~~TEN MYTHS ABOUT~~ ISRAEL

ILAN PAPPE

"Ilan Pappe is Israel's bravest, most principled, most incisive historian"

JOHN PILGER

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Ilan Pappe

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Preface

History lies at the core of every conflict. A true and unbiased understanding of the past offers the possibility of peace. The distortion or manipulation of history, in contrast, will only sow disaster. As the example of the Israel–Palestine conflict shows, historical disinformation, even of the most recent past, can do tremendous harm. This willful misunderstanding of history can promote oppression and protect a regime of colonization and occupation. It is not surprising, therefore, that policies of disinformation and distortion continue to the present and play an important part in perpetuating the conflict, leaving very little hope for the future.

Constructed fallacies about the past and the present in Israel and Palestine hinder us from understanding the origins of the conflict. Meanwhile, the constant manipulation of the relevant facts works against the interests of all those victimized by the ongoing bloodshed and violence. What is to be done?

The Zionist historical account of how the disputed land became the state of Israel is based on a cluster of myths that subtly cast doubt on the Palestinians' moral right to the land. Often, the Western mainstream media and political elites accept this set of myths as a given truth, as well as the justification for Israeli actions across the last sixty or so years. More often than not, the tacit acceptance of these myths serves as an explanation for Western governments' disinclination to interfere in any meaningful way in a conflict that has been going on since the nation's foundation.

This book challenges these myths, which appear in the public domain as indisputable truths. These statements are, to my eyes, distortions and fabrications that can—and must—be refuted through a closer examination of the historical record.

The common thread that runs through this book is the juxtaposition of popular assumption and historical reality. By placing each myth side by side with the truth, each chapter exposes the weaknesses of the received wisdom through an examination of the latest historical research.

The book covers ten foundational myths, or clusters of myths, which are common and recognizable to anyone engaged in one way or another with the Israel–Palestine question. The myths and the counter arguments follow a chronological order.

The first chapter charts Palestine on the eve of the arrival of Zionism in the late nineteenth century. The myth is the depiction of Palestine as an empty, arid, almost desert-like land that was cultivated by the arriving Zionists. The counter-argument reveals a thriving pre-existing society undergoing accelerated processes of modernization and nationalization.

The myth of Palestine being a land without people has its correlate in the famous myth of the people without a land, the subject of Chapter 2. Were the Jews indeed the original inhabitants of Palestine who deserved to be supported in every way possible in their "return" to their "homeland"? The myth insists that the Jews who arrived in 1882 were the descendants of the Jews expelled by the Romans around 70 CE. The counterargument questions this genealogical connection. Quite a hefty scholarly effort has shown that the Jews of Roman Palestine remained on the land and were first converted to Christianity and then to Islam. Who these Jews were is still an open question—maybe the Khazars who converted to Judaism in the ninth century; or maybe the mixture of races across a millennium precludes any answer to such a question. More importantly, I argue in this chapter that in the pre-Zionist period the connection between the Jewish communities in the world and Palestine was religious and spiritual, not political. Associating the return of the Jews with statehood, before the emergence of Zionism, was a Christian project until the sixteenth century, and thereafter a specifically Protestant one (in particular an Anglican one).

Chapter 3 closely examines the myth that equates Zionism with Judaism (so that anti-Zionism can only be depicted as

anti-Semitism). I try to refute this equation through an historical assessment of Jewish attitudes to Zionism and an analysis of the Zionist manipulation of Judaism for colonial and, later, strategic reasons.

The fourth chapter engages with the claim that there is no connection between colonialism and Zionism. The myth is that Zionism is a liberal national liberation movement while the counterargument frames it as a colonialist, indeed a settler colonial, project similar to those seen in South Africa, the Americas, and Australia. The significance of this refutation is that it reflects how we think about the Palestinian resistance to Zionism and later to Israel. If Israel is just a democracy defending itself, then Palestinian bodies such as the PLO are purely terrorist outfits. However, if their struggle is against a colonialist project then they are an anticolonialist movement, and their international image will be very different from the one Israel and its supporters try to impose on world public opinion.

Chapter 5 revisits the well-known mythologies of 1948, and in particular aims to remind readers why the claim of voluntary Palestinian flight has been successfully debunked by professional historiography. Other myths associated with the 1948 events are also discussed in this chapter.

The final historical chapter questions whether the 1967 war was forced on Israel and was therefore a “no choice” war. I claim that this was part of Israel’s desire to complete the takeover of Palestine that had almost been completed in the 1948 war. The planning for the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip began in 1948, and did not cease until the historical opportunity offered by a reckless Egyptian decision in June 1967. I further argue that the Israeli policies immediately after the occupation prove that Israel anticipated the war rather than accidently staggered into it.

The seventh chapter brings us into the present. Is Israel a democratic state, I ask, or is it a non-democratic entity? I make the case for the latter by examining the status of the Palestinians inside Israel and in the occupied territories (who

together make up almost half of the population ruled by Israel).

Chapter 8 deals with the Oslo process. After nearly a quarter of a century since the signing of the accord, we have a good perspective on the fallacies connected to the process and can ask whether it was a peace accord that failed, or a successful Israeli ploy to deepen the occupation.

A similar perspective can be now applied to the Gaza Strip and the still widely accepted myth that the misery of the people there is due to the terrorist nature of the Hamas. In the ninth chapter I choose to differ, and present another interpretation of what has happened in Gaza since the turn of the last century.

Finally, in the tenth chapter I challenge the myth that the two-states solution is the only way forward. We have been blessed with excellent activist and scholarly works critiquing this formula and offering alternative solutions. They constitute a formidable challenge to this last myth.

The book also includes a timeline as an appendix, which will help readers to further contextualize the arguments.

My hope is that, whether the reader is a newcomer to the field, or a veteran student of it, the book will be a useful tool. It is directed primarily to anyone who finds themselves in a discussion on the evergreen topic of the Israel–Palestine question. This is not a balanced book; it is yet another attempt to redress the balance of power on behalf of the colonized, occupied, and oppressed Palestinians in the land of Israel and Palestine. It would be a real bonus if advocates of Zionism or loyal supporters of Israel were also willing to engage with the arguments herein. After all, the book is written by an Israeli Jew who cares about his own society as much as he does about the Palestinian one. Refuting mythologies that sustain injustice should be of benefit to everyone living in the country or wishing to live there. It forms a basis on which all its inhabitants might enjoy the great achievements that only one privileged group currently has access to.

Moreover, the book will hopefully prove a useful tool for activists who recognize that knowledge about Palestine is as necessary as commitment to the cause. It is not a substitute for the incredible work done by many scholars over the years, whose contributions have made a book like this possible; but it is an entry point into that world of knowledge.

Students and scholars may tap into this book if they have cured themselves of the greatest malaise of the academic world in our time: the idea that commitment undermines excellence in scholarly research. The best undergraduate and postgraduate students I have had the pleasure to teach and supervise were the committed ones. This book is just one modest invitation to future scholars to leave their ivory towers and reconnect with the societies on whose behalf they conduct their research—whether they write about global warming, poverty, or Palestine, they should proudly wear their commitment on their academic sleeves. And if their universities are still not ready for this, they should be savvy enough to play the game of "unbiased, objective academic research" on these contentious issues, while fully recognizing its false pretense.

For the general public this book presents a simple version of a topic that can often seem to be extremely complicated (as indeed some of its aspects are); but it is one that can be easily explained and related to from the universal perspective of justice and human rights.

Finally, my hope is that this book will clarify some of the deep misunderstandings at the heart of the Israel–Palestine problem, in the past and in the present. As long as these distortions and inherited assumptions are not questioned, they will continue to provide an immunity shield for the present inhuman regime in the land of Palestine. By examining these assumptions in light of the latest research, we can see how far they are from the historical truth and why setting the historical record straight might have an impact on the chances for peace and reconciliation in Israel and Palestine.

PART I

THE FALLACIES OF THE PAST

Chapter 1

Palestine Was an Empty Land

The geopolitical space today called Israel or Palestine has been a recognized country since Roman times. Its status and conditions in the distant past are topics for heated debate between those who believe that sources such as the Bible have no historical value and those who regard the holy book as a historical account. The significance of the country's pre-Roman history will be treated in this book in the next few chapters. However, it seems there is a wide consensus among scholars that it was the Romans who granted the land the name "Palestina," which predated all the other similar references to the land as Palestine. During the period of Roman, and later Byzantine, rule, it was an imperial province, and its fate depended very much on the fortunes of Rome and later Constantinople.

From the mid-seventh century onwards, Palestine's history was closely linked to the Arab and Muslim worlds (with a short interval in the medieval period when it was ceded to the Crusaders). Various Muslim empires and dynasties from the north, east and south of the country aspired to control it, since it was home to the second-holiest place in the Muslim religion after Mecca and Medina. It also had other attractions of course, due to its fertility and strategic location. The cultural richness of some of these past rulers can still be seen in parts of Israel and Palestine, although local archaeology gives precedence to Roman and Jewish heritages and hence the legacy of the Mamelukes and the Seljuk, those fertile and thriving medieval Islamic dynasties, has not yet been excavated.

Even more relevant to an understanding of contemporary Israel and Palestine is the Ottoman period, commencing with their occupation of the land in 1517. The Ottomans remained there for 400 years and their legacy is still felt today in several respects. The legal system of Israel, the religious court records (the *sijjil*), the land registry (the *tapu*), and a few architectural gems all testify to the significance of the Ottomans' presence. When the Ottomans arrived, they found a society that was mostly Sunni Muslim and rural, but with small urban elites who spoke Arabic. Less than 5 percent of the population was Jewish and probably 10 to 15 percent were Christian. As Yonatan Mendel comments:

> The exact percentage of Jews prior to the rise of Zionism is unknown. However, it probably ranged from 2 to 5 percent. According to Ottoman records, a total population of 462,465 resided in 1878 in what is today Israel/Palestine. Of this number, 403,795 (87 percent) were Muslim, 43,659 (10 percent) were Christians and 15,011 (3 percent) were Jewish.[1]

The Jewish communities around the world regarded Palestine at that time as the holy land of the Bible. Pilgrimage in Judaism does not have the same role as it does in Christianity and Islam, but nonetheless, some Jews did see it as a duty and in small numbers visited the country as pilgrims. As one of the chapters in the book will show, before the emergence of Zionism it was mainly Christians who wished, for ecclesiastical reasons, to settle Jews in Palestine more permanently.

You would not know this was Palestine in the 400 years of Ottoman rule from looking at the official website of the Israeli foreign ministry relating to the history of Palestine since the sixteenth century:

> Following the Ottoman Conquest in 1517, the Land was divided into four districts, attached administratively to the province of Damascus and ruled from Istanbul. At the outset of the Ottoman era, some 1,000 Jewish families lived in the country, mainly in Jerusalem, Nablus (Schechem), Hebron, Gaza, Safed (Tzfat) and the villages of the Galilee. The community was composed of descendants of Jews who had always lived in the Land as well as immigrants from North Africa and Europe.
>
> Orderly government, until the death (1566) of Sultan Suleiman the magnificent, brought improvements and stimulated Jewish immigration. Some newcomers settled in Jerusalem, but the majority went to Safed

> where, by the mid-16th century, the Jewish population had risen to about 10,000, and the town had become a thriving textile center.[2]

Sixteenth-century Palestine, it appears, was mainly Jewish, and the commercial lifeblood of the region was concentrated in the Jewish communities in these towns. What happened next? According to the foreign ministry website:

> With the gradual decline in the quality of Ottoman rule, the country suffered widespread neglect. By the end of the 18th century, much of the Land was owned by absentee landlords and leased to impoverished tenant farmers, and taxation was as crippling as it was capricious. The great forests of the Galilee and the Carmel mountain range were denuded of trees; swamp and desert encroached on agricultural land.

In this story, by 1800 Palestine had become a desert, where farmers who did not belong there somehow cultivated parched land that was not theirs. The same land appeared to be an island, with a significant Jewish population, ruled from the outside by the Ottomans and suffering from intensive imperial projects that robbed the soil of its fertility. Every passing year the land became more barren, deforestation increased, and farmland turned to desert. Promoted through an official state website this fabricated picture is unprecedented.

It is a bitter irony that in composing this narrative the authors did not rely on Israeli scholarship. Most Israeli scholars would be quite hesitant about accepting the validity of these statements or sponsoring such a narrative. Quite a few of them, such as David Grossman (the demographer not the famous author), Amnon Cohen, and Yehoushua Ben-Arieh, have indeed successfully challenged it. Their research shows that, over the centuries, Palestine, rather than being a desert, was a thriving Arab society—mostly Muslim, predominantly rural, but with vibrant urban centers.

