
Were the Palestinians Expelled?

Efraim Karsh

SINCE THE birth of the Jewish state in 1948, there have been two Arab-Israeli conflicts. The first one was, and is, military in nature. Played out on the battlefield, it has had more than its share of heroes, villains, martyrs, and victims. The second, less bloody but no less incendiary, has been the battle over the historical culpability for the 1948 war and the accompanying dispersion of large numbers of Palestinian Arabs.

The Israeli "narrative" of this episode sees the Palestinian tragedy as primarily self-inflicted, a direct result of the vehement Palestinian/Arab rejection of the United Nations resolution of November 29, 1947 calling for the establishment of two states in Palestine, and the violent attempt by the Arab nations of the region to abort the Jewish state at birth. By contrast, Palestinians view themselves as the hapless victims of a Zionist grand design to dispossess them from their patrimony.

For much of the last half-century, this second battle lay in the background as Israel struggled for survival and the Arab world continued to nourish and from time to time act upon its hope for the Jewish state's extinction by military means. But the focus of

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confrontation has now shifted. As the possibility looms of some political resolution to the century-long conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the latter have adamantly insisted on reintroducing into debate the events surrounding the 1948 war and the birth of Israel. In the words of the prominent Palestinian politician Hanan Ashrawi:

They [the Israelis] cannot wipe the slate clean and say: "Now we will deal with history in another way. The political process is a new process and must not be taken back". . . . What we need is, first of all, a genuine recognition, an admission of guilt and culpability by Israel; the real authentic narrative of the Palestinians has to come out, to be acknowledged, to be recognized.

Ashrawi is not invoking history for history's sake. Hers is a clear and far-reaching political agenda: first, to rewrite the history of the 1948 war in a manner that stains Israel politically and morally; then, to force Israel to measure up to its "original sin"—the allegedly forcible dispossession of native Palestinians—both by permitting the return of refugees to parts of the territory that is now Israel and by compensating them monetarily for their sufferings.

For the first time since 1948, this objective seems to be within reach. Fatigued by decades of fighting, and yearning for normalcy, most Israelis, while still nominally opposed to the return of Palestinian refugees, have effectively conceded defeat in the

factual battle over their past. Not only have substantial elements of the Palestinian narrative—championed within Israel itself by a group of revisionist “new historians”—become the received wisdom in the country’s academic and intellectual circles, but this same view of the past has also made inroads into public consciousness. A number of new high-school textbooks, introduced last year into the Israeli curriculum, repudiate many well-documented and long-established facts about the 1948 war in favor of standard Arab/Palestinian claims, including the charge that substantial numbers of Palestinians were expelled during the war and that Israel bears sole responsibility for their ongoing status as refugees.

“Only ten years ago, much of this was taboo,” the Israeli author of one of the new ninth-grade textbooks boasted to the *New York Times*. “Now we can deal with this the way Americans deal with the Indians and black enslavement.” That is precisely how the Palestinians plan to deal with it as well: i.e., through Israel’s acknowledgment of guilt and the implementation of the Palestinian “right of return.”

The city of Haifa, on Israel’s northwest coast, has come to epitomize this demand for “rectification” (to use Ashrawi’s term). It is not difficult to understand why. In 1948, Haifa’s Arab population was second in size only to that of Jaffa. No less significantly, Haifa then constituted the main socioeconomic and administrative center in northern Palestine for both Arabs and Jews. It was one of the primary ports of the eastern Mediterranean, the hub of Palestine’s railway system, the site of the country’s oil refinery, and a formidable industrial center.

When hostilities between Arabs and Jews broke out in 1947, there were 62,500 Arabs in Haifa; by May 1948, all but a few were gone, accounting for fully a tenth of the total Palestinian dispersion. Little wonder, then, that Haifa has acquired a mythical place in Palestinian collective memory, on a par with Jaffa’s and greater than Jerusalem’s. As the prominent Palestinian author and political activist, Fawaz Turki, himself a native of Haifa, has put it,

You [Israelis] owe me. And you owe me big. You robbed me of my city and my property. You owe me reparations (which I know that you, or your children, will one day have to pay, and under duress if need be) for all the pain and unspeakable suffering you have put me, my family, and my fellow exiles through.

