The Zionist forces ethnically cleansed most of the towns of Palestine and scores of Palestinian villages. Some of these operations, as any ethnic cleansing campaign, ended with massacres, the most infamous among them the Dir Yasin massacre of 9 April 1948.

Pressure grew in the Arab world and the Arab League attempted to coordinate a military salvage operation that began on 15 May 1948 and despite some initial success, the level of military performance, the lack of unity and coordination, a British and French embargo on arms sales to the Arab armies and the strong military capacity of the Zionist forces did not prevent the next stages in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

By the end of 1948, half of Palestine population became refugees, half of its villages were destroyed and most of its towns (apart from those in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) were de-Arabized. On the ruins of the Palestinian villages, Israel built Jewish settlements or planted recreational forests.

The world knew about this crime against humanity, accentuated by the categorical refusal of Israel to allow the return of the refugees after the fighting subsided. The UN declared its support for the right of return already its 194 resolution form 11 December 1948, but the Western world did not force Israel to accept it, did not acknowledge that ethnic cleansing operation was taking place and treated the refugees issue only as a humanitarian case. With this international message, it is not surprising that since 1948 in different historical junctures and against different Palestinian groups, Israel employed further ethnic in its quest to turn Palestine, as a whole, into a Jewish state with as few Palestinians in it as possible. Had not been for the Palestinian resistance and steadfastness this ethnic cleansing operation would have been completed by now. But it will be incomplete and maybe stopped all together as long as the Palestinians resist it and there will be enough people in the world willing to help them to rectify the evils of the past and prevent those of the future.

ⁱ State Department Special Report, "Erasing History: Ethnic Cleansing in Kosovo," 10 May 1999.

ⁱⁱ United Nations, "Report Following Security Council Resolution 819," 16 April 1993.

ⁱⁱⁱ 7. Drazen Petrovic, "Ethnic Cleansing: An Attempt at Methodology," *European Journal of International Law* 5, no. 3 (1994), pp. 342–60.