The Politics of Denial

Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem

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2 Israel's 'New Historians' and the *Nakba:* A Critique of Zionist Discourse

Much of the rewriting of the history of 1948 has been a combined effort undertaken by several Israeli and Palestinian scholars, with minor contributions from outsiders. This revisionist historiography, critically acclaimed by the early 1990s, was initiated by a small group of Israeli historians and researchers in the immediate period following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Stimulated partly by the shattering of the Zionist national consensus, historical revisionism was given a huge boost by the opening of Israeli archives and the discovery of an astonishing array of new documents.[1] Since then, major works on 1948 have also been contributed by Palestinian authors, including Walid Khalidi, Rashid Khalidi, Sharif Kana'ana and myself.[2] The 1948 *nakba* is central to Palestinian memory and the society of today. However, although the issue of the 1948 exodus is a critical turning point in the Palestinians' history, only a small number of Palestinian historians and academics have investigated its actual roots and causes.[3] This is rather ironical since the debate over the causes and circumstance of the exodus is also reflected in the array of proposed solutions to the refugee problem.

In a number of articles I published between 1988 and 1991 I was in fact the first Arab historian to provide a critical assessment of the Israeli 'new historiography' of the refugee exodus and to draw attention to the significance of this new scholarly phenomenon.[4] Central to this 'new historiography' are the debates on the 1948 Palestinian refugee exodus (expulsion versus flight), the impact of the British mandate on Palestinian Arab and Jewish (Yishuv) societies, the Zionist–Hashemite alliance of the 1930s and 1940s, the regional balance of power in 1948, the questionable nature of Zionist acceptance of the 1947 UN partition resolution, and the new revelations about early peace negotiations between Israeli and Arab leaders. In 1948, while Arab leaders were in league against each other and had little interest in assisting the Palestinians, the Israelis were consolidating their new conquests far beyond the Jewish state's boundaries as envisaged by the UN. The picture that emerges from

the 1948 war, for example, as Israeli 'new historian' Avi Shlaim has shown, is not the mythical one (still repeated by Israeli orthodox historians and spokespersons) of Israel standing alone against the combined might of the entire Arab world. It is rather one of convergence between the interests of Israel and those of Hashemite Transjordan against other members of the bickering Arab coalition, and especially against the Palestinians.[5]

The rise in Israel of an influential, though controversial, 'new historiography' was a remarkable phenomenon. On the whole, the terms of the debate on the early history of the Israeli state and the birth of the Palestinian refugee question have been transformed by the works of the Israeli 'new historians', including Benny Morris, Simha Flapan, Tom Segev, Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim. Containing remarkable revelations based on Hebrew and archival material, these works closely scrutinised the conduct of the (Labour Zionist) founding fathers of the Israeli state, thus contributing to the demolition of some of the long-held misconceptions surrounding Israel's birth. Several foundational myths surrounding 1948 have been examined and discredited as being part of an Israeli disinformation campaign. Most of these highly innovative works appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, sparking an internal debate within Israel as well as a keen interest worldwide. It also soon became apparent that the Israeli 'new historiography' was part of the much wider phenomenon of the development of new critical perspectives, encompassing several disciplines within the social sciences, with contributions from a long list of authors, most of whom held teaching positions in Israeli universities. These Israeli authors are not a monolithic group; they range from the liberal Zionist to the 'post-Zionist', from the good old-fashioned positivist historian to the 'post-modernist' relativist.[6]

The Palestinian nakba, however, has become central to the new Israeli discourse on 1948 only among some of contributors to the Israeli 'new historiography'. Ilan Pappé, for instance, provides a critical assessment of the 'old and new' Israeli historiography of the refugee exodus by noting – in contrast to Benny Morris – that expulsion was a dominant feature of the Palestinian nakba and experience in 1948.[7] Pappé had this to say in a recent article entitled: 'Demons of the Nakbah':

For a short while at the end of the 1980s, several academics, including myself, caught public attention by publishing scholarly

books that challenged the accepted Israeli version of the 1948 War. In these books, we accused Israel of expelling the indigenous population and of destroying the Palestinian villages and neighbourhoods. Although our early works were hesitant and cautious, and mine were not even translated into Hebrew, it was still possible to gather from them that the Jewish State was built on the ruins of the indigenous people of Palestine, whose livelihood, houses, cultures and land had been systematically destroyed.[8]

