

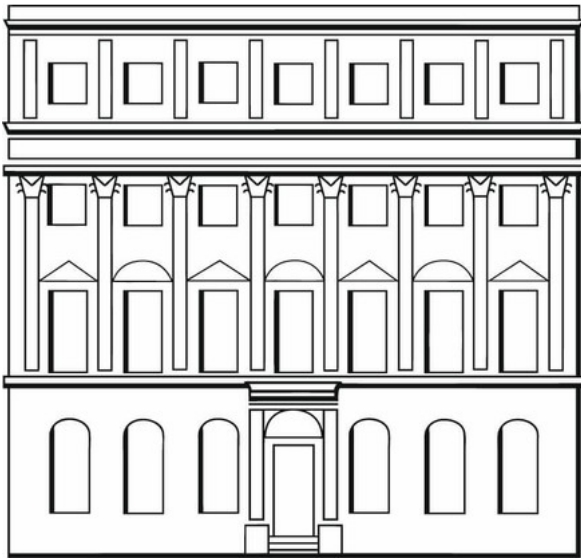
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Explaining Transfer: Zionist Thinking and the Creation of the
Palestinian Refugee Problem

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Explaining Transfer: Zionist Thinking and the Creation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem

BENNY MORRIS

The Palestinian refugee problem was born of the 1948 war, the first war between Israel and the Arabs. It was not the product of a preconceived master plan or, indeed, of a governmental policy decision or of a blanket, systematic implementation of a policy of expulsion. The overwhelming majority of the 700,000 Arabs who were displaced from their homes fled as a result of battle or encroaching battle. Most moved to other parts of Palestine (and, in this sense, they were not really refugees at all) rather than to neighbouring countries (the minority, some 300,000, reached and resettled in Lebanon, Syria, and Transjordan). They fled as the shells landed or, they feared, were about to land on their towns and villages. Many were driven by the economic privations of war—unemployment, soaring prices, and lack of food or fuel. Some left because their local leaders, military and political, urged or ordered them to leave, for military or political reasons. Many fled because of an accumulation of reasons. And some were expelled by advancing Israeli troops, primarily out of military calculation.

But these were the immediate causes of departure. Above and beyond them, there was a wider, general, explanatory meta-narrative. Or, rather, two metanarratives. One metanarrative, traditionally trotted out in Zionist propaganda, is that the Arab leadership—the national Palestinian leadership and/or the leaders of the neighbouring Arab states—beyond the particulars of flight from each area or battle, advised or ordered the Palestinians to leave their homes and move out of actual or potential battle zones to clear the path for the invading or about-to-invade Arab armies and perhaps to affix the stigma of expulsion on the Israeli side, as a justification for their invasion (the

armies of Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq invaded Israel/Palestine on 15 May 1948). This narrative has been thoroughly discredited by historians because there is practically no basis for it in the contemporary documentation. The documentation contains no hint of a general Arab order of this sort and, indeed, for May 1948, contains a great deal of evidence from a contrary direction, showing that at least some Arab leaders (King Abdullah of Jordan and Fawzi al Qawuqji, the commander of the Arab Liberation Army, an Arab League volunteer force sent into Palestine to help the Arab militias even before the pan-Arab invasion) tried to persuade Palestinians to stay put or, if already displaced, to return to their homes.

The other metanarrative, that offered in traditional Arab historiography, is that the Zionists from the first, as part of their ideology and programme, sought to transfer or expel the native Arab population of Palestine, and during the first decades of Zionism, organized for it, prepared a master plan, and, in 1947–8, seized the opportunity and systematically implemented it and expelled the Arab inhabitants from the areas earmarked by the United Nations for Jewish statehood and the additional areas that became 'Jewish' in the course of the fighting.