Despite this contestation of the narrative, however, it is still propagated through the Israeli educational curriculum, as well as in the media, informed by scholars of a lesser prominence but with greater influence on the education system.[3] Outside of Israel, in particular in the United States, the assumption that the promised land was empty, desolate, and barren before the arrival of Zionism is still alive and kicking, and is therefore worth attending to.

We need to examine the facts. The opposing historical narrative reveals a different story in which Palestine during the Ottoman period was a society like all the other Arab societies around it. It did not differ from the Eastern Mediterranean countries as a whole. Rather than encircled and isolated, the Palestinian people were readily exposed to interactions with other cultures, as part of the wider Ottoman empire. Secondly, being open to change and modernization, Palestine began to develop as a nation long before the arrival of the Zionist movement. In the hands of energetic local rulers such as Daher al-Umar (1690–1775), the towns of Haifa, Shefamr, Tiberias, and Acre were renovated and re-energized. The coastal network of ports and towns boomed through its trade connections with Europe, while the inner plains traded inland with nearby regions. The very opposite of a desert, Palestine was a flourishing part of Bilad al-Sham (the land of the north), or the Levant of its time. At the same time, a rich agricultural industry, small towns and historical cities served a population of half a million people on the eve of the Zionist arrival.[4]

At the end of the nineteenth century this was a sizeable population, of which, as mentioned above, only a small percentage were Jewish. It is notable that this cohort were at the time resistant to the ideas promoted by the Zionist movement. Most Palestinians lived in the countryside in villages, which numbered almost 1,000. Meanwhile, a thriving urban elite made their home along the coast, on the inner plains and in the mountains.

We now have a much better understanding of how the people who lived there defined themselves on the eve of the Zionist colonization of the country. As elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond, Palestinian society was introduced to the powerful defining concept of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the nation. There were local and external dynamics that prompted this new mode of self-reference, as happened elsewhere in the world. Nationalist ideas were imported into the Middle East in part by American missionaries, who arrived in the early nineteenth century both with the wish to proselytize but also with a desire to spread novel notions of self-determination. As Americans they felt they represented

not only Christianity but also the newest independent state on the global map. The educated elite in Palestine joined others in the Arab world in digesting these ideas and formulating an authentic national doctrine, which led them to demand more autonomy within, and eventually independence from, the Ottoman Empire.

In the mid to late nineteenth century the Ottoman intellectual and political elite adopted romantic nationalist ideas that equated Ottomanism with Turkishness. This trend contributed to the alienation of the non-Turkish subjects of Istanbul, most of them Arabs, from the Ottoman Empire. The nationalization process in Turkey itself was accompanied by secularization trends in the second half of the nineteenth century which diminished the importance of Istanbul as a religious authority and focus.

In the Arab world, secularization was also part of the process of nationalization. Not surprisingly, it was mainly minorities, such as the Christians, that embraced warmly the idea of a secular national identity based on a shared territory, language, history, and culture. In Palestine, Christians who engaged with nationalism found eager allies among the Muslim elite, leading to a mushrooming of Muslim-Christian societies all over Palestine towards the end of World War I. In the Arab world, Jews joined these kind of alliances between activists from different religions. The same would have happened in Palestine had not Zionism demanded total loyalty from the veteran Jewish community there.

A thorough and comprehensive study of how Palestinian nationalism arose before the arrival of Zionism can be found in the works of Palestinian historians such as Muhammad Muslih and Rashid Khalidi.[5] They show clearly that both elite and non-elite sections of Palestinian society were involved in developing a national movement and sentiment before 1882. Khalidi in particular shows how patriotic feelings, local loyalties, Arabism, religious sentiments, and higher levels of education and literacy were the main constituents of the new nationalism, and how it was only later that resistance to Zionism played an additional crucial role in defining Palestinian nationalism.

Khalidi, among others, demonstrates how modernization, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the greedy European quest for territories in the Middle East contributed to the solidification of Palestinian nationalism before Zionism made its mark in Palestine with the British promise of a Jewish homeland in 1917. One of the clearest manifestations of this new self-definition was the reference in the country to Palestine as geographical and cultural entity, and later as a political one. Despite there not being a Palestinian state, the cultural location of Palestine was very clear. There was a unifying sense of belonging. At the very beginning of the twentieth century, the newspaper *Filastin* reflected the way the people named their country.[6] Palestinians spoke their own dialect, had their own customs and rituals, and appeared on the maps of the world as living in a country called Palestine.

During the nineteenth century, Palestine, like its neighboring regions, became more clearly defined as a geopolitical unit in the wake of administrative reforms initiated from Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. As a consequence, the local Palestinian elite began to seek independence within a united Syria, or even a united Arab state (a bit like the United States of America). This pan-Arabist national drive was called in Arabic *qawmiyya*, and was popular in Palestine and the rest of the Arab world.

Following the famous, or rather infamous, Sykes-Picot Agreement, signed in 1916 between Britain and France, the two colonial powers divided the area into new nation states. As the area was divided, a new sentiment developed: a more local variant of nationalism, named in Arabic *wataniyya*. As a result, Palestine began to see itself as an independent Arab state. Without the appearance of Zionism on its doorstep, Palestine would probably have gone the same way as Lebanon, Jordan, or Syria and embraced a process of modernization and growth.[7] This had, in fact, already started by 1916, as a result of Ottoman polices in the late nineteenth century. In 1872, when the Istanbul government founded the Sanjak (administrative province) of Jerusalem, they created a cohesive geopolitical space in Palestine. For a brief moment, the powers in Istanbul even toyed with the possibility of

adding to the Sanjak, encompassing much of Palestine as we know it today, as well as the sub-provinces of Nablus and Acre. Had they done this, the Ottomans would have created a geographical unit, as happened in Egypt, in which a particular nationalism might have arisen even earlier.[8]

However, even with its administrative division into north (ruled by Beirut) and south (ruled by Jerusalem), this shift raised Palestine as a whole above its previous peripheral status, when it had been divided into small regional sub-provinces. In 1918, with the onset of British rule, the north and the south divisions became one unit. In a similar way and in the same year the British established the basis for modern Iraq when they fused the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra into one modern nation state. In Palestine, unlike in Iraq, familial connections and geographical boundaries (the River Litani in the north, the River Jordan in the east, the Mediterranean in the west) worked together to weld the three sub-provinces of South Beirut, Nablus, and Jerusalem into one social and cultural unit. This geopolitical space had its own major dialect and its own customs, folklore, and traditions.[9]

By 1918, Palestine was therefore more united than in the Ottoman period, but there were to be further changes. While waiting for final international approval of Palestine's status in 1923, the British government renegotiated the borders of the land, creating a better-defined geographical space for the national movements to struggle over, and a clearer sense of belonging for the people living in it. It was now clear what Palestine was; what was not clear was who it belonged to: the native Palestinians or the new Jewish settlers? The final irony of this administrative regime was that the reshaping of the borders helped the Zionist movement to conceptualize geographically "Eretz Israel," the Land of Israel where only Jews had the right to the land and its resources.

Thus, Palestine was not an empty land. It was part of a rich and fertile eastern Mediterranean world that in the nineteenth century underwent processes of modernization and nationalization. It was not a desert waiting to come into

bloom; it was a pastoral country on the verge of entering the twentieth century as a modern society, with all the benefits and ills of such a transformation. Its colonization by the Zionist movement turned this process into a disaster for the majority of the native people living there.

Chapter 2

The Jews Were a People Without a Land

The claim in the previous chapter, that Palestine was a land without people, goes hand in hand with the claim that the Jews were a people without a land.

But were the Jewish settlers a people? Recent scholarship has repeated doubts expressed many years ago about this as well. The common theme of this critical point of view is best summarized in Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Jewish People*.[1] Sand shows that the Christian world, in its own interest and at a given moment in modern history, supported the idea of the Jews as a nation that must one day return to the holy land. In this account, this return would be part of the divine scheme for the end of time, along with the resurrection of the dead and the second coming of the Messiah.

The theological and religious upheavals of the Reformation from the sixteenth century onwards produced a clear association, especially among Protestants, between the notion of the end of the millennium and the conversion of the Jews and their return to Palestine. Thomas Brightman, a sixteenth-century English clergyman, represented these notions when he wrote, "Shall they return to Jerusalem again? There is nothing more certain: the prophets do everywhere confirm it and beat about it."[2] Brightman was not only hoping for a divine promise to be fulfilled; he also, like so many after him, wished the Jews either to convert to Christianity or to leave Europe all together. A hundred years later, Henry Oldenburg, a German theologian and natural philosopher, wrote: "If the occasion present itself amid changes to which human affairs are liable, [the Jews] may even raise their

empire anew, and … God may elect them a second time."[3] Charles-Joseph of Lign, an Austro-Hungarian field marshal, stated in the second half of the eighteenth century:

> I believe that the Jew is not able to assimilate, and that he will constantly constitute a nation within a nation, wherever he may be. The simplest thing to do would in my opinion be returning to them their homeland, from which they were driven.[4] As is quite apparent from this last text, there was an obvious link between these formative ideas of Zionism and a more longstanding anti-Semitism.

François-René de Chateaubriand, the famous French writer and politician, wrote around the same time that the Jews were "the legitimate masters of Judea." He influenced Napoleon Bonaparte, who hoped to elicit the help of the Jewish community in Palestine, as well as other inhabitants of the land, in his attempt to occupy the Middle East at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He promised them a "return to Palestine" and the creation of a state.[5] Zionism, as we can see, was therefore a Christian project of colonization before it became a Jewish one.

The ominous signs of how these seemingly religious and mythical beliefs might turn into a real program of colonization and dispossession appeared in Victorian Britain as early as the 1820s. A powerful theological and imperial movement emerged that would put the return of the Jews to Palestine at the heart of a strategic plan to take over Palestine and turn it into a Christian entity. In the nineteenth century, this sentiment became ever more popular in Britain and affected the official imperial policy: "The soil of Palestine … only awaits for the return of her banished children, and the application of industry, commensurate with agricultural capabilities, to burst once more into universal luxuriance, and be all that she ever was in the days of Solomon."[6] Thus wrote the Scottish peer and military commander John Lindsay. This sentiment was echoed by David Hartley, an English philosopher, who wrote: "It is probable that the Jews will be reinitiated in Palestine."[7]

The process was not wholly successful before it received the support of the United States. Here, too, there was a history of endorsing the idea of a Jewish nation having the right to return to Palestine and build a Zion. At the same time as

Protestants in Europe articulated these views, they appeared in a similar form across the Atlantic. The American president, John Adams (1735–1826), stated: "I really wish the Jews again in Judea as an independent nation."[8] A simple history of ideas leads directly from the preaching fathers of this movement to those with the power to change the fate of Palestine. Foremost among them was Lord Shaftesbury (1801–85), a leading British politician and reformer, who campaigned actively for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. His arguments for a greater British presence in Palestine were both religious and strategic.[9]

As I will presently show, this dangerous blend of religious fervor and reformist zeal would lead from Shaftesbury's efforts in the middle of the nineteenth century to the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Shaftesbury realized that it would not be enough to support the return of the Jews, and they would have to be actively assisted by Britain in their initial colonization. Such an alliance should start, he asserted, by providing material help to the Jews to travel to Ottoman Palestine. He convinced the Anglican bishopric center and cathedral in Jerusalem to provide the early funding for this project. This would probably not have happened at all had Shaftesbury not succeeded in recruiting his father in law, Britain's foreign minister and later prime minister, Lord Palmerston, to the cause. In his diary for August 1, 1838, Shaftesbury wrote:

> Dined with Palmerston. After dinner left alone with him. Propounded my schemes, which seems to strike his fancy. He asked questions and readily promised to consider it [the program to help the Jews to return to Palestine and take it over]. How singular is the order of Providence. Singular, if estimated by man's ways. Palmerston had already been chosen by God to be an instrument of good to His ancient people, to do homage to their inheritance, and to recognize their rights without believing their destiny. It seems he will yet do more. Though the motive be kind, it is not sound. I am forced to argue politically, financially, commercially. He weeps not, like his Master, over Jerusalem, nor prays that now, at last, she may put on her beautiful garments.[10]