But what exactly happened in Haifa? Was there “an act of expulsion,” as the Palestinians and Israeli “new historians” have argued? Or was the older Israeli contention correct—namely, that the Arabs

who fled the city in 1947-48 did so of their own volition, and/or at the behest of their leaders? During the past decade, as it happens, Israeli and Western state archives have declassified millions of records, including invaluable contemporary Arab and Palestinian documents, relating to the 1948 war and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. These make it possible to establish the truth about what happened in Haifa—and by extension, elsewhere in Palestine.

AS THE British Mandate in Palestine neared its end in 1947-48, the city of Haifa became engulfed in intermittent violence that pitted Arab fighters, recruited locally as well as from neighboring Arab countries, against the Jewish underground organization known as the Hagana. The hostilities would reach their peak on April 21-22, 1948, when the British suddenly decided to evacuate most of the town and each of the two parties moved in quickly to try to fill the vacuum and assert control. But the first thing the documents show is that Arab flight from Haifa began well *before* the outbreak of these hostilities, and even before the UN’s November 29, 1947 partition resolution.

On October 23, over a month earlier, a British intelligence brief was already noting that “leading Arab personalities are acting on the assumption that disturbances are near at hand, and have already evacuated their families to neighboring Arab countries.” By November 21, as the General Assembly was getting ready to vote, not just “leading Arab personalities” but “many Arabs of Haifa” were reported to be removing their families. And as the violent Arab reaction to the UN resolution built up, eradicating any hope of its peaceful enforcement, this stream of refugees turned into a flood.

Thus it was that, by mid-December 1947, some 15,000-20,000 people, almost a third of the city’s Arab population, had fled, creating severe adversity for those remaining. Economic and commercial activity ground to a halt as the wealthier classes converted their assets to gold or U.S. dollars and transferred them abroad. Merchants and industrialists moved their businesses to Egypt, Syria, or Lebanon, causing both unemployment and shortages in basic necessities. Entire areas were emptied of their residents.

These difficulties were exacerbated by deep cleavages within the Arab community itself. The town’s Christian Arabs, erecting clear boundaries between themselves and Muslims, refused to feed the Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraqi recruits arriving to wrest the city from the Jews, asserted their determination not to attack Jewish forces unless attacked first, and

established a special guard to protect themselves from Muslim violence. Added to this was a growing lawlessness, including pandemic looting of deserted properties.

At the time, the official leadership of Haifa Arabs was a fifteen-member body called the National Committee. Although the Committee strove to curb the mass flight, urging Haifa's Arabs to stay put and castigating those who fled—occasionally, these warnings were backed by the torching of escapees' belongings—its remonstrations proved of no avail.

To be sure, the Committee itself hardly constituted a model of commitment or self-sacrifice. For one thing, scarcely a meeting was attended by all members. For another, affluent though they were, Committee members, while taking care to reimburse themselves for the smallest expense, rarely contributed financially to the national struggle. Transcripts of the Committee's meetings do not exactly convey a grasp of the severity of the situation: they tend to be taken up instead with trivialities, from the placement of an office partition to the payment to a certain individual of £1.29 in travel expenses.

Even when the Committee did try to deal with the cycle of violence in which the town was embroiled, its efforts were repeatedly undermined by the sheer number of armed groups operating in defiance of its authority, by infighting between its own pragmatists and militants, and by the total lack of coordination, if not outright hostility, between the Committee and its parent body, the Arab Higher Committee (AHC). The latter, the effective government of all the Arabs in Palestine, was headed by the former Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, now resident in Cairo. Giving his own fighters free rein in Haifa, the Mufti turned a deaf ear to the Committee's requests and recommendations. Not even the dispatch of an emergency delegation to Cairo in late January, warning that, if terrorist activity did not cease, the result would be the eventual disappearance of the entire Haifa community, had any effect.