A liberal Zionist interpretation of the phenomenon, however, is found in *Palestinian Refugees and the Middle East Peace Process* (1993) by Don Peretz, a leading American Jewish expert on the Palestinian refugee problem, who concluded that the Israeli 'revisionist' historians highlighted the issue of Israel's 'shared accountability for the [refugee] flight'.[9] Peretz also believes that the issue of moral responsibility for the 1948 refugee exodus has major ramifications for the refugee question, including the 'right of return', compensation and restitution of property.[10]

By the mid-1990s the great history debate in Israel, remorselessly aired in the Hebrew media, had divided generations and driven the old guard of establishment academics to a better defence of their turf against the encroachments of the 'new historians'. The latter were described as 'self-hating Jews', and subjected to relentless abuse and personal attacks, often resembling witch-hunts. They were accused of rewriting the history of Zionism in the image of its enemies and dedicating themselves to the destruction of the state of Israel by sapping its legitimacy. The old guard turned to the Israeli media to mobilise public opinion against the 'traitors' by manipulating public fears and apprehensions.[11] The attacks on them involved not only many orthodox historians and partisans of labour Zionism (Shabtai Teveth, Anita Shapira, Shlomo Aharonson, Itamar Rabinowich, Efraim Karsh, Yoav Gelber) but also some popular writers and journalists (Aharon Megged, Hanoch Bar-Tov, David Bar-Ilan).[12] Karsh, in particular, responded by waging a bitter campaign against the 'new historians', which was designed (in the words of Benny Morris) to 'refabricate 1948'.[13] Karsh and other orthodox academics accused the 'new historians' of destroying the foundations of the state of Israel and threatening its legitimacy. The old guard, themselves responsible for the foundational myths, demanded a return to a 'committed' (Zionist) scholarship; on the contrary, their opponents (especially Benny Morris) argued, it was precisely because

Israel had come of age, was strong enough and its right to exist now recognised by its Arab enemies, that a new, 'non-ideological' history was born.[14]

Ideological (Zionist) mobilisation has always presented Israeli social scientists and historians with professional and ethical dilemmas. Faced with the competing demands of their professions and the requirements of the Zionist-Jewish state – a state created on the ruins of Palestinian society – many Israeli academics have opted for 'committed' (Zionist) scholarship and 'official' versions of events. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that both academic and political establishments reacted to the 'new historiography' with dismay. They did everything they could to stifle these early signs of Israeli self-awareness and the recognition of Israel's role in the Palestinian catastrophe. Departments of Middle Eastern Studies at Israeli universities and mainstream academics in Israel have continued to erase the Palestinian *nakba* as a historical event, discouraging new scholars and academics from challenging the overall denial and suppression of the Palestinian catastrophe which took place in the world outside their ivory towers.[15]

A CRITIQUE OF BENNY MORRIS

Benny Morris spent the mid-1980s investigating what led to the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, publishing *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* in 1987. Since then he has come to be seen in the West as the ultimate authority on the Palestinian exodus of 1948. Indeed, his work has contributed to demolishing some of the long-held (at least in Israel and the West) misconceptions surrounding Israel's birth. His subsequent collection of essays, *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (1990), revisits the ground covered in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, bringing to light new material he discovered himself or which became available only after the completion of the first book.

Morris's work belongs to the Israeli 'new historiography'. Despite his passionate Zionism and, worse, his recent conversion to the right-wing cause in Israel,[16] his real contribution to the new scholarship and to the creation of a phenomenon of considerable political and scholarly significance has been widely acknowledged. Morris himself does not like the term 'revisionist' historiography, in part because it 'conjures up' images of the Revisionist Movement in Zionism of Zeev Jabotinsky, and thus causes 'confusion'. He further eschews the term

because 'Israel's old historians, by and large, were not really historians, and did not produce real history. In reality they were chroniclers, and often apologetic.'[17] Morris examines this 'old' – orthodox and official – historiography in the opening essay of *1948 and After*, referring to the historians who produced it over three decades after 1948 as 'less candid', 'deceitful' and 'misleading'.[18] As examples, he cites the accounts provided by Lieutenant-Colonel (ret.) Elhanan Orren, a former officer at the Israel Defence Force (IDF) History Branch, in his *Baderech el Ha'ir* (On the Road to the City), a detailed account of Operation Dani, published by the IDF Press in 1976, and *Toldot Milhemet Hakomemiyut* (History of the War of Independence), produced by the General Staff/History Branch, as well as Ben-Gurion's own 'histories' *Medinat Yisrael Hamehudeshet* and *Behilahem Yisrael*.[19]