As a first step, Shaftesbury persuaded Palmerston to appoint his fellow restorationist (a believer in the restoration of Palestine to the Jews) William Young as the first British vice-consul in Jerusalem. He subsequently wrote in his diary: "What a wonderful event it is! The ancient City of the people

of God is about to resume a place among the nations; and England is the first of the gentile kingdoms that ceases to 'tread her down.'"[11] A year later, in 1839, Shaftesbury wrote a thirty-page article for *The London Quarterly Review*, entitled "State and Restauration (*sic*) of the Jews," in which he predicted a new era for God's chosen people. He insisted that

> the Jews must be encouraged to return in yet greater numbers and become once more the husbandman of Judea and Galilee … though admittedly a stiff-necked, dark hearted people, and sunk in moral degradation, obduracy, and ignorance of the Gospel, [they are] not only worthy of salvation but also vital to Christianity's hope of salvation.[12]

Shaftesbury's gentle lobbying of Palmerston proved successful. For political reasons, more than for religious ones, Palmerston too became an advocate for Jewish restoration. Among other factors that came into play in his deliberations was the "view that the Jews could be useful in buttressing the collapsing Ottoman Empire, thus helping to accomplish the key object of British foreign policy in the area."[13]

Palmerston wrote to the British ambassador in Istanbul on August 11, 1840, concerning the mutual benefit to both the Ottomans and Britain of allowing Jews to return to Palestine. Ironically, the restoration of the Jews was seen as an important means of maintaining the status quo, and of avoiding the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Palmerston wrote:

> There exists at the present time among the Jews dispersed over Europe, a strong notion that the time is approaching when their nation is to return to Palestine … It would be of manifest importance to the Sultan to encourage the Jews to return and to settle in Palestine because the wealth which they would bring with them would increase the resources of the Sultan's dominions; and the Jewish people, if returning under the sanction and protection and at the invitation of the Sultan, would be a check upon any future evil designs of Mohamet Ali or his successor … I have to instruct Your Excellency strongly to recommend [the Turkish government] to hold out every just encouragement to the Jews of Europe to return to Palestine.[14]

Mohamet Ali, more popularly known as Muhammad Ali, was the governor of Egypt who ceded from the Ottoman Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century. When Palmerston wrote this letter to his ambassador in Istanbul, it was after a decade in which the Egyptian ruler had nearly toppled the sultan himself. The idea that Jewish wealth exported to Palestine

would strengthen the Ottoman Empire from potential internal and external enemies underlines how Zionism was associated with anti-Semitism, British imperialism, and theology.

A few days after Lord Palmerston sent his letter, a lead article in *The Times* called for a plan "to plant the Jewish people in the land of their fathers," claiming this was under "serious political consideration" and commending the efforts of Shaftesbury as the author of the plan, which, it argued, was "practical and statesmanlike."[15] Lady Palmerston also supported her husband's stance. She wrote to a friend: "We have on our side the fanatical and religious elements, and you know what a following they have in this country. They are absolutely determined that Jerusalem and the whole of Palestine shall be reserved for the Jews to return to; this is their only longing to restore the Jews."[16] Thus the Earl of Shaftesbury was described as: "The leading proponent of Christian Zionism in the nineteenth century and the first politician of stature to attempt to prepare the way for Jews to establish a homeland in Palestine."[17]

This moment of British establishment enthusiasm for the idea of restoration should properly be described as proto-Zionism. While we should be careful about reading contemporary ideology into this nineteenth-century phenomenon, it nevertheless had all the ingredients that would turn these ideas into the future justification for erasing and denying the basic rights of the indigenous Palestinian population. There were of course churches and clergymen who did identify with the local Palestinians. Notable among them was George Francis Popham Blyth, a Church of England cleric who, along with some high church Anglican colleagues, developed strong sympathies for the Palestinians' aspirations and rights. In 1887 Blyth founded St. George College, which is today probably still one of the best high schools in East Jerusalem (attended by the children of the local elite, who would play a crucial role in Palestinian politics in the first half of the twentieth century). The power, however, was with those who supported the Jewish cause, later to become the Zionist cause.

The first British consulate in Jerusalem opened in 1838. Its brief included informally encouraging Jews to come to Palestine, promising to protect them, and in some cases attempting to convert them to Christianity. The most well-known of the early consuls was James Finn (1806–72), whose character and direct approach made it impossible to conceal the implications of this brief from the local Palestinians. He wrote openly, and was probably the first to do so, about the connection between returning the Jews to Palestine and the possible displacement of the Palestinians as a result.[18] This connection would be at the heart of the Zionist settler colonial project in the following century.

Finn was stationed in Jerusalem between 1845 and 1863. He has been lauded by later Israeli historians for helping Jews to settle in their ancestral land, and his memoirs have been translated into Hebrew. He is not the only historical figure to have appeared in one nation's pantheon and in the rogues' gallery of another. Finn detested Islam as a whole and the notables of Jerusalem in particular. He never learned to speak Arabic and communicated via an interpreter, which did nothing to smooth his relationship with the local Palestinian population.

Finn was helped by the inauguration of the Anglican bishopric in Jerusalem in 1841, headed by Michael Solomon Alexander (a convert from Judaism), and by the inauguration of Christ Church, the first Anglican church, near Jaffa Gate, Jerusalem, in 1843. Although these institutions later developed a strong affinity with the Palestinian right of self-determination, at the time they supported Finn's proto-Zionist aspirations. Finn worked more eagerly than any other European to establish a permanent Western presence in Jerusalem, organizing the purchase of lands and real estate for missionaries, commercial interests, and government bodies.

An important link connecting these early, mainly British, Christian Zionist buds with Zionism was the German Temple Pietist movement (later known as the Templers), active in Palestine from the 1860s to the outbreak of World War I. The Pietist movement grew out of the Lutheran movement in Germany that spread all over the world, including to North

America (where its influence on the early settler colonialism is felt to this very day). Its interest in Palestine evolved around the 1860s. Two German clergymen, Christoph Hoffman and Georg David Hardegg, founded the Temple Society in 1861. They had strong connections to the Pietist movement in Württemberg, Germany, but developed their own ideas on how best to push forward their version of Christianity. For them, the rebuilding of a Jewish temple in Jerusalem was an essential step in the divine scheme for redemption and absolution. More importantly, they were convinced that if they themselves settled in Palestine they would precipitate the second coming of the Messiah.[19] While not everyone in the respective churches and national organizations welcomed their particular way of translating Pietism into settler colonialism in Palestine, senior members of the Royal Prussian court and several Anglican theologians in Britain enthusiastically supported their dogma.

As the Temple movement grew in prominence, it came to be persecuted by most of the established church in Germany. But they moved their ideas on to a more practical stage and settled in Palestine—fighting with each other along the way, as well as adding new members. They founded their first colony on Mount Carmel in Haifa in 1866 and expanded into other parts of the country. The warming of the relationship between Kaiser Wilhelm II and the sultan at the very end of the nineteenth century further enhanced their settlement project. The Templers remained in Palestine under the British Mandate until 1948, when they were kicked out by the new Jewish state.

The Templers' colonies and methods of settlement were emulated by the early Zionists. While the German historian Alexander Scholch described the Templers' colonization efforts as "The Quiet Crusade," the early Zionist colonies established from 1882 onwards were anything but quiet.[20] By the time the Templers settled in Palestine, Zionism had already become a notable political movement in Europe. Zionism was, in a nutshell, a movement asserting that the problems of the Jews of Europe would be solved by colonizing Palestine and creating a Jewish state there. These ideas germinated in the

1860s in several places in Europe, inspired by the Enlightenment, the 1848 "Spring of Nations," and later on by socialism. Zionism was transformed from an intellectual and cultural exercise into a political project through the visions of Theodor Herzl, in response to a particularly vile wave of anti-Jewish persecution in Russia in the late 1870s and early 1880s, and to the rise of anti-Semitic nationalism in the west of Europe (where the infamous Dreyfus trial revealed how deeply rooted anti-Semitism was in French and German society).

Through Herzl's efforts and those of like-minded Jewish leaders, Zionism became an internationally recognized movement. Independently at first, a group of Eastern European Jews developed similar notions about the solution for the Jewish question in Europe, and they did not wait for international recognition. They began to settle in Palestine in 1882, after preparing the ground by working in communes in their home countries. In the Zionist jargon they are called the First Aliyah—the first wave of Zionist immigration lasting to 1904. The second wave (1905–14) was different, since it mainly included frustrated communists and socialists who now saw Zionism not only as a solution for the Jewish problem but also as spearheading communism and socialism through collective settlement in Palestine. In both waves, however, the majority preferred to settle in Palestinian towns, with only a smaller number attempting to cultivate land they bought from Palestinians and absentee Arab landowners, at first relying on Jewish industrialists in Europe to sustain them, before seeking a more independent economic existence.

While the Zionist connection with Germany proved insignificant at the end of the day, the one with Britain became crucial. Indeed, the Zionist movement needed strong backing because the people of Palestine began to realize that this particular form of immigration did not bode well for their future in the country. Local leaders felt it would have a very negative effect on their society. One such figure was the mufti of Jerusalem, Tahir al-Hussayni II, who linked Jewish immigration into Jerusalem with a European challenge to the city's Muslim sanctity. Some of his elders had already noted that it was James Finn's idea to connect the arrival of the Jews

with the restoration of Crusader glory. No wonder, then, that the mufti led the opposition to this immigration, with a special emphasis on the need to refrain from selling land to such projects. He recognized that possession of land vindicated claims of ownership, whereas immigration without settlement could be conceived as transient pilgrimage.[21]

Thus, in many ways, the strategic imperial impulse of Britain to use the Jewish return to Palestine as a means of deepening London's involvement in the "Holy Land" coincided with the emergence of new cultural and intellectual visions of Zionism in Europe. For both Christians and Jews, therefore, the colonization of Palestine was seen as an act of return and redemption. The coincidence of the two impulses produced a powerful alliance that turned the anti-Semitic and millenarian idea of transferring the Jews from Europe to Palestine into a real project of settlement at the expense of the native people of Palestine. This alliance became public knowledge with the proclamation of the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917—a letter from the British foreign secretary to the leaders of the Anglo-Jewish community in effect promising them full support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Thanks to the accessibility and efficient structure of the British archives, today we are blessed with many excellent scholarly works exploring the background to the declaration. Still among the best of them is an essay from 1970 by Mayer Verte, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.[22] He showed in particular how British officials asserted wrongly that Jewish members in the Bolshevik movement had similar aspirations to the Zionists, and that therefore a pro-Zionist declaration would pave the way for good relations with the new political power in Russia. More to the point was the assumption of these policy makers that such a gesture would be welcomed by the American Jews, whom the British suspected of having a great influence in Washington. There was also a mixture of millenarianism and Islamophobia: David Lloyd George, the prime minister at the time and a devout Christian, favored the return of the Jews on a religious basis, and strategically both

he and his colleagues preferred a Jewish colony to a Muslim one, as they saw the Palestinians, in the Holy Land.

More recently we have had access to an even more comprehensive analysis, written in 1939, but lost for many years before it reappeared in 2013. This is the work of the British journalist, J. M. N Jeffries, *Palestine: The Reality*, which runs to more than 700 pages explaining what lay behind the Balfour Declaration.[23] It reveals, through Jeffries' personal connections and his access to a wide range of no-longer-extant documents, precisely who in the British admiralty, army and government was working for the declaration and why. It appears that the pro-Zionist Christians in his story were far more enthusiastic than the Zionists themselves about the idea of British sponsorship of the colonization process in Palestine.

The bottom line of all the research hitherto conducted on the declaration is that the various decision makers in Britain saw the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine as coinciding with British strategic interests in the area. Once Britain had occupied Palestine, this alliance allowed the Jews to build the infrastructure for a Jewish state under British auspices, while protected by His Majesty's Government's bayonets.

But Palestine was not easily taken. The British campaign against the Turks lasted almost the whole of 1917. It began well, with the British forces storming through the Sinai Peninsula, but they were then held up by an attritional trench war in the lines between the Gaza Strip and Bir Saba. Once this stalemate was broken, it became easier—in fact, Jerusalem surrendered without a fight. The ensuing military occupation brought all three discrete processes—the emergence of Zionism, Protestant millenarianism, and British imperialism—to Palestinian shores as a powerful fusion of ideologies that destroyed the country and its people over the next thirty years.

There are those who would like to question whether the Jews who settled in Palestine as Zionists in the aftermath of 1918 were really the descendants of the Jews who had been exiled by Rome 2,000 years ago. It began with popular doubts cast by Arthur Koestler (1905–83), who wrote *The Thirteenth*

Tribe (1976) in which he advanced the theory that the Jewish settlers were descended from the Khazars, a Turkish nation of the Caucasus that converted to Judaism in the eighth century and was later forced to move westward.[24] Israeli scientists have ever since tried to prove that there is a genetic connection between the Jews of Roman Palestine and those of present-day Israel. Nevertheless, the debate continues today.