Against this background, the National Committee apparently gave up the hope of stemming further flight. Shortly after the return of the delegation from Cairo, a proposal was passed urging improvements in the condition of Palestinian refugees in the states where they now found themselves, and requesting help in settling them there. This was momentous indeed: the official leadership of the second largest Arab community in Mandate Palestine was not only condoning mass flight but suggesting that Arab refugee status be, however temporarily, institutionalized.

As the months passed and Britain's departure from Palestine neared, such views gained further currency. Even the Mufti, who had warned that "the flight of . . . families abroad will weaken the morale of our noble, struggling nation," was not averse to the evacuation of the nonfighting populace. In March 1948, the AHC evidently ordered the removal of women and children from Haifa; a special committee was established in Syria and Lebanon to oversee the operation, and preparations began in earnest with the chartering of a ship from an Egyptian company.

BY EARLY April 1948, according to Rashid Hajj Ibrahim, the head of the National Committee, the city's Arab populace had dwindled to some 35,000-40,000. (Ibrahim himself, a man who had been active in Haifa's public life for decades, left for Cairo shortly thereafter, never to return.) By the time the final battle for the city was joined a few weeks later, the number had fallen still further, and only about half the town's original community remained.

Not for long: disheartened by the desertion of their local military leaders, and petrified by wildly exaggerated accounts of a Zionist atrocity at the village of Deir Yassin near Jerusalem, the remnant now took to the road. In the early morning of April 22, as Hagana forces battled their way to the downtown market area, thousands streamed into the port, still held by the British army. Within hours, many of these had fled by trains and buses, while the rest awaited evacuation by sea.

What was left of the local Arab leadership now asked the British military to stop the fighting. When this failed, a delegation requested a meeting with the British commander, Major-General Hugh Stockwell, "with a view to obtaining a truce with the Jews." Having learned from Stockwell the Hagana's terms for such a truce, the delegates then left to consult with their peers, in particular asking the Syrian consul in Haifa to inform his government and the Arab League. In no time, the British ambassador in Damascus, P.M. Broadmead, was summoned to a meeting with Shukri al-Quwaitly, the president of Syria.

Reminding the president that neither of them was familiar with the real situation on the ground, Broadmead begged al-Quwaitly "to urge moderation and to take no action which would bring this local Haifa issue on to a wider plane." To this, al-Quwaitly responded that he "was very nervous concerning public opinion," yet refrained from any threat of military intervention. Thus, no instruc-

tions from Damascus seem to have reached the Haifa truce delegation by four in the afternoon, when it met its Jewish counterpart at city hall.

There, after an impassioned plea for peace and reconciliation by the town's Jewish mayor, Shabtai Levy, the assembled delegates went through the truce terms point by point, modifying a number of them to meet Arab objections. Then the Arabs requested a 24-hour recess "to give them the opportunity to contact their brothers in the Arab states." Although this was deemed unacceptable, a briefer break was approved and the meeting adjourned at 5:20.

When the Arabs returned that evening at 7:15, they had a surprise in store: as Stockwell would later put it in his official report, they stated "that they were not in a position to sign the truce, as they had no control over the Arab military elements in the town and that, in all sincerity, they could not fulfill the terms of the truce, even if they were to sign." They then offered, "as an alternative, that the Arab population wished to evacuate Haifa and that they would be grateful for military assistance."