Two remarks are in order here: first, having myself examined many of the 'old' and official Hebrew chronicles, it is quite clear to me that Morris does not always live up to his claim of using this material in a critical manner and this casts doubts on his conclusions. For instance, in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Morris quotes uncritically the 'major political conclusions' Ben-Gurion drew from the Arab departure from Haifa and makes little effort to reconcile the 'deceitfulness' of such a chronicle with uncritical reliance on it. Also, generally speaking, having based himself predominantly, and frequently uncritically, on official Israeli archival and non-archival material, Morris's description and analysis of such a controversial subject as the Palestinian exodus have serious shortcomings. Second, Morris's description of the works by the 'new' Israeli historians – while ignoring the recent works by non-Zionist scholars on 1948 – gives rise to the impression that these discourses are basically the outcome of a debate among Zionists which, unfortunately, has little to do with the Palestinians themselves.

Morris's central thesis, as first expounded in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, is summed up in the following passage from *1948 and After*:

what occurred in 1948 lies somewhere in between the Jewish 'robber state' [i.e., a state which had 'systematically and forcefully expelled the Arab population'] and the 'Arab orders' explanations. While from the mid-1930s most of the Yishuv's leaders, including Ben-Gurion, wanted to establish a Jewish state without an Arab minority, or with as small an Arab minority as possible, and

supported a 'transfer solution' to this minority problem, the Yishuv did not enter the 1948 War with a master plan for expelling the Arabs, nor did its political or military leaders ever adopt such a master plan. What happened was largely haphazard and a result of the war. There were Haganah/IDF expulsions of Arab communities, some of them at the initiative or with the *post facto* approval of the cabinet or the defense minister, and most with General Staff sanction – such as the expulsions from Miska and Ad Dumeira in April; from Zarnuqa, Al Qubeiba, and Huj in May; from Lydda and Ramle in July; from the Lebanese border area (Kafr Bir'im, Iqrit, Al Mansura, Tarbikha, Suruh, and Nabi Rubin) in early November. But there was no grand design, no blanket policy of expulsion.[20]

In other words, only in 'smaller part' were Haganah/IDF expulsions carried out and these were impromptu, ad hoc measures dictated by the military circumstances, a conclusion that deflects serious responsibility for the 1948 exodus from the Zionist leadership. But can his claim that there was no transfer design and expulsion policy in 1948 be sustained? Does the fact that there was no 'master plan' for expelling the Palestinians absolve the Zionist leadership of responsibility, given, *inter alia*, its campaign of psychological warfare (documented by Morris and others) designed to precipitate Arab evacuation? How can Morris be so categorical in stating that there was no Israeli expulsion policy when his own work rests on carefully released partial documentation and when many of the Israeli files and documents relating to the subject are still classified and remain closed to researchers? Is it inconceivable that such a 'transfer' policy was based on an understanding between Ben-Gurion and his lieutenants rather than on a blueprint? Morris himself writes in an article in *Haaretz* (entitled: 'The New Historiography and the Old Propagandists', 9 May 1989) in which he discusses the transfer notion and Ben-Gurion's role in 1948:

> One of the hallmarks of Ben-Gurion's greatness was that the man knew what to say and what not to say in certain circumstances; what is allowed to be recorded on paper and what is preferable to convey orally or in hint.

Ben-Gurion's admiring biographer Michael Bar-Zohar states:

> In internal discussions, in instructions to his men [in 1948] the Old Man [Ben-Gurion] demonstrated a clear position: It would be better that as few a number as possible of Arabs should remain in the territory of the [Jewish] state.[21]

Morris claims (in *1948 and After*, p.16) that it 'was the Arab contention ... that the Yishuv had always intended forcible 'transfer'. Is it merely an 'Arab contention', or perhaps, a figment of Arab imagination? Yet the evidence Morris adduces points to a completely different picture. In his 9 May 1989 article in *Haaretz*, Morris traces 'the growth of the transfer idea in Ben-Gurion's thinking' from the second half of the 1930s. 'There is no doubt', Morris writes,

> that from the moment [the Peel proposal was submitted] ... the problem of the Arab minority, supposed to reside in that [prospective Jewish] state, began to preoccupy the Yishuv's leadership obsessively. They were justified in seeing the future minority as a great danger to the prospective Jewish state – a fifth political, or even military, column. The transfer idea ... was viewed by the majority of the Yishuv leaders in those days as the best solution to the problem.