More serious analysis came from biblical scholars who were not influenced by Zionism, such as Keith Whitelam, Thomas Thompson, and the Israeli scholar, Israel Finkelstein, all of whom reject the Bible as a factual account of any significance.[25] Whitelam and Thompson also doubt the existence of anything like a nation in biblical times and, like others, criticize what they call the "invention of modern Israel" as the work of pro-Zionist Christian theologians. The latest and most updated deconstruction of this idea came in Shlomo Sand's two books, *The Invention of the Jewish People* and *The Invention of the Land of Israel*.[26] I respect and appreciate this scholarly effort. Politically, however, I think it is less significant than the assumption that denies the existence of the Palestinians (although it is the complement of that assumption). People are entitled to invent themselves, as so many national movements have done in their moment of inception. But the problem becomes acute if the genesis narrative leads to political projects such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and oppression.

In the particular case of the claims of nineteenth-century Zionism, it is not the historical accuracy of those claims that matters. What matters is not whether the present Jews in Israel are the authentic descendants of those who lived in the Roman era, but rather the state of Israel's insistence that it represents all the Jews in the world and that everything it does is for their sake and on their behalf. Until 1967, this claim was very helpful for the state of Israel. Jews around the world, in particular in the United States, became its main supporters whenever its policies were questioned. In many respects, this is still the case in the United States today. However, even there, as well as in other Jewish communities, this clear association is nowadays challenged.

Zionism, as we shall see in the next chapter, was originally a minority opinion among Jews. In making the argument that the Jews were a nation belonging to Palestine and therefore should be helped to return to it, they had to rely on British officials and, later, military power. Jews and the world at large did not seem to be convinced that the Jews were a people without a land. Shaftesbury, Finn, Balfour, and Lloyd George liked the idea because it helped Britain gain a foothold in Palestine. This became immaterial after the British took Palestine by force and then had to decide from a new starting point whether the land was Jewish or Palestinian—a question it could never properly answer, and therefore had to leave to others to resolve after thirty years of frustrating rule.

Chapter 3

Zionism Is Judaism

In order to examine properly the assumption that Zionism is the same as Judaism, one has to begin with the historical context in which it was born. Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, Zionism was only one, inessential, expression of Jewish cultural life. It was born out of two impulses among Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe. The first was a search for safety within a society that refused to integrate Jews as equals and that occasionally persecuted them, either through legislation or through riots organized or encouraged by the powers that be as a diversion from economic crises or political upheavals. The second impulse was a wish to emulate other new national movements mushrooming in Europe at the time, during what historians called the European Spring of Nations. Those Jews who sought to transform Judaism from a religion into a nation were not unique among the many ethnic and religious groups within the two crumbling empires—the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman—who wished to redefine themselves as nations.

The roots of modern-day Zionism can be found already in the eighteenth century in what was called the Jewish enlightenment movement. This was a group of writers, poets, and rabbis who revived the Hebrew language and pushed the boundaries of traditional and religious Jewish education into the more universal study of science, literature, and philosophy. Across Central and Eastern Europe, Hebrew newspapers and journals began to proliferate. Out of this group there emerged a few individuals, known in Zionist historiography as the "Harbingers of Zionism," who showed greater nationalist tendencies and associated the revival of Hebrew with nationalism in their writings. They put forward two new ideas:

the redefinition of Judaism as a national movement and the need to colonize Palestine in order to return the Jews to the ancient homeland from which they had been expelled by the Romans in 70 CE. They advocated for "the return" by way of what they defined as "agricultural colonies" (in many parts of Europe Jews were not allowed to own or cultivate land, hence the fascination with starting anew as a nation of farmers, not just as free citizens).

These ideas became more popular after a brutal wave of pogroms in Russia in 1881, which transformed them into a political program propagated by a movement called "The Lovers of Zion," who dispatched a few hundred enthusiastic young Jews to build the first new colonies in Palestine in 1882. This first phase in the history of Zionism culminates with the works and actions of Theodor Herzl. Born in Pest in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1860, but resident for most of his life in Vienna, Herzl began his career as a playwright interested in the status and problems of the modern Jew in his society, asserting at first that full assimilation into local society was the key to this predicament. In the 1890s he became a journalist and, according to his own version of his life, it was at this time that he realized how potent anti-Semitism was. He concluded that there was no hope for assimilation and opted instead for the foundation of a Jewish state in Palestine as the best solution to what he defined as the "Jewish Problem."

As these early Zionist ideas were aired among Jewish communities in countries such as Germany and the United States, prominent rabbis and leading figures in those communities rejected the new approach. Religious leaders dismissed Zionism as a form of secularization and modernization, while secular Jews feared that the new ideas would raise questions about the Jews' loyalty to their own nation-states and would thus increase anti-Semitism. Both groups had different ideas about how to cope with the modern-day persecution of the Jews in Europe. Some believed that the further entrenchment of Jewish religion and tradition was the answer (as Islamic fundamentalists would do at the same time, when faced with European modernization), while others advocated for further assimilation into non-Jewish life.

When Zionist ideas appeared in Europe and the United States between the 1840s and the 1880s, most Jews practiced Judaism in two different ways. One involved entrenchment: living within very tight religious communities, shunning new ideas such as nationalism, and indeed regarding modernization as such as an unwelcome threat to their way of life. The other way involved living a secular life, which differed from that of the non-Jewish communities in only very minimal ways—celebrating certain holidays, frequenting the synagogue on Fridays, and probably not eating in public during the fast of the day of atonement (Yom Kippur). Gershom Scholem, who was one such Jew, recalled in his memoirs *Berlin to Jerusalem* how, as a member of a young Jewish group in Germany, he used to dine with his friends in the same restaurant in Berlin during Yom Kippur; on their arrival, the proprietor would inform them that "the special room for the fasting gentlemen in the restaurant was ready."[1] Individuals and communities found themselves between these two poles of secularization on the one hand and Orthodox life on the other. But let us look more closely at the positions they adopted towards Zionism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Jewish secularism is a slightly bizarre concept of course, as is Christian secularism or Islamic secularism. Secular Jews as described above were people with various degrees of connection to religion (very much as a secular Christian in Britain celebrates Easter and Christmas, sends his children to Church of England schools, or attends Sunday mass occasionally or frequently). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, this modern form of practicing Judaism became a powerful movement known as the Reform movement, which looked for ways of adapting religion to modern life without succumbing to its anachronistic aspects. It was particularly popular in Germany and the United States.

When the Reformists first encountered Zionism, they vehemently rejected the idea of redefining Judaism as nationalism and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. However, their anti-Zionist stance shifted after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In the second half of the twentieth century, the majority among them created a new Reform

movement in the United States, which became one of the strongest Jewish organizations in the country (although not until 1999 did the new movement officially vow allegiance to Israel and Zionism). However, a large number of Jews left the new movement and set up the American Council of Judaism (ACJ), which reminded the world in 1993 that Zionism was still a minority view among Jews, and which remained loyal to the old Reformist notions about Zionism.[2]

Before that schism, the Reform movement in both Germany and the United States had provided a strong and unanimous case against Zionism. In Germany, they publicly rejected the idea of a Jewish nation and proclaimed themselves "Germans of the Mosaic faith." One of the German Reformists' early acts was to remove from their prayer rituals any references to a return to "Eretz Israel" or the rebuilding of a state there. Similarly, already in 1869, American Reformists stated in one of their first conventions

> that the messianic aim of Israel [i.e. the Jewish people] is not the restoration of a Jewish state under a descendant of David, involving a second separation from the nations of earth, but the union of the children of God in the confession of the unity of God, so as to realize the unity of all rational creatures, and their call to moral sanctification.

In 1885, another Reformist conference stated: "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and we therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any laws concerning the Jewish state."

One famous leader in this respect was Rabbi Kaufman Kohler, who repudiated the idea "that Judea is the home of the Jew—an idea which 'unhomes' [*sic*] the Jew all over the wide earth." Another leader of the movement at the end of the nineteenth century, Isaac Mayer Wise, often ridiculed Zionist leaders such as Herzl, comparing them to charlatan alchemists claiming to contribute to science. In Vienna, the city of Herzl, Adolf Jellinek argued that Zionism would endanger the position of Jews in Europe and claimed that most of them objected to the idea. "We are at home in Europe," he declared.

Apart from the Reformers, liberal Jews at that time rejected the claim that Zionism provided the only solution for

anti-Semitism. As Walter Lacquer shows us in his book, *The History of Zionism*, liberal Jews regarded Zionism as a fanciful movement that provided no answer to the problems of the Jews in Europe. They argued for what they called a "regeneration" of the Jews, involving a display of total loyalty to their homelands and a willingness to be fully assimilated into them as citizens.[3] They hoped that a more liberal world might solve the problems of persecution and anti-Semitism. History showed that liberalism had saved those Jews who moved to, or lived in, the UK and the USA. Those who believed it could happen in the rest of Europe were proven wrong. But even today, with hindsight, many liberal Jews do not see Zionism as the right answer then or now.

Socialists and Orthodox Jews began to voice their criticisms of Zionism only in the 1890s, when Zionism became a more recognized political force very late in the decade, thanks to the diligent work of Herzl. Herzl understood contemporary politics and wrote utopian stories, political tracts, and newspaper reports summarizing the idea that it was in Europe's interest to help build a modern Jewish state in Palestine. World leaders were not impressed; neither were the Ottomans, as the rulers of Palestine. Herzl's greatest achievement was bringing all the activists together at one conference in 1897, and from there building up two basic organizations—a world congress promoting the ideas of Zionism globally, and local Zionist outfits on the ground expanding the Jewish colonization of Palestine.

Thus, with the crystallization of Zionist ideas, the criticism of Jews opposed to Zionism also became clearer. Apart from the Reform movement, criticism came from the left, lay leaders of the various communities, and from Orthodox Jews. In 1897, the same year as the first Zionist conference was convened in Basel, a socialist Jewish movement was born in Russia: the Bund. It was both a political movement and a Jewish trade union. Bund members believed that a socialist, even a Bolshevik, revolution would be a far better solution to the problems of Jews in Europe than Zionism. They regarded the latter as a form of escapism. More importantly, when Nazism and Fascism were on the rise in Europe, Bundists felt

that Zionism contributed to this brand of anti-Semitism by questioning the loyalty of Jews to their homelands. Even after the Holocaust, Bundists were convinced that Jews should seek a place in societies that cherish human and civil rights, and did not see a Jewish nation state as a panacea. This strong anti-Zionist conviction, however, slowly subsided from around the mid-1950s, and the remnants of this once-powerful movement eventually decided to support the state of Israel publicly (they even had a branch in the Jewish state).[4]

The reaction of the Bund did not trouble Herzl as much as did the lukewarm response of the Jewish political and economic elites in places such as Britain and France. They saw Herzl either as a charlatan whose ideas were far removed from reality, or worse as someone who could undermine Jewish life in their own societies where, as in Britain, they had made immense progress in terms of emancipation and integration. The Victorian Jews were disturbed by his call for Jewish sovereignty in a foreign land with an equal status to other sovereign states in the world. For the more established sections of Central and Western European Jewry, Zionism was a provocative vision that called into question the loyalty of English, German, and French Jews to their own home nations. Thanks to their lack of support for Herzl, the Zionist movement failed to become a powerful actor before World War I. Only after Herzl's death in 1904 did other leaders of the movement—in particular Chaim Weizmann, who immigrated to Britain in the year Herzl died and became a leading scientist there, contributing to the British war effort in World War I—build a strong alliance with London that served Zionism well, as will be described later in this chapter.[5]

The third critique on Zionism in its early days came from the ultra-Orthodox Jewish establishment. To this day, many ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities vehemently oppose Zionism, although they are much smaller than they were in the late nineteenth century and some of them moved to Israel and are now part of its political system. Nonetheless, as in the past, they constitute yet another non-Zionist way of being Jewish. When Zionism made its first appearance in Europe, many traditional rabbis in fact forbade their followers from having

anything to do with Zionist activists. They viewed Zionism as meddling with God's will to retain the Jews in exile until the coming of the Messiah. They totally rejected the idea that Jews should do all they can to end the "Exile." Instead, they had to wait for God's word on this and in the meantime practice the traditional way of life. While individuals were allowed to visit and study in Palestine as pilgrims, this was not to be interpreted as permission for a mass movement. The great Hasidic German Rabbi of Dzikover summed up this approach bitterly when he said that Zionism asks him to replace centuries of Jewish wisdom and law for a rag, soil, and a song (i.e. a flag, a land, and an anthem).[6]