This came as a bombshell. With tears in his eyes, the elderly Levy pleaded with the Arabs, most of whom were his personal acquaintances, to reconsider, saying that they were committing "a cruel crime against their own people." Yaacov Salomon, a prominent Haifa lawyer and the Hagana's chief liaison officer in the city, followed suit, assuring the Arab delegates that he "had the instructions of the commander of the zone . . . that if they stayed on they would enjoy equality and peace, and that we, the Jews, were interested in their staying on and the maintenance of harmonious relations." Even the stoic Stockwell was shaken. "You have made a foolish decision," he thundered at the Arabs. "Think it over, as you'll regret it afterward. You must accept the conditions of the Jews. They are fair enough. Don't permit life to be destroyed senselessly. After all, it was you who began the fighting, and the Jews have won."

But the Arabs were unmoved. The next morning, they met with Stockwell and his advisers to discuss the practicalities of the evacuation. Of the 30,000-plus Arabs still in Haifa, only a handful, they said, wished to stay. Perhaps the British could provide 80 trucks a day, and in the meantime ensure an orderly supply of foodstuffs in the city and its environs? At this, a senior British officer at the meeting erupted: "If you sign your truce you would automatically get all your food worries over. You are merely starving your own people." "We will not sign," the Arabs retorted. "All is already lost, and it does not matter if everyone is killed so long as we do not sign the document."

Within a matter of days, only about 3,000 of Haifa's Arab residents remained in the city.

WHAT HAD produced the seemingly instantaneous sea change from explicit interest in a truce to its rejection only a few hours later? In an address to the UN Security Council on April 23, Jammal Husseini of the AHC contended that the Arabs in Haifa had been "presented with humiliating conditions and preferred to abandon all their possessions and leave." But this was not so: not only had the Arab leadership in Haifa and elsewhere been apprised of the Hagana's terms several hours before the meeting on April 22, but, as we have seen, the Arab delegates to the meeting had proceeded to negotiate on the basis of those terms and had succeeded in modifying several key elements.

Later writers have spoken of "a Jewish propaganda blitz" aimed at frightening the Arabs into fleeing. Yet the only evidence offered for this "blitz" is a single sentence from a book by the Jewish writer Arthur Koestler, who was not even in Palestine at the time of the battle for Haifa but (in his own words) "pieced together the improbable story of the conquest by the Jews of this key harbor" about a week after his arrival on June 4—that is, nearly two months after the event. As against this isolated second-hand account, there is an overwhelming body of evidence from contemporary Arab, Jewish, British, and American sources to prove that, far from seeking to drive the Arabs out of Haifa, the Jewish authorities went to considerable lengths to convince them to stay.

This effort was hardly confined to Levy's and Salomon's impassioned pleas at city hall. The Hagana's truce terms stipulated that Arabs were expected to "carry on their work as equal and free citizens of Haifa." In its Arabic-language broadcasts and communications, the Hagana consistently articulated the same message. On April 22, at the height of the fighting, it distributed a circular noting its ongoing campaign to clear the town of all "criminal foreign bands" so as to allow the restoration of "peace and security and good neighborly relations among all of the town's inhabitants." The following day, a Hagana broadcast asserted that "the Jews did and do still believe that it is in the real interests of Haifa for its citizens to go on with their work and to ensure that normal conditions are restored to the city."

On April 24, a Hagana radio broadcast declared: "Arabs, we do not wish to harm you. Like you, we only want to live in peace. . . . If the Jews and [the] Arabs cooperate, no power in the world will ever attack our country or ignore our rights." Two days later, informing its Arab listeners that "Haifa has

returned to normal," the Hagana reported that "between 15,000 and 20,000 Arabs had expressed their willingness to remain in the city," that "Arab employees had been appointed to key posts," and that Arabs had been given "part of the corn, flour, and rice intended for the Jews in Haifa." And on April 27, the Hagana distributed a leaflet urging the fleeing Arab populace to return home: "Peace and order reign supreme across the town and every resident can return to his free life and resume his regular work in peace and security."