I would like to focus on an element of this second metanarrative, that part dealing with Zionist aforethought and pre-planning, what can be termed 'transfer' thinking—that the Zionists, from the first, intended and planned to expel the Arabs of Palestine. It is certainly true that Zionist leaders, from the 1890s onwards, indeed, beginning with the Zionist movement's prophet and founder, Theodor Herzl, occasionally toyed with the idea of transferring some or all of the Arabs from the area of the Jewish-state-to-be to make way for massive Zionist immigration and settlement. (The movement's leaders anticipated massive waves of immigration as a result of the surge in eastern European anti-semitism, beginning with the pogroms of 1881–4 in the tsarist empire.) For example, in one passage in his diaries, Herzl wrote: 'We must expropriate gently. . . . We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries [i.e. the countries of destination], while denying it employment in our country. . . . The removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly.'¹

¹ Theodor Herzl, *Complete Diaries*, 5 vols. (New York, 1960), i. 88, entry for 12 June 1895.

But two points are worth making. First, generally, when speaking and writing about transfer, and they did so rarely, partly because the subject was sensitive, Zionist leaders such as Artur Ruppin and Leo Motzkin, and pro-Zionist writers such as Israel Zangwill, talked in terms of a voluntary agreed transfer of the Arabs out of Palestine, with compensation, rather than a coerced expulsion. Second, the idea of transfer was never adopted as part of the Zionist movement's platform, nor as part of the programme or platform of any of the main Zionist parties, not in the nineteenth century and not in the twentieth century. And, in general, the Zionist leaders looked to massive Jewish immigration, primarily from Russia and Europe, as the means of establishing and then assuring a Jewish majority in Palestine or whatever part of it was to be earmarked for Jewish statehood.

But around 1929 and, with even greater frequency, during the late 1930s and early 1940s, Zionist leaders began to talk, in ever-wider, less discreet forums, about the desirability and possibility of transferring Arabs or 'the Arabs'. Both of twentieth-century Zionism's main leaders, David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) and Israel's founding Prime Minister, and Chaim Weizmann, the head of the World Zionist Organization and Israel's first President, repeatedly during these years referred approvingly to the idea. But, again, it is worth noting, this talk never translated into the co-option of the idea into official mainstream Zionist ideology or its advocacy in the movement's programme or in that of any of its chief component parties, the socialist Mapai, Hashomer Hatza'ir, and Ahdut Ha'avoda, the liberal General Zionists and Progressives, or the right-wing Revisionist Movement.

In August 1937 Ben-Gurion told an emergency meeting of the Zionist Congress, the movement's supreme decision-making body: 'We must look carefully at the question of whether transfer is possible, necessary, moral and useful. . . . Transfer of populations occurred previously, in the (Jezreel) Valley, in the Sharon and in other places [Ben-Gurion was referring to the small-scale removal of Arab tenant farmers from plots of land bought and settled by the Zionist movement during the previous decades]. . . . Now a transfer of a completely different scope will have to be carried out. In many parts of the country new settlement will not be possible without transferring the Arab peasantry. . . . [It] will

make possible a comprehensive settlement program. Thankfully, the Arab people have vast empty areas. Jewish power, which grows steadily, will also increase our possibilities to carry out the transfer on a large scale.²

Four years later, in 1941, at a meeting with Ivan Maiskii, the Soviet ambassador in London, Weizmann said 'that if half a million Arabs could be transferred, two million Jews (from Europe) could be put in their place. That, of course, would be a first instalment; what might happen afterwards was a matter for history.'³

The explanation for the increase in volume and intensity of pro-transfer pronouncements in the late 1930s and early 1940s is simple, and goes a long way to explaining the Zionist leadership's growing adoption of this idea in the first place. In 1929 the Palestine Arabs mounted their first major bout of violence against the Jewish community in Palestine. Altogether, some 130 Jews were killed—66 of them, incidentally, non- or anti-Zionist, ultra-orthodox yeshiva students and rabbis and their families, murdered by a Muslim mob brandishing clubs, hatchets, and knives in Hebron's Jewish quarter. In 1936 the Palestine Arabs launched a far more comprehensive campaign of violence directed at the British Mandate authorities and the Zionist settlers. The violence, dubbed by the Arabs the Great Arab Revolt, lasted until spring 1939, and claimed many hundreds of lives and entailed widespread destruction of property.