Not all the leading rabbis opposed Zionism however. There was a small group of quite famous authoritative figures, such as the rabbis al-Qalay, Gutmacher, and Qalisher, who endorsed the Zionist program. They were a small minority but in hindsight they were an important group as they laid the foundation for the national religious wing of Zionism. Their religious acrobatics were quite impressive. In Israeli historiography they are called the "Fathers of the Religious Zionism." Religious Zionism is a very important movement in contemporary Israel, as the ideological home of the messianic settler movement, Gush Emunim, which colonized the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from 1967 onwards. These rabbis not only called on Jews to leave Europe but also asserted that it was a religious duty, not just a nationalist one, for Jews to colonize Palestine through the cultivation of its land (not surprisingly the natives of the land do not feature in their writings). They claimed that such an act would not be meddling with God's will; on the contrary, it would fulfill the prophecies of the Prophets and advance the full redemption of the Jewish people and the coming of the Messiah.[7]

Most of the leading lights in Orthodox Judaism rejected this plan and interpretation. They had another axe to grind with Zionism. The new movement not only wished to colonize Palestine; it also hoped to secularize the Jewish people, to invent the "new Jew" in antithesis to the religious Orthodox Jews of Europe. This culminated in the image of a new European Jew who could no longer live in Europe, because of

its anti-Semitism, but had to live as a European outside the continent. Thus, like many movements during this period, Zionism redefined itself in national terms—but it was radically different because it chose a new land for this conversion. The Orthodox Jew was ridiculed by the Zionists and was viewed as someone who could only be redeemed through hard work in Palestine. This transformation is beautifully described in Herzl's futuristic utopian novel, *Altnueland*, which tells the story of a German tourist expedition arriving in the Jewish state long after it had been established.[8] Before arriving in Palestine, one of the tourists had run into a young Orthodox Jewish beggar—he comes across him again in Palestine, now secular, educated, and extremely rich and content.

The role of the Bible within Jewish life offered one further clear difference between Judaism and Zionism. In the pre-Zionist Jewish world, the Bible was not taught as a singular text that carried any political or even national connotation in the various Jewish educational centers in either Europe or the Arab world. The leading rabbis treated the political history contained in the Bible, and the idea of Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel, as marginal topics in their spiritual world of learning. They were much more concerned, as indeed Judaism in general was, with the holy writings focusing on the relationship between believers, and in particular on their relations with God.

From "The Lovers of Zion" in 1882 to the Zionist leaders on the eve of World War I, who appealed to Britain to support the Jewish claim for Palestine, reference to the Bible was quite common. In pursuit of their own interests, Zionist leaders fundamentally challenged the traditional biblical interpretations. The Lovers of Zion, for instance, read the Bible as the story of a Jewish nation born on the land of Palestine as an oppressed people under the yoke of a Canaanite regime. The latter exiled the Jewish people to Egypt, until they returned to the land and liberated it under Joshua's leadership. The traditional interpretation, in contrast, focuses on Abraham and his family as a group of people discovering a monotheistic god rather than a nation and a homeland. Most readers will be familiar with this conventional

narrative of the Abrahamites discovering God and through trials and tribulations finding themselves in Egypt[9]—hardly a story of an oppressed nation engaged in a liberation struggle. However, the latter was the preferred Zionist interpretation, which still holds water in Israel today.

One of the most intriguing uses of the Bible in Zionism is that practiced by the socialist wing of the movement. The fusion of socialism with Zionism began in earnest after Herzl's death in 1904, as the various socialist factions became the leading parties in the World Zionist movement and on the ground in Palestine. For the socialists, as one of them said, the Bible provided "the myth for our right over the land."[10] It was in the Bible that they read stories about Hebrew farmers, shepherds, kings, and wars, which they appropriated as describing the ancient golden era of their nation's birth. Returning to the land meant coming back to become farmers, shepherds, and kings. Thus, they found themselves faced with a challenging paradox, for they wanted both to secularize Jewish life and to use the Bible as a justification for colonizing Palestine. In other words, though they did not believe in God, He had nonetheless promised them Palestine.

For many Zionist leaders, the reference in the Bible to the land of Palestine was just a means to their ends, and not the essence of Zionism. This was clear in particular in texts written by Theodor Herzl. In a famous article in *The Jewish Chronicle* (July 10, 1896) he based the Jewish demand for Palestine on the Bible, but expressed his wish that the future Jewish state be run according to the European political and moral philosophies of his time. Herzl was probably more secular than the group of leaders who replaced him. This prophet of the movement seriously considered alternatives to Palestine, such as Uganda, as the promised land of Zion. He also looked at other destinations in the north and south of America and in Azerbaijan.[11] With Herzl's death in 1904, and the rise of his successors, Zionism homed in on Palestine and the Bible became even more of an asset than before as proof of a divine Jewish right to the land.

The new post-1904 fixation on Palestine as the only territory in which Zionism could be implemented was reinforced by the growing power of Christian Zionism in Britain and in Europe. Theologians who studied the Bible and evangelical archeologists who excavated "the Holy Land" welcomed the settlement of Jews as confirming their religious belief that the "Jewish return" would herald the unfolding of the divine promise for the end of time. The return of the Jews was the precursor of the return of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. The Zionist project of colonizing Palestine was well served by this esoteric religious belief.[12] However, behind these religious visions lay classical anti-Semitic sentiments. For pushing Jewish communities in the direction of Palestine was not only a religious imperative; it also helped in the creation of a Europe without Jews. It therefore represented a double gain: getting rid of the Jews in Europe, and at the same time fulfilling the divine scheme in which the Second Coming was to be precipitated by the return of the Jews to Palestine (and their subsequent conversion to Christianity or their roasting in Hell should they refuse).

From that moment onwards, the Bible became both the justification and the route map for the Zionist colonization of Palestine. Historically, the Bible served Zionism well from its inception until the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. It played an important role in the dominant Israeli narrative—for both domestic and external purposes—claiming that Israel is the same land as was promised by God to Abraham in the Bible. "Israel" in this narrative existed until 70 CE, when the Romans demolished it and exiled its people. The religious commemoration of that date, when the second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, was a day of mourning. In Israel it has become a national day of mourning on which all leisure-industry businesses, including restaurants, are required to close from the evening before.

The principal scholarly and secular proof for this narrative has been provided in recent years with the help of what is called biblical archeology (in itself an oxymoronic concept, since the Bible is a great literary work, written by many peoples in different periods, and hardly a historical text[13]).

After 70 CE, according to the narrative, the land was more or less empty until the Zionist return. However, leading Zionists knew that appealing to the authority of the Bible would not be enough. Colonizing the already inhabited Palestine would require a systematic policy of settlement, dispossession, and even ethnic cleansing. To this end, portraying the dispossession of Palestine as the fulfillment of a divine Christian scheme was priceless when it came to galvanizing global Christian support behind Zionism.

As we have seen, once all other territorial options were ruled out and Zionism focused on the reclamation of Palestine, the leaders who took over from the early pioneers began to inject socialist, and even Marxist, ideology into the growing secular movement. The aim now was to establish (with the help of God) a secular, socialist, colonialist Jewish project in the Holy Land. As the colonized natives quickly learned, ultimately their fate was sealed regardless of whether the settlers brought with them the Bible, the writings of Marx, or the tracts of the European Enlightenment. All that mattered was whether, or how, you were included in the settlers' vision of the future. It is telling therefore that in the obsessive records kept by the early Zionist leaders and settlers, the natives featured as an obstacle, an alien and an enemy, regardless of who they were or of their own aspirations.[14]

The first anti-Arab entries in those records were written while the settlers were still being hosted by the Palestinians on the way to the old colonies, or in the towns. Their complaints stemmed from their formative experiences, searching for work and a means of subsistence. This predicament seemed to affect them universally, whether they went to the old colonies or whether they tried their luck in the towns. Wherever they were, in order to survive they had to work shoulder to shoulder with Palestinian farmers or workers. Through such intimate contact even the most ignorant and defiant settlers realized that Palestine was totally an Arab country in its human landscape.

David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Jewish community during the Mandatory period and Israel's first prime minister, described the Palestinian workers and farmers as *beit mihush* ("an infested hotbed of pain"). Other settlers talked about the

Palestinians as strangers and aliens. “The people here are stranger to us than the Russian or Polish peasant,” wrote one of them, adding, “We have nothing in common with the majority of the people living here.”[15] They were surprised to find people in Palestine at all, having been told the land was empty. “I was disgusted to find out that in Hadera [an early Zionist colony built in 1882] part of the houses were occupied by Arabs,” reported one settler, while another reported back to Poland that he was appalled to see many Arab men, women, and children crossing through Rishon LeZion (another colony from 1882).[16]

Since the country was not empty, and you had to overcome the presence of the natives, it was good to have God on your side—even if you were an atheist. Both David Ben-Gurion and his close friend and colleague Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (who along with Ben-Gurion led the Zionist socialist factions in Palestine and later became the second president of Israel) used the biblical promise as the main justification for the colonization of Palestine. This remained the case for the ideologues who succeeded them in the Labor party into the mid-1970s, and up to the very shallow secular Bible-ism of the Likud party and its offshoots of recent years.

The interpretation of the Bible as the divine justification for Zionism helped the socialists to reconcile their adherence to the universal values of solidarity and equality with the colonization project of dispossession. Indeed, since colonization was the main goal of Zionism, one has to ask what kind of socialism this was. After all, in the collective memory of many, the golden period of Zionism is associated with the collectivist, egalitarian life embodied in the establishment of the Kibbutz. This form of life lasted long after Israel was founded and it attracted young people from all over the world who came to volunteer and experience communism in its purest form. Very few of them realized, or could have known, that most of the Kibbutzim were built on destroyed Palestinian villages, whose populations had been expelled in 1948. In justification, the Zionists claimed that these villages were old Jewish places mentioned in the Bible, and hence that their appropriation was not an occupation but a

liberation. A special committee of "biblical archeologists" would enter a deserted village and determine what its name was in biblical times. Energetic officials of the Jewish National Fund would then establish the settlement with its newly recovered name.[17] A similar method was used after 1967 by the then minister of labor, Yigal Alon, a secular socialist Jew, for building a new town near Hebron, since it "belonged" to the Jewish people, according to the Bible.

Some critical Israeli scholars, most notable among them Gershon Shafir and Zeev Sternhell (as the well as the American scholar Zachary Lockman), have explained how the colonial appropriation of land tainted the supposed golden era of socialist Zionism. As these historians show, socialism within Zionism, as a praxis and way of life, was always a conditional and limited version of the universal ideology. The universal values and aspirations that characterized the various ideological movements of the Western left were very early on nationalized or Zionized in Palestine. No wonder then that socialism lost its attractiveness for the next generation of settlers.[18]

Yet religion remained an important aspect of the process even after the land had been taken from the Palestinians. In its name you could invoke and assert an ancient moral right to Palestine that challenged every other external claim to the land in those dying days of imperialism. This right also superseded the moral claims of the native population. One of the most socialist and secular colonialist projects of the twentieth century demanded exclusivity in the name of a pure divine promise. The reliance on the sacred text proved highly profitable for the Zionist settlers and extremely costly to the local population. The late and brilliant Michael Prior's last book, *The Bible and Colonialism*, showed how the same kinds of projects were pursued around the globe in ways that have much in common with the colonization of Palestine.[19]

After Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, the Bible continued to be used to similar ends. I have already mentioned Yigal Alon, who used the Bible to justify building a Jewish town, Qiryat Arba, on land expropriated

from the people of Hebron, the nearby Palestinian town. Qiryat Arba quickly became a hotbed for people who took the Bible even more seriously as a guide to action. They selectively chose those biblical chapters and phrases that in their eyes justified the dispossession of the Palestinians. As the years of the occupation continued, so too did the regime of brutality against the dispossessed. This process of drawing political legitimization from a sacred text can lead to fanaticism with dangerous consequences. The Bible, for instance, has references to genocide: the Amalekites were killed to the last by Joshua. Today there are those, thankfully for now only a fanatical minority, who refer not only to the Palestinians as Amalekites but also to those who are not Jewish enough in their eyes.[20]

Similar references to genocide in the name of God appear in the Jewish Haggadah for Pesach (Passover). The main tale, of the Passover Seder—where God sends Moses and the Israelites to a land inhabited by others, to possess it as they see fit—is of course not an imperative issue for the vast majority of Jews. It is a literary text, not a manual for war. However, it can be exploited by the new stream of Jewish messianic thinking, as was the case with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and, in the summer of 2015, the burning to death first of a teenager in one incident, and then of two parents and their baby in another. Israel's new minister of justice, Ayelet Shaked, entertained similar ideas, so far only for Palestinians who have died in their attempts to resist Israel: their whole family, she said, should "follow their sons, nothing would be more just. They should go, as should the physical homes in which they raised the snakes. Otherwise, more little snakes will be raised there."[21] For the time being, this is just a warning for the future. Since 1882, as we have seen, the Bible has been used as a justification for dispossession. However, in the early years of the state of Israel, 1948–67, reference to the Bible subsided and was only employed on the right-wing margins of the Zionist movement to justify their depiction of the Palestinians as subhuman and as the eternal enemies of the Jewish people. After the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, these messianic and fundamentalist Jews,

growing up in the Religious National Party, MAFDAL, seized the opportunity to transform their hallucinations into real action on the ground. They settled everywhere in the newly occupied territories, with or without the consent of the government. They created islands of Jewish life within Palestinian territory, and began to behave as if they owned all of it.