In *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (p.25) Morris shows that Ben-Gurion advocated 'compulsory' transfer in 1937. In his *Haaretz* article he writes of the 'growth of the transfer idea in Ben-Gurion's thinking' and that in November 1947, a few days before the UN General Assembly's partition resolution, a consensus emerged at the meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive in favour of giving as many Arabs in the Jewish state as possible citizenship of the prospective Arab state rather than of the Jewish state where they would be living. According to Morris, Ben-Gurion explained the rationale in the following terms:

> If a war breaks out between the Jewish state and the Palestine Arab state, the Arab minority in the Jewish state would be a 'Fifth Column': hence, it was preferable that they be citizens of the Palestine Arab state so that, if the War breaks out and, if hostile, they 'would be expelled' to the Arab state. And if they were citizens of the Jewish state 'it would (only) be possible to imprison them'.

Does not this show that the Yishuv's leaders entered the 1948 war at least with a transfer desire or mind-set?

Morris argues that a new approach emerged in 1948 among the ruling Mapai Party leaders, presided over by Ben-Gurion, in support of a transfer 'solution' to the 'Arab demographic problem':

> Ben-Gurion understood ... that war changed everything; a different set of 'rules' had come to apply. Land could and would be conquered and retained; there would be demographic changes. This approach emerged explicitly in Ben-Gurion's address at the meeting of the Mapai Council on 7 February: Western Jerusalem's Arab districts had been evacuated and a similar, permanent demographic change could be expected in much of the country as the war spread.[22]

Other prominent Mapai leaders such as Eliahu Lulu (Hacarmeli), a Jerusalem branch leader, and Shlomo Lavi, an influential Kibbutz movement leader, echoed the same approach. In an internal debate at the Mapai Centre on 24 July 1948, held against the background of the expulsion of the Palestinian towns of Lydda and Ramle, Shlomo Lavi stated that 'the ... transfer of Arabs out of the country in my eyes is one of the most just, moral and correct things that can be done. I have thought this ... for many years.'[23] Lavi's views were backed by another prominent Mapai leader, Avraham Katznelson: there is nothing 'more moral, from the viewpoint of universal human ethics, than the emptying of the Jewish State of the Arabs and their transfer elsewhere ... This requires [the use of] force.'[24] Contrary to what Morris claims, there was nothing new about this approach of 'forcible transfer', nor did it emerge out of the blue merely as a result of the outbreak of hostilities in 1948.

The Yishuv's leaders pursued transfer schemes from the mid-1930s onwards almost obsessively. Transfer Committees were set up by the Jewish Agency between 1937 and 1942 and a number of transfer schemes were formulated in secret. A thorough discussion of these schemes is found in my book *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948* (1992). Shortly after the publication of the Peel Commission report, which endorsed the transfer idea, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary (12 July 1937): 'The Compulsory transfer of the Arabs from the valleys of the proposed Jewish state could give us something which we never had ... a Galilee free of Arab population.'[25] Already in 1937 he believed that the

Zionists could rid themselves of 'old habits' and put pressure on the Mandatory authorities to carry out forced removal. 'We have to stick to this conclusion', Ben-Gurion wrote,

> in the same way we grabbed the Balfour Declaration, more than that, in the same way we grabbed Zionism itself. We have to insist upon this conclusion [and push it] with full determination, power and conviction. ... We must uproot from out hearts the assumption that the thing is not possible. It can be done.

Ben-Gurion went on to note: 'We must prepare ourselves to carry out' the transfer.[26] Ben-Gurion was also convinced that few, if any, of the Palestinians would be willing to transfer themselves 'voluntarily', in which case the 'compulsory' provisions would have to be put into effect. In an important letter to his 16-year-old son Amos, dated 5 October 1937, Ben-Gurion wrote: 'We must expel Arabs and take their places ... and if we have to use force – not to dispossess the Arabs of the Negev and Transjordan, but to guarantee our own right to settle those places – then we have force at our disposal.'[27] It is explicit in this letter that the transfer had become clearly associated with expulsion in Ben-Gurion's thinking. In reflecting on such expulsion and the eventual enlargement of, and breaking through, the Peel partition borders, Ben-Gurion used the language of force, increasingly counting on Zionist armed strength. He also predicted a decisive war in which the Palestinian Arabs aided by neighbouring Arab states would be defeated by the Haganah.[28] From the mid-1930s onwards he repeatedly stated his advocacy of transfer.