That these were not hollow words was evidenced by, inter alia, the special dispensation given to Jewish bakers by the Haifa rabbinate to bake bread during the Passover holiday for distribution among the Arabs, and by the April 23 decision of the joint Jewish-Arab Committee for the Restoration of Life to Normalcy to dispatch two of its members to inform women, children, and the elderly that they could return home. In a May 6 fact-finding report to the Jewish Agency executive (the effective government of Jewish Palestine), Golda Meir told her colleagues that while "we will not go to Acre or Nazareth to return the Arabs [to Haifa] . . . our behavior should be such that if it were to encourage them to return—they would be welcome; we should not mistreat the Arabs so as to deter them from returning."

The sincerity of the Jewish position is attested as well by reports from the U.S. consulate in Haifa. Thus, on April 25, after the fighting was over, Vice Consul Aubrey Lippincott cabled Washington that the "Jews hope poverty will cause laborers [to] return [to] Haifa as many are already doing despite Arab attempts [to] persuade them [to] keep out." On April 29, according to Lippincott, even Farid Saad of the National Committee was saying that Jewish leaders had "organized a large propaganda campaign to persuade [the] Arabs to return." Similarly, the British district superintendent of police reported on April 26 that "every effort is being made by the Jews to persuade the Arab populace to stay and carry on with their normal lives, to get their shops and businesses open, and to be assured that their lives and interests will be safe." Several more reports in the same vein were sent by British authorities in Palestine to their superiors in London.

MEANWHILE, HOWEVER, as the Jews were attempting to keep the Arabs in Haifa, an ad-hoc body, the Arab Emergency Committee, was doing its best to get them out. Scaremongering was a major weapon in its arsenal. Some Arab residents received written threats that, unless they left town, they would be branded as traitors deserving of

death. Others were told they could expect no mercy from the Jews. Sheikh Abd al-Rahman Murad of the National Committee, who had headed the truce negotiating team, proved particularly effective at this latter tactic: on April 23, he warned a large group of escapees from the neighborhood of Wadi Nisnas, who were about to return to their homes, that if they did so they would all be killed, as the Jews spared not even women and children. On the other hand, he continued, the Arab Legion had 200 trucks ready to transfer the Haifa refugees to a safe haven, where they would be given free accommodation, clothes, and food.

The importance of these actions cannot be overstated. The Emergency Committee was not a random collection of self-appointed vigilantes, as some Palestinian apologists would later argue. Rather, it was the successor to the Haifa National Committee and involved two National Committee members: Farid Saad and Sheikh Murad. In other words, *the evacuation of the Haifa Arab community was ordered, and executed, by the Arab Higher Committee's official local representatives.* The only question is whether those representatives did what they did on their own, or under specific instructions from above.

As I indicated earlier, the Haifa leaders had been extremely reluctant to accept or reject the Hagana's truce terms on their own recognizance: hence the initial appeal to their peers, and hence the request for a 24-hour recess to seek the advice of the Arab states. When this was not granted, and the Committee had to make do with the brief respite granted to it, its delegates proceeded to telephone the AHC office in Beirut for instructions. They were then told explicitly not to sign, but rather to evacuate. Astonished, the Haifa delegates protested, but were assured that "it is only a matter of days" before Arab retaliatory action would commence, and "since there will be a lot of casualties following our intended action, . . . you [would] be held responsible for the casualties among the Arab population left in the town."

This entire conversation was secretly recorded by the Hagana, and its substance was passed on to some of the Jewish negotiators at city hall. In retrospect, it helps explain a defiant comment made at the meeting by the Arab delegates after they announced the intended evacuation—namely, that "they had lost [the] first round but . . . there were more to come." From Yaacov Salomon, one of the Jewish negotiators, we also learn of certain other emotions experienced by his Arab interlocutors:

The Arab delegation arrived at the evening meeting under British escort, but when the meeting

broke up they asked me to give them a lift and to take them home. I took them in my car.

On the way back they told me that they had instructions not to sign the truce and that they could not sign the truce on any terms, as this would mean certain death at the hands of their own people, particularly the Muslim leaders, guided by the Mufti. . . . While therefore they would remain in town, as they thought that would be best in their own interests, they had to advise the Arabs to leave.