The most militant factions of Gush Emunim, the post-1967 settlement movement, took advantage of the very particular circumstances created by the Israeli rule over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to go wild in their license to dispossess and abuse in the name of the sacred texts. Israeli law did not apply in the occupied territories, which were ruled by military emergency regulations. However, this military legal regime did not apply to the settlers, who were in many ways immune from sanction in both legal systems. Their settling by force in the middle of Palestinian neighborhoods in Hebron and Jerusalem, uprooting of Palestinian olive trees, and setting fire to Palestinian fields were all justified as part of the divine duty to settle in "Eretz Israel."

But the settlers' violent interpretation of the biblical message was not confined to the occupied territories. They began to push into the heart of the mixed Arab-Jewish towns in Israel, such as Acre, Jaffa and Ramleh, in order to disturb the delicate modus vivendi that had prevailed there for years. The movement of settlers into these sensitive spots inside the pre-1967 Israeli border had the potential of undermining, in the name of the Bible, the already strained relations between the Jewish state and its Palestinian minority.

The final reason offered for the Zionist reclamation of the Holy Land, as determined by the Bible, was the need of Jews around the world to find a safe haven, especially after the Holocaust. However, even if this was true, it might have been possible to find a solution that was not restricted to the biblical map and that did not dispossess the Palestinians. This position was voiced by a quite a few well-known personalities, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. These commentators tried to suggest that the Palestinians should be asked to provide a safe haven for persecuted Jews alongside the native

population, not in place of it. But the Zionist movement regarded such proposals as heresy.

The difference between settling alongside the native people and simply displacing them was recognized by Mahatma Gandhi when he was asked by the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, to lend his support to the Zionist project. In 1938, Buber had been asked by Ben-Gurion to put pressure on several well-known moral figures to show their public support for Zionism. They felt that approval from Gandhi, as the leader of a nonviolent national struggle against imperialism, would be especially useful, and were prepared to leverage his respect for Buber in order to get it. Gandhi's major statement on Palestine and the Jewish question appeared in his widely circulated editorial in the *Harijan* of November 11, 1938, in the middle of a major rebellion by the native Palestinians against the British government's pro-Zionist policies. Gandhi began his piece by saying that all his sympathies lay with the Jews, who as a people had been subjected to inhuman treatment and persecution for centuries. But, he added,

> My sympathy does not blind me to the requirements of justice. The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me. The sanction for it is sought in the Bible and in the tenacity with which the Jews have hankered after their return to Palestine. Why should they not, like other peoples of the earth, make that country their home where they are born and where they earn their livelihood?[22]

Gandhi thus questioned the very foundational logic of political Zionism, rejecting the idea of a Jewish state in the promised land by pointing out that the "Palestine of the Biblical conception is not a geographical tract." Thus, Gandhi disapproved of the Zionist project for both political and religious reasons. The endorsement of that project by the British government only alienated Gandhi even further. He had no doubts about who Palestine belonged to:

> Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs … Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home.[23]

Gandhi's response to the Palestine question contains different layers of meaning, ranging from an ethical position to political realism. What is interesting is that, while firmly believing in the inseparability of religion and politics, he consistently and vehemently rejected the cultural and religious nationalism of Zionism. A religious justification for claiming a nation state did not appeal to him in any substantial sense. Buber responded to this article by trying to justify Zionism, but Gandhi had apparently had enough and the correspondence petered out.

Indeed, the space the Zionist movement demanded for itself was not determined by the need to rescue persecuted Jews, but by the wish to take as much of Palestine as possible with as few inhabitants as was practical. Sober and secular Jewish scholars attempted to remain "scientific" in translating a hazy promise from an ancient past into a present fact. The project had been started already by the chief historian of the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine, Ben-Zion Dinaburg (Dinur), and was continued intensively after the creation of the state in 1948. Its end product is represented by the quotation from the website of the Israeli foreign ministry reproduced in Chapter 1. Dinur's task in the 1930s, like that of his successors ever since, was to prove scientifically that there had been a Jewish presence in Palestine ever since Roman times.

Not that anyone doubted it. Despite the historical evidence that the Jews who lived in eighteenth-century Palestine rejected the notion of a Jewish state, as did the Orthodox Jews in the late nineteenth century, this was rejected out of hand in the twentieth century. Dinur and his colleagues used the statistic that Jews made up no more than 2 percent of the population of eighteenth-century Palestine to prove the validity of the biblical promise and of the modern Zionist demand for Palestine.[24] This narrative has become the standard, accepted history. One of Britain's most distinguished professors of history, Sir Martin Gilbert, produced many years ago the *Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, published across several editions by Cambridge University Press.[25] The *Atlas* begins the history of the conflict in biblical times, taking it for

granted that the territory was a Jewish kingdom to which the Jews returned after 2,000 years of exile. Its opening maps tell the whole story: the first is of biblical Palestine; the second of Palestine under the Romans; the third of Palestine during the time of the crusaders; and the fourth, of Palestine in 1882. Thus, nothing of importance happened between the medieval era and the arrival of the first Zionists. Only when foreigners are in Palestine—Romans, Crusaders, Zionists—is it worth mentioning.

Israeli educational textbooks now carry the same message of the right to the land based on a biblical promise. According to a letter sent by the education ministry in 2014 to all schools in Israel: "the Bible provides the cultural infrastructure of the state of Israel, in it our right to the land is anchored."[26] Bible studies are now a crucial and expanded component of the curriculum—with a particular focus on the Bible as recording an ancient history that justifies the claim to the land. The biblical stories and the national lessons that can be learned from them are fused together with the study of the Holocaust and of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. There is a direct line from this 2014 letter back to the evidence given by David Ben-Gurion in 1937 to the Royal Peel Commission (the British inquiry set up to try to find a solution to the emerging conflict). In the public discussions on the future of Palestine, Ben-Gurion waved a copy of the Bible at the members of the committee, shouting: "This is our *Qushan* [the Ottoman land registry proof], our right to Palestine does not come from the Mandate Charter, the Bible is our Mandate Charter."[27]

Historically, of course, it makes no sense to teach the Bible, what happened to the Jews of Europe, and the 1948 war as one historical chapter. But ideologically the three items are linked together and indoctrinated as the basic justification for the Jewish state in our time. This discussion of the role of the Bible in modern-day Israel leads us to our next question: is Zionism a colonialist movement?

Chapter 4

Zionism Is Not Colonialism

The land of Palestine was not empty when the first Zionist settlers arrived there in 1882. This fact was known to the Zionist leaders even before the first Jewish settlers arrived. A delegation sent to Palestine by the early Zionist organizations reported back to their colleagues: "the bride is beautiful but married to another man."[1] Nevertheless, when they first arrived, the early settlers were surprised to encounter the locals whom they regarded as invaders and strangers. In their view, the native Palestinians had usurped their homeland. They were told by their leaders that the locals were not natives, that they had no rights to the land. Instead they were a problem that had to, and could, be resolved.

This conundrum was not unique: Zionism was a settler colonial movement, similar to the movements of Europeans who had colonized the two Americas, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Settler colonialism differs from classical colonialism in three respects. The first is that settler colonies rely only initially and temporarily on the empire for their survival. In fact, in many cases, as in Palestine and South Africa, the settlers do not belong to the same nation as the imperial power that initially supports them. More often than not they ceded from the empire, redefining themselves as a new nation, sometimes through a liberation struggle against the very empire that supported them (as happened during the American Revolution for instance). The second difference is that settler colonialism is motivated by a desire to take over land in a foreign country, while classical colonialism covets the natural resources in its new geographical possessions. The third difference concerns the way they treat the new

destination of settlement. Unlike conventional colonial projects conducted in the service of an empire or a mother country, settler colonialists were refugees of a kind seeking not just a home, but a homeland. The problem was that the new "homelands" were already inhabited by other people. In response, the settler communities argued that the new land was theirs by divine or moral right, even if, in cases other than Zionism, they did not claim to have lived there thousands of years ago. In many cases, the accepted method for overcoming such obstacles was the genocide of the indigenous locals.[2]

One of the leading scholars on settler colonialism, Patrick Wolfe, argues that settler colonial projects were motivated by what he calls "the logic of elimination." This meant that the settlers developed the necessary moral justifications and practical means to remove the natives. As Wolfe indicates, at times this logic entailed actual genocide, at other times, ethnic cleansing or an oppressive regime that denied the natives any rights.[3] I would add that there was another logic permeating the logic of elimination: the logic of dehumanization. As a victim yourself of persecution in Europe, you needed first to dehumanize a whole native nation or society, before being willing to do the same, or worse, to fellow humans.

As a result of these twin logics, whole nations and civilizations were wiped out by the settler colonialist movement in the Americas. Native Americans, south and north, were massacred, converted by force to Christianity, and finally confined to reservations. A similar fate awaited the aboriginals in Australia and to a lesser extent the Maoris in New Zealand. In South Africa, such processes ended with the imposition of the apartheid system upon the local people, while a more complex system was imposed on the Algerians for about a century.

Zionism is therefore not sui generis but an example of a wider process. This is important not just for how we understand the machinations of the colonial project, but also for our interpretation of the Palestinian resistance to it. If one asserts that Palestine was a land without people waiting for the people without a land, then the Palestinians are robbed of any

argument for protecting themselves. All their efforts to hold onto their land become baseless violent acts against the rightful owners. As such, it is difficult to separate the discussion of Zionism as colonialism from the question of the Palestinians as a colonized native people. The two are linked together in the same analysis.

The official Israeli narrative or foundational mythology refuses to allow the Palestinians even a modicum of moral right to resist the Jewish colonization of their homeland that began in 1882. From the very beginning, Palestinian resistance was depicted as motivated by hate for Jews. It was accused of promoting a protean anti-Semitic campaign of terror that began when the first settlers arrived and continued until the creation of the state of Israel. The diaries of the early Zionists tell a different story. They are full of anecdotes revealing how the settlers were well received by the Palestinians, who offered them shelter and in many cases taught them how to cultivate the land.[4] Only when it became clear that the settlers had not come to live alongside the native population, but in place of it, did the Palestinian resistance begin. And when that resistance started, it quickly took the form of every other anticolonialist struggle.

The idea that impoverished Jews were entitled to a safe haven was not objected to by the Palestinians and those supporting them. However, this was not reciprocated by the Zionist leaders. While Palestinians offered shelter and employment to the early settlers, and did not object to working should to shoulder with them under whatever ownership, the Zionist ideologues were very clear about the need both to push the Palestinians out of the country's labor market and to sanction those settlers who were still employing Palestinians or who worked alongside them. This was the idea of *avoda aravit*, (Hebrew Labor), which meant mainly the need to bring an end to *avoda aravit*, (Arab Labor). Gershon Shafir, in his seminal work on the Second Aliyah, the second wave of Zionist immigration (1904–14), explains well how this ideology developed and was practiced.[5] The leader of that wave, David Ben-Gurion (who became the leader of the community and then prime minister of Israel), constantly

referred to Arab labor as an illness for which the only cure was Jewish labor. In his and other settlers' letters, Hebrew workers are characterized as the healthy blood that will immunize the nation from rottenness and death. Ben-Gurion also remarked that employing "Arabs" reminded him of the old Jewish story of a stupid man who resuscitated a dead lion that then devoured him.[6]

The initial positive Palestinian reaction confused some of the settlers themselves throughout the period of British rule (1918–48). The colonialist impulse was to ignore the native population and create gated communities. However, life offered different opportunities. There is extensive evidence of coexistence and cooperation between the newly arrived Jews and the native population almost everywhere. Jewish settlers, particularly in the urban centers, could not survive without engaging, at least economically, with the Palestinians. Despite numerous attempts by the Zionist leadership to disrupt these interactions, hundreds of joint businesses were formed throughout those years, alongside trade-union cooperation and agricultural collaboration. But without political support from above this could not open the way for a different reality in Palestine.[7]

At the same time, the Palestinian political leaders grew more hostile to such joint initiatives as the Zionist movement became more aggressive. The slow realization among the Palestinian political, social, and cultural elite that Zionism was a colonialist project strengthened the common national identity in opposition to the settlers. And eventually there was also Palestinian pressure from above to cease the cooperation and interaction. The Palestinian political movement took time to emerge, developing out of a small group, the Muslim-Christian society, in several Palestinian towns. The guiding principles of the society were primarily modern and secular, added to the twofold concerns of the Arab world at large: a pan-Arab overview wedded to a local patriotism that became ever stronger following World War II.