The debates of the World Convention of Ihud Po'alei Tzion – the highest political forum of the dominant Zionist world labour movement – and the Zurich 20th Congress in August 1937 revealed a Zionist consensus in support of transfer. Eliahu Lulu, for instance, had this to say at the debate of Ihud Po'alei Tzion convention:

> This transfer, even if it were to be carried out through compulsion – all moral enterprises are carried out through compulsion – will be justified in all senses. And if we negate all right to transfer, we would need to negate everything we have done until now: the transfer from Emek Hefer [Wadi al-Hawarith] to Beit Shean, from the Sharon [coastal plain] to Ephraem Mountains, etc ... the transfer ... is a just, logical, moral, and humane programme in all senses.[29]

During the same debate, Shlomo Lavi expressed a similar view: 'The demand that the Arabs should move and evacuate the place for us, because they have sufficient place to move to ... in itself is very just and very moral.'[30] There were, of course, Zionist leaders who supported 'voluntary' transfer, but to suggest as Morris does that the notion of 'forcible transfer' is merely an 'Arab contention' or that it was only in 1948 that Mapai leaders such as Ben-Gurion adopted the radical new approach of using force to transform Palestine's demographic reality is a misrepresentation of the facts, of which Morris must be aware.

Is Morris's conclusion that a Zionist transfer/expulsion policy was never formulated borne out of the evidence he adduces in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* and in *1948 and After*? In *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* Morris describes how the Yishuv military establishment, presided over by Ben-Gurion, formulated in early March 1948 and began implementing in early April Plan Dalet (*Tochnit Dalet*) in anticipation of Arab military operations. According to Morris, the

> essence of the plan was the clearing of hostile and potentially hostile forces out of the interior of the prospective territory of the Jewish State. ... As the Arab irregulars were based and quartered in the villages, and as the militias of many villages were participating in the anti-Yishuv hostilities, the Haganah regarded most of the Arab villages as actively or potentially hostile.[31]

Morris goes on to explain that Plan Dalet 'constituted a strategic-ideological anchor and basis for expulsions by front, district, brigade and battalion commanders (who in each case argued military necessity) and it gave commanders, *post facto*, a formal, persuasive covering note to explain their actions'.[32] In *1948 and After*, Morris states:

> In conformity with Tochnit Dalet (Plan D), the Haganah's master plan ... The Haganah cleared various areas completely of Arab villages – the Jerusalem corridor, an area around Mishmar Haemek, and the coastal plain. But in most cases, expulsion orders were unnecessary; the inhabitants had already fled, out of fear or as a result of Jewish attack. In several areas, Israeli commanders successfully used psychological warfare ploys to obtain Arab evacuation (as in the Hula Valley, in Upper Galilee, in May).[33]

He further notes: 'if the denial of the right of return ... was a form of 'expulsion', then a great many villagers – who had waited near their villages for the battle to die down before trying to return home – can be considered 'expelees'.[34]

Plan Dalet is a straightforward document (now accessible both in Hebrew and English), which has generated a great deal of historiographical debate among Israeli and Palestinian historians. Yet, contrary to Morris's conclusion, Plan Dalet has been described by another leading Israeli 'new historian', Ilan Pappé, as

> a master plan for the expulsion of as many Palestinians as possible. Moreover, the plan legitimized, a *priori*, some of the more horrendous atrocities committed by Jewish soldiers. In some cases, particularly in the north, in the area under the command of Moshe Carmel, the order 'to destroy,' meant also to kill off the local population. Hence, those responsible for the Deir Yassin massacre could have legitimized their action by referring to Plan D, as almost every village in the vicinity of Jerusalem was considered as an enemy base.[35]

However, even if, for the sake of argument, we were to accept that Plan Dalet was not a political blueprint or a 'master plan' for a blanket expulsion of the Arab population, and even if the plan 'was governed by military considerations', how can Morris square his own explanations with his conclusion that there existed no Haganah/IDF 'plan' or policy decision to expel Arabs from the prospective Jewish state?