In any case, what the Hagana had learned by covert means became public knowledge within days. Already on April 25, the American consulate in Haifa was reporting that the "local Mufti-dominated Arab leaders urge all Arabs [to] leave [the] city and large numbers [are] going." Three days later it pointed a clear finger: "Reportedly Arab Higher Committee ordering all Arabs [to] leave." Writing on the same day to the colonial secretary in London, Sir Alan Cunningham, the British high commissioner for Palestine, was equally forthright: "British authorities in Haifa have formed the impression that total evacuation is being urged on the Haifa Arabs from higher Arab quarters and that the townfolk themselves are against it." Finally, a British intelligence report summing up the events of the week judged that, had it not been for the incitement and scaremongering of the Haifa Arab leadership, most Arab residents might well have stayed.

WITHOUT A past there can be no future. Today, as the saga of Israel's birth is being turned upside down, with aggressors portrayed as hapless victims and victims as aggressors, it can be only a matter of time before the Jewish state is presented with the bill for its alleged crimes against the Palestinian refugees. Indeed, this past May, as part of the commemoration of the 52nd anniversary of the 1948 war (in Palestinian parlance, *al-Nakba*, the catastrophe), Yasir Arafat's Palestinian Authority attempted to link any final-status settlement with Israel to the return of refugees to their homes in Haifa and Jaffa. Organized tours brought scores of Palestinians to locations in Israel abandoned in 1948, and the Arab-language Jerusalem newspaper *al-Quds* bemoaned "the uprooting of the Palestinian people in one of the worst crimes of modern history."

But were they uprooted, and if so by whom? In Haifa, one of the largest and most dramatic locales of the Palestinian exodus, not only had half the

Arab community fled the city before the final battle was joined, but another 5,000-15,000 apparently left voluntarily during the fighting while the rest, some 15,000-25,000 souls, were ordered or bullied into leaving against their wishes, almost certainly on the instructions of the Arab Higher Committee. The crime was exclusively of Arab making. There was no Jewish grand design to force this departure, nor was there a psychological "blitz." To the contrary, both the Haifa Jewish leadership and the Hagana went to great lengths to convince the Arabs to stay.

These efforts, indeed, reflected the wider Jewish attitude in Palestine. *All* deliberations of the Jewish leadership regarding the transition to statehood were based on the assumption that, in the Jewish state that would arise with the termination of the British Mandate, Palestine's Arabs would remain as equal citizens.

And just there, no doubt, lay the reason why the Arab leadership preferred the evacuation of Haifa's Arabs to any truce with the Hagana. For according to the UN partition resolution, Haifa was to be one of the foremost towns of the new Jewish state; hence, any agreement by its Arab community to live under Jewish rule would have amounted to acquiescence in Jewish statehood in a part of Palestine. This, to both the Palestinian leadership and the Arab world at large, was anathema.

Shortly after the fall of Haifa to the Hagana, Abd al-Rahman Azzam, the secretary-general of the Arab League, declared: "The Zionists are seizing the opportunity to establish a Zionist state against the will of the Arabs. The Arab peoples have accepted the challenge and soon they will close their account with them." At the time, the cost of this fiery determination by the Arab peoples to "close their account" with the Zionists included the driving of tens of thousands of their hapless fellow-Arabs from their homes. This simple, incontrovertible fact has never been acknowledged in the Arab world. Instead, and in moral collusion with many of today's war-weary Israelis, responsibility for the 1948 Arab aggression and its tragic consequences has been placed squarely on the shoulders of the Zionists themselves.

And so the account lies open. Today, *mutatis mutandis*, Hanan Ashrawi, Fawaz Turki, and a host of others are keeping faith with the spirit of Abd al-Rahman Azzam. It only remains to be seen whether the descendants of the Jews who in 1948 pleaded with Haifa's Arabs to stay will keep faith with the truth, and act on it.