The first eruption of pan-Arab nationalism had occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century. It brought with it the

hope of transforming the Ottoman world into an independent Arab republic, a bit like the United States of America, or an Arab-Ottoman empire, like the Austro-Hungarian one. When it transpired that this impulse could not withstand the imperial interests of Britain and France, who wished to divide the Ottoman Middle East between themselves, a more local version of nationalism developed, adapting itself to the map created by the Ottoman administrative boundaries and the division of the area by the colonial powers. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the first Arab nationalist impulse is called *qawmiyya*, the later local version, *wataniyya*. The Palestinian community played a role in both. Its intellectuals were engaged with, and were members of, the various organizations and movements seeking Arab unity, independence, and self-determination. At the same time, even before Britain defined, with the help of other European powers, the geopolitical space called Palestine, there was a particular Palestinian existence manifested in the customs of people, their Arabic dialect, and shared history.

When the Zionists arrived in Palestine in the late nineteenth century, the two impulses were still at work among the Palestinian community. Many of its intellectuals and activists were dreaming of a united Arab republic. Others were taken with the idea of a Greater Syria—willing for Damascus to be the center of a new state with Palestine a part of it. When the British arrived and the international community, through the League of Nations, began discussing the future of Palestine, prominent Palestinians produced a journal called *Southern Syria*, and even considered establishing a party under this name.[8] In 1919, when US president Woodrow Wilson sent an inquiry, the King-Crane Commission, to discern the wishes of the Palestinians, the committee discovered that the majority wanted the territory to be independent.

Whether they were pan-Arabists, or local patriots, or wanted to be part of Greater Syria, the Palestinians were united in their wish not to be part of a Jewish state. Their leaders objected to any political solution that would hand any part of the small country to the settler community. As they clearly declared in their negotiations with the British at the end

of the 1920s, they were willing to share with those who had already arrived, but could accept no more.[9] The collective voice of the Palestinians was crystallized in the executive body of the Palestinian National Conference that met every year for a decade, starting in 1919. This body represented the Palestinians in their negotiations with both the British government and the Zionist movement. However, before that happened, the British tried to advance an agreement of equality between the parties. In 1928, the Palestinian leadership, notwithstanding the wishes of the overall majority of their people, consented to allow the Jewish settlers equal representation in the future bodies of the state. The Zionist leadership was in favor of the idea only for as long as it suspected the Palestinians would reject it. Shared representation stood against everything Zionism was supposed to be. So, when the proposal was accepted by the Palestinian party, it was rejected by the Zionists. This led to the riots of 1929, which included the massacre of Jews in Hebron and a much higher death toll among the Palestinian community.[10] But there were also other reasons for the wave of violence, the most serious since the beginning of the Mandate. It was triggered by the dispossession of Palestinian tenants from land owned by absentee landlords and local notables, which had been bought by the Jewish National Fund. The tenants had lived for centuries on the land but they were now forced into slums in the towns. In one such slum, northeast of Haifa, the exiled Syrian preacher, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, recruited his first followers for an Islamic holy war against the British and the Zionist movement in the early 1930s. His legacy was ensured when his name was adopted by the military wing of the Hamas movement.

After 1930, the Palestinian leadership was institutionalized in the form of the Arab Higher Committee, a body that represented all the political parties and movements in the Palestinian community. Until 1937 it continued to attempt a compromise with the British government, but by then both the Zionists and the imperialists had ceased to care what the Palestinian point of view was, and went on unilaterally to determine the future of the territory. By this time the

Palestinian national movement regarded Zionism as a colonialist project that had to be defeated. Yet even in 1947, when Britain decided to refer the question to the United Nations, the Palestinians suggested, with other Arab states, a unitary state in Palestine to replace the Mandate. The UN deliberated the fate of Palestine for seven months and had to decide between two options: the one suggested by the Palestinians of a unitary state that would absorb the existing Jewish settlers but would not allow any further Zionist colonization; the other suggesting a partition of the land into an Arab state and Jewish state. The UN preferred the latter option, and hence the message to Palestinians was: you cannot share your life on the land with the settlers— all you can hope for is to salvage half of it and concede the other half to the settlers.

Thus one can depict Zionism as a settler colonial movement and the Palestinian national movement as an anticolonialist one. In this context, we can understand the behavior and policies of the leader of the community, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, before and during World War II in a different light than the narrative normally served up as historical fact. As many readers will know, one of the common allegations propagated endlessly by the Israelis is that the Palestinian leader was a Nazi sympathizer. The mufti of Jerusalem was not an angel. At a very early age he was chosen by the notables of Palestine, and by the British, to hold the most important religious position in the community. The position, which al-Husayni held throughout the Mandatory period (1922–48), brought him political power and a high social standing. He attempted to lead the community in the face of the Zionist colonization, and when in the 1930s people such as Izz ad-Din al-Qassam pushed for an armed struggle he was able to steer the majority away from this violent option. Nevertheless, when he endorsed the idea of strikes, demonstrations, and other ways of trying to change British policy, he became the empire's enemy, and had to escape from Jerusalem in 1938.[11] In the circumstances he was forced into the arms of his enemy's enemy, in this case Italy and Germany. While in political asylum in Germany for two years, he came

under the influence of Nazi doctrine and confused the distinction between Judaism and Zionism. His willingness to serve as a radio commentator for the Nazis and to help recruit Muslims in the Balkans to the German war effort no doubt stains his career. But he did not act any differently from the Zionist leaders in the 1930s, who themselves sought an alliance with the Nazis against the British Empire, or from all the other anticolonialist movements who wanted rid of the Empire by way of alliances with its principal enemies.

When the war ended in 1945, the Mufti returned to his senses and tried to organize the Palestinians on the eve of the Nakbah, but he was already powerless, and the world he belonged to, that of the Arab Ottoman urban notables, was gone. If he deserves criticism, it is not for his errors concerning Zionism. It is for his lack of sympathy with the plight of the peasants in Palestine, and for his disagreements with other notables, which weakened the anticolonialist movement. Nothing he did justifies his entry in the American-Zionist project *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* being the second longest after Hitler's.[12] Ultimately, neither his mistakes nor his achievements had much impact on the course of Palestinian history. He was absolved of being treated as a war criminal by the allies, and allowed to return to Egypt, but not Palestine, at the end of the war.

With all his faults, before he escaped from Palestine in 1938, and to a certain extent after that in exile, he led an anticolonialist liberation movement. The fact that he was Mufti—one who also believed that religion should be recruited in the struggle against a colonialist movement that coveted his homeland and threatened his people's existence—is not relevant. Anticolonialist movements such as the FLN in Algeria had a strong connection to Islam, as did many liberation movements in the Arab world struggling for independence from Italy, Britain, and France after World War II. Nor was the Mufti's commitment to violence, or that of other leaders such as al-Qassam (killed by the British in 1935 and buried near Haifa), unique in the history of anticolonialist struggles. The liberation movements in South America and Southeast Asia were not pacifist organizations, and they put

their faith in the armed struggle as much as in the political process. Had the Mufti been able to return to Palestine he would have realized not only that Zionism was a successful settler colonial project, but more importantly that it was on the eve of its most crucial existential project.

By 1945, Zionism had attracted more than half a million settlers to a country whose population was about 2 million. Some came with the permission of the Mandatory government, some without. The local native population was not consulted, nor was its objection to the project of turning Palestine into a Jewish state taken into account. The settlers managed to build a state within a state—constructing all the necessary infrastructure—but they failed in two respects. They managed to buy up only 7 percent of the land, which would not suffice for a future state. They were also still a minority—one third in a country in which they wanted to be the exclusive nation.

As with all earlier settler colonial movements, the answer to these problems was the twin logic of annihilation and dehumanization. The settlers' only way of expanding their hold on the land beyond the 7 percent, and of ensuring an exclusive demographic majority, was to remove the natives from their homeland. Zionism is thus a settler colonial project, and one that has not yet been completed. Palestine is not entirely Jewish demographically, and although Israel controls all of it politically by various means, the state of Israel is still colonizing—building new colonies in the Galilee, the Negev, and the West Bank for the sake of increasing the number of Jews there—dispossessing Palestinians, and denying the right of the natives to their homeland.

Chapter 5

The Palestinians Voluntarily Left Their Homeland in 1948

There are two questions relating to this assumption and both will be examined here. First: was there was a will to expel the Palestinians? Second: on the eve of the 1948 war, were the Palestinians called upon to voluntarily leave their homes, as the Zionist mythology has it?

The centrality of the transfer idea in Zionist thought was analyzed, to my mind very convincingly, in Nur Masalha's book, *Expulsion of the Palestinians*.[1] Here I will just add some quotations to emphasize the point that the Zionist leadership and ideologues could not envision a successful implementation of their project without getting rid of the native population, either through agreement or by force. More recently, after years of denial, Zionist historians such as Anita Shapira have accepted that their heroes, the leaders of the Zionist movement, seriously contemplated transferring the Palestinians. However, they hang on desperately to the fact there was a confusion between "compulsory" and "voluntary" transfer.[2] It is true that in public meetings all the Zionist leaders and ideologues talked about transfer by agreement. But even those speeches reveal a bitter truth: there is no such a thing as voluntary transfer. It is semantics not practice.

Berl Katznelson was probably one of the most important Zionist ideologues in the 1930s. He was known as the moral conscience of the movement. His support for transfer was unequivocal. At the twentieth Zionist conference, convened

shortly after the British made their first significant proposal for peace, he strongly voiced his support for the idea. He told the attendees,

> My conscience is completely clear. A distant neighbor is better than a close enemy. They will not lose by their transfer and we certainly will not. In the final analysis this is a political reform of benefit to both sides. For a long time I have been convinced that this is the best solution … and this must happen one of these days.[3]

When he heard that the British government was considering the possibility of moving the Palestinians within Palestine, he was greatly disappointed: "The transfer to 'inside of Palestine' would mean the area of Shechem (Nablus). I believe that their future lies in Syria and Iraq."[4]

In those days, leaders like Katznelson hoped that the British would convince, or induce, the local population to leave. In an infamous letter from Ben-Gurion to his son Amos in October 1937, he already understood that it might be necessary to do it by force.[5] Publicly, that same year, Ben-Gurion supported Katznelson, saying,

> The compulsory transfer of the Arabs from the valleys of the proposed Jewish state could give us something we never had, even when we stood on our own during the days of the first and second Temples … We are given an opportunity which we never dared to dream of in our wildest imaginings. This is more than a state, government and sovereignty—this is national consolidation in a free homeland.[6]

In a similarly clear way he told the Zionist assembly in 1937, "In many parts of the country it will not be possible to settle without transferring the Arab fellahin," which he hoped would be done by the British.[7] But, with or without the British, Ben-Gurion articulated clearly the place of expulsion in the future of the Zionist project in Palestine when he wrote that same year, "With compulsory transfer we would have a vast area for settlement … I support compulsory transfer. I don't see anything immoral in it."[8]

In 2008, an Israeli journalist, reviewing these statements from the past, concluded that they were still acceptable to many Israelis seventy years later. Indeed, since 1937, the expulsion of the Palestinians has been part of the Zionist DNA

of the modern Jewish state.[9] However, the process was not straightforward. Ben-Gurion and the other leaders were cautious about what to do should it prove impossible to convince the Palestinians to leave. Beyond that they were not inclined to articulate any policy. All Ben-Gurion was willing to say was that he did not object to forceful transfer but he did not deem it necessary at that historical juncture.