Furthermore, in the context of 'decision-making' and 'transfer' policy, Morris shows in his essay 'Yosef Weitz and the Transfer Committees, 1948–49', how Weitz – the Jewish National Fund executive in charge of land acquisition and its distribution among Jewish settlements and an ardent advocate of mass Arab transfer since the 1930s (he was on the Jewish Agency's Transfer Committees between 1937 and 1942)

> was well placed [in 1948] to shape and influence decision-making regarding the Arab population on the national level and to oversee the implementation of policy on the local level.[36]

From early 1948, Weitz began to exploit the conditions of war to expel Arab villagers and tenant-farmers, some of whom cultivated lands

owned by Jewish institutions. He personally supervised many local evictions during the early months of the war, frequently with the assistance of local Haganah commanders.[37] Moreover, Morris explains:

> Everyone, at every level of military and political decision-making, understood that a Jewish state without a large Arab minority would be stronger and more viable both militarily and politically. The tendency of local military commanders to 'nudge' Palestinians into flight increased as the war went on. Jewish atrocities – far more widespread than the old histories have let on (there were massacres of Arabs at Ad Dawayima, Eilaboun, Jish, Safsaf, Majd al Kurum, Hule (in Lebanon), Saliha, and Sasa, besides Deir Yassin and Lydda and other places) – also contributed significantly to the exodus.[38]

I cannot see how the above explanation regarding 'decision-making' can be reconciled with Morris's denial of a transfer policy. Does it matter in the end whether such a policy was actually formulated, or whether it was just de facto and clearly understood at every level of military and political decision-making?

On the basis of the revelations, documentation, and factual findings brought to light by Morris, other Israeli 'new historians' and myself (in Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948), the traditional Palestinian contention that there was a Zionist consensus on the question of finding a 'solution' to the 'Arab demographic problem' – the Palestinian Arabs, even in 1947, still constituted two-thirds of the population of Palestine – through 'transfer'/expulsion of Arabs to areas outside the prospective Jewish state, and barring their return to their villages and towns, is corroborated. Zionist parties of all shades of opinion – with the exception of muted, internal criticism from a few members of the Mapam and Mapai parties – were in basic agreement about the need and desirability of utilising the 1948 war to establish an enlarged Jewish state with as small an Arab population as possible. Yosef Sprintzak, the relatively liberal secretary-general of the Histadrut, a critic of the forcible transfer policy, had this to say at the 24 July 1948 meeting at the Mapai Centre, some ten days after the Lydda–Ramle expulsion:

> There is a feeling that faits accomplis are being created. ... The question is not whether the Arabs will return or not return. The question is whether the Arabs are [being or have been] expelled

or not. ... This is important to our moral future. ... I want to know, who is creating the facts? And the facts are being created on orders. ... [there appears to be] a line of action ... of expropriation and of emptying the land of Arabs by force.[39]

It is difficult, using Morris's own evidence and other evidence produced by Palestinian historians and Israeli 'new historians', not to see on the part of the leaders of mainstream labour Zionism a de facto, forcible, transfer policy in 1948.

Morris's analysis of the Palestinian catastrophe is also flawed by his treatment of the Palestinian exodus largely in an historical and political vacuum, without any intrinsic connection with Zionism. Although he does refer to the Zionist consensus emerging from the mid-1930s in support of transferring the Arab population, he sees no connection between this and the expulsions of 1948. This brings us to the explanatory framework underlying Morris's work: the Zionist leadership's ideological-political disposition for transferring/expelling Arabs resulted from the 'security' threat (the 'fifth column') the Arab population posed to the Jewish state. The facts presented earlier, on the other hand, show that the 'voluntary/compulsory' transfer of the indigenous Arabs was prefigured in the Zionist ideology a long time before the 1948 war broke out and advocated 'obsessively' by the Zionist leadership from the mid-1930s onwards. Consequently, the resistance of the indigenous Arab population to Zionism before and in 1948 emanated from precisely the Zionist goal of establishing a Jewish state that would, at best, marginalise the Palestinians as a small, dependent minority in their own homeland, and, at worst, eradicate and 'transfer' them. The 'security' threat posed by the 'transferred' inhabitants of the Palestinians towns and villages resulted from the Zionist movement's ideological premises and political agenda, namely the establishment of an ethnocratic, exclusionist Jewish state.