Apart from the ousting of British governance and the establishment of an independent Arab state in all of Palestine, the rebels demanded an immediate cessation of Jewish immigration to Palestine. And through this violence they succeeded in coercing the British—who faced the prospect of a three-front world war and were bent on appeasing the Arabs to achieve tranquillity in the Middle East, strategically vital because of land, sea, and air routes and oil deposits—severely to curtail Jewish immigration, a policy that was subsequently embodied in the government's White Paper of May 1939. The White Paper limited Jewish immigration to 75,000 over the following five years, with any

² Text of Ben-Gurion's speech, 7 Aug. 1937, Central Zionist Archive, S5-1543.

³ 'Short Minutes of Meeting Held on Thursday, January 30th, 1941, at 77 Great Russell Street, London, WC 1', unsigned, Chaim Weizmann Archive, 2271; and 'Meeting: I. M. Maiskii-Ch. Weizmann', 3 Feb. 1941, in *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1941-1953*, 2 vols. (London, 2000), i. 3-5.

further intake of Jewish immigrants dependent on Arab agreement, and promised the country's inhabitants independence within ten years. Given the demographics of 1939, with about one million Arabs and 450,000 Jews, the British were endorsing the emergence of an Arab-majority state.

This British curtailment of Jewish immigration under Arab military duress, at a point when the Jews constituted about 30 per cent of Palestine's population, put paid to the possibility of the achievement of a Jewish majority through immigration. In the longer term, the problem, from the Jewish perspective, was to be compounded by the Holocaust, in which six million Jews were murdered and in which most of Zionism's potential pool of immigrants was annihilated. Thus Arab violence in the late 1930s coupled during the following years with the Holocaust nixed the possibility of the Jews achieving a majority in Palestine by way of immigration.

But this was in the medium term. In the short term, the Arab violence of 1929, and, even more so, of 1936–9, had a further effect: it put the Jewish community on notice that the Arabs would not countenance the emergence of a Jewish state in Palestine and would fight against it tooth and nail; and that an Arab minority included in that Jewish state, even if established only on a small part of Palestine, would be disloyal and rebellious and would destabilize or overthrow that state from within.

This was the conclusion of the British royal commission, headed by Lord Peel, that was established in late 1936 to investigate the causes of the Arab Revolt and to recommend a solution to the Palestine problem. In its thorough, 400-page report, published in July 1937, the commission made two major recommendations: the termination of the Mandate and the partition of the country into two areas, with a Jewish state to be established on less than 20 per cent of the land (the Galilee and the northern and central Coastal Plain) and an Arab state, to be conjoined to Transjordan, to be established on the bulk of the remainder of Palestine. (Some 5–10 per cent of the country, it further recommended, including Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and a corridor to the Mediterranean, should be retained by Britain.) The commission ruled that the Mandate could not continue and that the two peoples, the Arabs and the Jews, could not live in peace in one unitary state (either the Jews would dominate the Arabs or the

Arabs would dominate the Jews, and both possibilities were unthinkable). The commission further recommended the removal of most or all of the Arabs from the area of the Jewish-state-to-be (some 300,000 souls) and their transfer to the Arab part of Palestine or out of the country altogether. The transfer was to be achieved voluntarily, but, if that proved impossible, by coercion. The commission reasoned: 'The existence [of this minority inside the Jewish state] clearly constitutes the most serious hindrance to the smooth and successful operation of partition. . . . If the settlement is to be clean and final, the question of the minorities must be boldly faced and firmly dealt with.'⁴ What the commission was saying was that a disloyal, discontented, and large Arab minority inside a future Jewish state, probably aided by the surrounding Arab world, would destabilize that state and, indeed, threaten the viability and longevity of the settlement itself. It was in the interest of the long-term prosperity of both peoples to separate them as completely as possible, determined the commission.