From the perspective of Morris's 'new' historiography, there was no inherent link between the 'transfer' of the Palestinians and the acquisition of their lands on the one hand and Zionism's long-advocated imperative of accommodating millions of Jewish immigrants in the Jewish state on the other. The nearest he comes to hinting at such a connection is the following:

> The war afforded the Yishuv a historic opportunity to enlarge the Jewish state's borders and, as things turned out, to create a state

without a very large Arab minority. The war would solve the Yishuv's problem of lack of land, which was necessary to properly absorb and settle the expected influx of Jewish immigrants.[40]

Would Zionism have succeeded in fulfilling its imperative of absorbing the large influx of Jewish immigrants while allowing the indigenous population to remain *in situ*? If not, could the Zionist objective of 'transferring' the Arabs from Palestine have been carried out 'voluntarily' and peacefully, without Palestinian resistance or the destruction of their society in 1948?

Morris's findings constitute a landmark and are a major contribution to our knowledge because they show that the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians was a result of direct attacks, fear of attacks, intimidation, psychological warfare (e.g., the whispering campaign) and sometimes outright expulsions ordered by the Haganah/IDF leadership. Yet, a wider explanatory and theoretical framework within which the Palestinian catastrophe can be properly understood must be sought elsewhere.

Morris's work reflects a nuanced Israeli view of the 1948 events. However, his historiography is a typical example of the narrative of victor: triumphalist, well-organised, well-written and comprehensive. His narrative remains anchored to its (ideological) Zionist moorings, which also provide the wider context for Israel's politics of denial. As Morris made clear in an interview with the Hebrew daily *Yedi'ot Aharonot* in November 2001 (and in his article in the *Guardian* of 21 February 2002) he firmly believes that Arabs started the 1948 war and, therefore, have only themselves to blame for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem.[41] In a recent article, entitled: 'Peace? No Chance', Morris had this to say:

> My conclusion, which angered many Israelis and undermined Zionist historiography, was that most of the refugees were a product of Zionist military action and, in smaller measure, of Israeli expulsion orders and Arab leaders' urgings or orders to move out. Critics of Israel subsequently latched on those findings that highlighted Israeli responsibility while ignoring the fact the problem was a direct consequence of the war that the Palestinians – and in their wake, the surrounding Arab states – had launched. ... I had explained that the creation of the problem was 'almost inevitable', given the Zionist aim of creating a Jewish state in a land largely populated by Arabs and given Arab resistance to the Zionist enterprise.[42]

It is important to note that similar views were expressed by Morris in the early 1990s and were discussed in my 1991 critique of Morris.[43] Moreover, despite the mountains of evidence about Israel's culpability, even from some of its 'revisionist historians', Morris suggests that Israel should continue with its pre-emptive strategy of refusing to accept any moral and legal responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem.

Morris is aware of the fact that the range of proposed solutions to the refugee problem would reflect the debate over the causes and circumstance of the 1948 exodus. While acknowledging the connection between the creation of Israel and the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem, he clearly believes that a Zionist offensive strategy is the best form of defence; he blames the victims, denying any major Zionist wrongdoing or any historical injustice; he also denies Palestinian 'right of return', and restitution of refugee property and Israel's moral responsibility or culpability for the creation of the refugee problem. For Morris, Israel should never atone and the Palestinian refugees should never gain restitutions.[44]

1948 was both the year of Palestinian catastrophe and the year of Israel's 'independence', of the triumph of the Zionist colonial project and rise of Israel. Moreover, history and historiography ought not to be written, exclusively or mainly, by the victors. They should be used as tools for initiating dialogue and cooperation across the national divide. The Palestinians still need a 'new *nakba* historiography' and the rewriting of their own history: one that does attempt to determine objectively the events in the most critical academic fashion; but they also need a critical *nakba* history that re-examines their nationalist perspective and narrative of the marginalised and of the victim. This should be the role of progressive historians, Palestinian, Israeli and others. Interpreting the history of the Holocaust has been a common endeavour towards which many Israelis, Germans, Europeans and Americans have contributed. It is in the interest of Israeli 'new historians' not to be carried away by triumphalism, but rather to concentrate on the task of expanding our common knowledge.

NOTES

1. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); see also Benny Morris, 'The New Historiography: Israel Confronts its Past', *Tikkun* 6

(November–December 1988), pp.14–23; Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); Tom Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* (New York: The Free Press, 1986); Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Avi Shlaim, *The Politics of Partition: King Abdullah, the Zionists and Palestine, 1921–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1947–1951* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992); Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim (eds), *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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