But the Peel Commission was driven to this conclusion not merely by the spectacle of Arab hatred for and violence against the Yishuv and the Arabs' stated unwillingness to live both inside and alongside a Jewish state in a partitioned Palestine. The commission had also been put on notice as regards the Palestinian Arabs' expulsionist mindset and programme. When the chairman of the Arab Higher Committee, Haj Muhammad Amin al Husseini, the cleric who headed the Palestinian national movement until 1948, testified before the Peel Commission, the members asked him: if Palestine is to become an independent, Arab-majority state—as Husseini, who flatly rejected any form of partition or Jewish statehood, was demanding—what would be the status of the 400,000 Jews already resident in the country? Husseini responded: those who were citizens of the Ottoman Palestine up to 1917—fewer than 60,000–70,000, all told—would receive Palestine citizenship. And what would be the fate of the remaining 330,000 Jews currently resident in the country, asked the commissioners. That would be for history to decide, he responded. The commissioners assumed that at the very least Husseini was consigning them to statelessness and, very possibly,

⁴ Palestine Royal Commission Report, Cmd 5479 (London, July 1937), 389–91.

to deportation. And, in their report, the commissioners hinted—alluding explicitly to the fate of the Assyrian Christian community in Iraq, hundreds of whom had recently been massacred by Muslims, despite Iraqi government assurances to the West—that the fate of Palestine's Jews under a Muslim Arab majority government might be much worse.

What Husseini implied before the Peel Commission, when he was at his diplomatic best, was what he usually said more explicitly elsewhere: the Jews who had arrived in Palestine after 1917, they and their children, would not be allowed to remain. And, of course, it was not just Husseini. The cry of 'idbah al yahud' (slaughter the Jews) had accompanied each of the bouts of violence, or anti-Jewish pogroms, unleashed by Palestine's Arabs in 1920, 1921, and 1929, and was echoed repeatedly by Arab mobs during the 1936–9 revolt. And it was in response to this violent and expulsionist mindset and ideology that the Zionist leadership increasingly turned to the idea of transfer as a solution to the Yishuv's 'Arab problem'. If this was the enemy and this is what they did and sought, no viable Jewish state could come into existence with a large Arab minority in its midst.

But events in Europe without doubt compounded the Zionist dilemma and further fuelled its new-found interest in transfer. From 1933 on, central and eastern Europe were in the throes of a violent antisemitic upsurge, leading to a progressive deterioration in the condition of European Jewry and a threat to its very existence. It was this that drove the urgency in the mid and late 1930s of the Zionist demand for a state that could serve as a haven for these threatened millions. And it was this that underlay the readiness both to compromise over territory—the Zionist movement had traditionally sought all of Palestine for its Jewish state, but by 1937 it was ready for partition and resigned itself to obtaining only a chunk of Palestine—and the demand that the small area allotted for Jewish statehood at least be clear of Arabs, so that there would be room to accommodate the needy millions and that they would not be threatened by violent, indeed murderous, neighbours within that state. The facts that the Palestinian Arabs, by their violence in 1936–9, had pushed the British into sealing off Palestine as a possible haven for Europe's persecuted Jews and that Husseini during the 1930s had repeatedly made friendly overtures towards the Nazi regime and, indeed, in 1941 had

moved to Berlin and for the next four years worked for the Third Reich, recruiting Muslims for the *Wehrmacht* and calling for an anti-Allied jihad in the Middle East, only compounded the Yishuv's fears of Palestinian intentions and their animosity towards them. In short, Arab expulsionist and annihilationist, or perceived annihilationist, intentions towards Zion's Jews triggered expulsionist Yishuv attitudes towards Palestine's Arabs.

Without doubt, Zionist thinking about transfer in the late 1930s and early 1940s helped pave the way, at least on a psychological plain, for the massive transfer that occurred in 1948, resulting in the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. But the process was also driven by the events of 1947–8 themselves, with what had occurred in the 1930s as a backdrop. Without doubt, the Holocaust played a part: the Holocaust had demonstrated that massive murderous intentions could and did translate into reality and that the world would not necessarily intervene to stymie the Arabs.

In November 1947 the Palestinian Arabs, followed by the Arab states, rejected the UN General Assembly partition plan (Resolution 181) and launched a war to prevent the emergence of a Jewish state. Indeed, by rejecting the succession of partition-based solutions—from Peel in 1937, and the United Nations in 1947—the Palestinians had turned the Palestine conflict into a zero-sum game. They had said and were saying, consistently, that it was all or nothing: they wanted all of Palestine, and not an inch for the Jews. In November–December 1947 Palestine's Arabs rose up to frustrate the implementation of the UN resolution. They failed. And in May 1948, the Arab states joined the fray, invading the country. Their radio broadcasts were explicit: the goal was to destroy the Yishuv. Or, as the Arab League's Secretary-General, Azzam Pasha, told the British minister in Amman, Alec Kirkbride, on the eve of the pan-Arab invasion: 'It does not matter how many [Jews] there are. We will sweep them into the sea.'⁵ This was the message broadcast by the Arab 'street', which the Arab leaders held in awe, and this was the gist of the fatwas issued by the Muslim religious authorities in the Middle East. As the ulema, the council of theologians, of Cairo's al-Azhar University, perhaps the supreme authority in Sunni Islam, put it

⁵ Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (New York, 1988), 228.

in a fatwa on 26 April: 'The liberation of Palestine [is] a religious duty for all Muslims. . . . The Islamic and Arab governments should without delay take effective and radical measures.'⁶ Jihad had been proclaimed and the infidel was to be put to the sword. Even Matiel Mughannam, the Lebanese Christian woman who headed the AHC-affiliated Arab Women's Organization in Palestine, told an interviewer (in January 1948): 'The UN decision has united all Arabs, as they have never been united before, not even against the Crusaders. . . . [A Jewish state] has no chance to survive now that the "holy war" has been declared. All the Jews will eventually be massacred.'⁷

Quite naturally, with the Holocaust still fresh in their minds, the Yishuv felt mortally threatened; as, indeed, it was. The Jews took the Arabs at their word; the talk of expulsion and worse lay heavily in the air. No decision was taken in 1947–8 by the Yishuv's leadership bodies—the Jewish Agency Executive, the People's Administration, the Provisional Government of Israel, the Haganah/IDF General Staff—to expel 'the Arabs'; expulsion was never adopted as policy (which is why, incidentally, the newborn Jewish state emerged from the 1948 war with almost a fifth of its citizens Arabs). But a mindset of transfer—not a policy but an unsystematic, inchoate will to be rid of the hostile, threatening Arab population in the area of the Jewish state—took hold in the Yishuv and helped propel the large-scale transfer that was reinforced and consolidated by the decision of the Israeli government, taken in summer 1948, not to allow the return of the refugees. Such a return, it was quite logically felt, would necessarily inject a potential large fifth column into the midst of the newborn state. It could not be countenanced. Continued Arab (including Palestinian Arab) hostility toward Israel made sure that Israel would never accept the refugees' 'right of return', as endorsed in UN General Assembly Resolution 194 in December 1948. At the same time, the Arab states refused properly to resettle the refugees in their midst. Together, these assured the persistence of the Palestinian refugee problem down to the present day.

⁶ Campbell to Foreign Office, 1 May 1948 (no. 536), PRO FO 371-68371.

⁷ Nadia Lourie, 'Interview with Mrs. Mogannam (Mughannam)', 10 Jan. 1948, Central Zionist Archives S25-9005.