This ambivalence was brought to Katznelson's attention. At a public meeting in 1942, he was asked about it by some leftist Zionist leaders who thought that Ben-Gurion had renounced the idea of transfer of the Palestinians. He replied, "To the extent that I know Zionist ideology, this [transfer] is part of the realization of Zionism, the perception of this Zionism is the transfer of the people from country to country —a transfer by agreement."[10] In public, Ben-Gurion, the leader of the movement, and other ideologues such as Katznelson, were all in favor of what they called voluntary transfer. Ben-Gurion said, "The transfer of the Arabs is easier than any other transfer since there are Arab states in the area"; he added that it would be an improvement for the Palestinians to be transferred (he did not explain why). He suggested transferring them to Syria. He also kept talking about voluntary transfer.[11]

This was not, however, an honest position, nor was it a possible one. In fact, colleagues of these leaders and ideologues could not see how a transfer could be anything but compulsory. At a closed meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive in June 1938 devoted to transfer, it seems the assembled members, including Ben-Gurion, Katznelson, Sharett, and Ussishkin, were all in favor of compulsory transfer. Katznelson tried to explain what he meant by compulsory: "What is meant by compulsory transfer? Is it transfer against the wishes of the Arab State? Against such wishes no force in the world could implement such a transfer."[12] He explained that compulsory meant overcoming the resistance of the Palestinians themselves:

> If you have to make a transfer agreement with each Arab village and every individual Arab, you will never resolve the problem. We are continually

> carrying out transfers of individual Arabs, but the question will be the transfer of large numbers of Arabs with the agreement of the Arab State.[13]

This was the trick. The talk was of voluntary transfer, and the strategy was incremental until the opportunity emerged for a massive transfer in 1948. Even if you accept Benny Morris's thesis in his book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, that the transfer was in practice incremental and not massive, after a certain number has been reached, however incrementally, the result is still a massive ethnic cleansing—of which more will be said later.

From the minutes of the June 1938 meeting we learn that the language of voluntary transfer actually meant compulsory. Ben-Gurion stated that carrying out a compulsory transfer, especially if the British did it, "would be the greatest achievement in the history of the Jewish settlement in Palestine." He added, "I favor compulsory transfer; I see nothing unethical in it." Menachem Ussishkin, a prominent leader and ideologue, added that "it was most ethical to transfer Arabs out of Palestine and resettle them in better conditions." He hinted that this was probably the logic behind the Balfour Declaration. Moreover, no time was wasted in beginning a discussion about numbers and the means of achieving them. These matters would be finalized only in 1948, but the foundations were laid at this 1938 meeting. A very small minority of those attending objected to compulsory transfer. Syria was the preferred destination and the hope was to be able to move at least 100,000 Palestinians in the first wave.[14]

The discussion about transfer was put on a hold during World War II as the community focused on increasing the number of Jewish immigrants and the establishment of the future state. The conversation was reignited when it became clear that Britain was about to leave Palestine. The British decision was announced in February 1947, which is when we see an intensification of the discussion on forced transfer. In my book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, I examine the way these discussions from 1947 evolved into a master plan for the massive expulsion of the Palestinians in March 1948 (Plan D), to which I will return later in this chapter. The

official Israeli line, however, has not changed for years: the Palestinians became refugees because their leaders, and the leaders of the Arab world, told them to leave Palestine before the Arab armies invaded and kicked out the Jews, after which they could then return. But there was no such call—it is a myth invented by the Israeli foreign ministry. The position of the Israeli foreign office on the very short-lived UN attempt to bring peace in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 war was that the refugees ran away. However, that particular peace process (which lasted for a few months in the first half of 1949) was so brief that Israel was not asked to provide any evidence for this claim, and for many years the refugee problem was expunged from the international agenda.

The need to provide proof emerged in the early 1960s, as we have learned recently thanks to the diligent work of Shay Hazkani, a freelance reporter working for *Haaretz*.[15] According to his research, during the early days of the Kennedy administration in Washington, the US government began to exert pressure on Israel to allow the return of the 1948 refugees to Israel. The official US position since 1948 had been to support the Palestinian right of return. In fact, already in 1949, the Americans had exerted pressure on Israel to repatriate the refugees and imposed sanctions on the Jewish state for its refusal to comply. However, this was a short-term pressure, and as the Cold War intensified the Americans lost interest in the problem until John F. Kennedy came to power (he was also the last US president to refuse to provide Israel with vast military aid; after his assassination the faucet was fully open—a state of affairs that led Oliver Stone to allude to an Israeli connection to the president's murder in his film *JFK*).

One of the first acts of the Kennedy administration on this front was to take an active part in a UN General Assembly discussion on the topic in the summer of 1961. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion panicked. He was convinced that, with American blessing, the UN might force Israel to repatriate the refugees. He wanted Israeli academics to conduct research that would prove that the Palestinians left voluntarily, and to this end approached the Shiloah Institute, the leading center for Middle

Eastern studies in Israeli academia at the time. A junior researcher, Ronni Gabai, was entrusted with the task. With his permit to access classified documents, he reached the conclusion that expulsions, fear, and intimidation were the major causes of the Palestinian exodus. What he did not find was any evidence for a call from the Arab leadership for the Palestinians to leave so as to make way for the invading armies. However, there is a conundrum here. The conclusion just mentioned appeared in Gabai's doctorate on the topic and is recalled by him as the one he sent to the foreign ministry.[16] And yet in his research in the archives Hazkani found a letter from Gabai to the foreign ministry summarizing his research and citing the Arab call to leave as the main cause for the exodus.

Hazkani interviewed Gabai, who even today is adamant that he did not write this letter, and that it did not reflect the research he had undertaken. Someone, we still do not know who, sent a different summary of the research. In any case, Ben-Gurion was not happy. He felt the summary— he did not read the whole research—was not poignant enough. He asked for a researcher he knew, Uri Lubrani, later one of Mossad's experts on Iran, to undertake a second study. Lubrani passed the bucket to Moshe Maoz, today one of Israel's leading orientalists. Maoz delivered the goods, and in September 1962 Ben-Gurion had what he himself described as our White Paper that proves beyond doubt that the Palestinians fled because they were told to do so. Moaz later went on to do a PhD in Oxford under the late Albert Hourani (on a non-related topic), but said in an interview that his research was affected less by the documents he had seen and more by the political assignment he received.[17]

The documents Gabai examined in early 1961 were declassified in the late 1980s, and several historians, among them Benny Morris and myself, saw for the first time clear evidence for what pushed the Palestinians out of Palestine. Although Morris and I have not agreed on how premeditated and planned the expulsion was, we concurred that there was no call from Arab and Palestinian leaders for people to leave. Our research, since described as the work of the "new historians,"

reaffirmed Gabai's conclusion that the Palestinians lost their homes and homeland mainly through expulsion, intimidation, and fear.[18]

Morris asserted that the onset of the fighting between Israel and the Arab armies that entered the country on the day the British Mandate ended, May 15, 1948, was the main reason for what he called the "Birth of the Palestinian refugee problem." I have argued that it was not the war itself, since half of those who became refugees—hundreds of thousands of Palestinians—had been expelled before it had even commenced. Moreover, I claimed that the war was initiated by Israel in order to secure the historical opportunity to expel the Palestinians.[19]

The idea that the Palestinians left voluntarily is not the only false assumption associated with the 1948 war. There are three others that are often aired to explain away the events of that year. The first is that the Palestinians are to be blamed for what happened to them since they rejected the UN partition plan of November 1947. This allegation ignores the colonialist nature of the Zionist movement. What is clear is that the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians can in no way be justified as a "punishment" for their rejecting a UN peace plan that was devised without any consultation with the Palestinians themselves.

The two other assumptions associated with 1948 are that Israel was a David fighting an Arab Goliath, and that after the war Israel extended the hand of peace but the Palestinians and the wider Arab world rejected the gesture. Research on the first assumption has proved that the Palestinians had no military power whatsoever, and that the Arab states sent only a relatively small contingent of troops—smaller compared to the Jewish forces, and far less well equipped or trained. Moreover, these troops were sent into Palestine not as a reaction to the declaration of the founding of the state of Israel, but in response to Zionist operations that had already begun in February 1948, and in particular in the wake of the well-publicized massacre in the village of Der Yassin near Jerusalem in April 1948.[20]

As for the third myth that the Israeli state extended a hand of peace in the aftermath of the conflict, the documents show the opposite. In fact, an intransigent Israeli leadership clearly refused to enter into negotiations over the future of post-Mandatory Palestine or consider the return of the people who had been expelled or had fled. While Arab governments and Palestinian leaders were willing to participate in a new and more reasonable UN peace initiative, the Israeli leadership turned a blind eye when in September 1948 Jewish terrorists assassinated the UN peace mediator, Count Bernadotte. They further rejected any new proposals for peace adopted by the body that replaced Bernadotte, the Palestine Conciliation Commission (PCC), as new negotiations commenced at the end of 1948. As a result, the same UN General Assembly that had voted by a two-thirds majority for the partition plan in November 1947, voted with no objections for a new peace plan in December 1948. This was Resolution 194, adopted on December 11. It had three recommendations: renegotiation of the partition of Palestine in a way that would better fit the demographic realties on the ground; the full and unconditional return of all refugees; and the internationalization of Jerusalem.[21]

The Israeli intransigence would continue. As the historian Avi Shlaim has shown in his book *The Iron Wall*, contrary to the myth that the Palestinians never missed an opportunity to refuse peace, it was Israel that constantly rejected the offers that were on the table.[22] It began with the rejection of a peace offer and fresh ideas for the refugee issue put forward by the Syrian ruler Husni al-Zaim in 1949, and continued with Ben-Gurion's undermining of initial peace feelers sent out by Gamal Abdel Nasser in the early 1950s. Better known is the way Israel refused to show any flexibility in its negotiations with King Hussein in 1972 (mediated by Henry Kissinger over the West Bank), and its refusal to heed President Sadat of Egypt's warning in 1971 that if they would not negotiate bilaterally over the Sinai he would be forced to go to war over it— which he did two years later, inflicting a traumatic blow to Israel's sense of security and invincibility.

All these myths surrounding 1948 fuse together in the image of a Jewish state fighting against all odds, offering succor to the Palestinians, encouraging them to stay and proposing peace, only to learn that there "is no partner" on the other side. The best way to counter this image is to redescribe, patiently and systematically, the events that took place in Palestine between 1946 and 1949.

In 1946, the British government in London thought it could hold onto Palestine for some time to come. It began moving forces out of Egypt into the territory as the Egyptian national liberation struggle intensified that year. However, a harsh winter at the year's end, rising tensions among the Zionist paramilitary groups who had begun to take action against the British forces, and, most importantly, the decision to leave India, brought about a dramatic shift in the British policy towards Palestine. In February 1947, Britain decided to leave the region. The two communities—settlers and natives—reacted very differently to the news. The Palestinian community and its leaders assumed that the process was to be similar to that in the neighboring Arab countries. The Mandatory administration would gradually transfer power to the local population, which would democratically decide the nature of the future state. The Zionists, however, were far better prepared for what came next. Immediately after London's decision to withdraw, the Zionist leadership prepared itself on two fronts: diplomatically and militarily, making preparations for a future confrontation.

At the outset the main focus was on diplomacy. This took the form of finding ways to defeat the well-argued Palestinian claim for a democratic decision about the future of the country. One particular way of doing this was by associating the Holocaust and the fate of Jews around the world with that of the settler Jewish community in Palestine. Thus the Zionist diplomats strove to persuade the international community that the question of who replaced Britain as the sovereign power in Palestine was associated with the fate of all the Jews in the world. Even more poignantly, this policy was associated with the need to compensate the Jewish people for their suffering during the Holocaust.

The result was the UN Partition Resolution of November 29, 1947. The document was prepared by a special committee, UNSCOP, made up of representatives who had little prior knowledge, if any, of the Palestine question. The idea that division of the territory was the best solution came from the Zionist movement itself. The committee members in fact obtained little feedback from the Palestinians themselves. The Arab Higher Committee, the political representative body of the Palestinians and the Arab League, decided to boycott UNSCOP. It was already clear that the right of the Palestinians to their homeland would not be respected in the same way it had been for the Iraqis and the Egyptians. In the immediate aftermath of World War I, the League of Nations had recognized the right of all the nations in the Middle East to self-determination. The decision in 1947 to exclude the Palestinians (likewise with the decision to the exclude the Kurdish nation) was a grave mistake that is one of the main causes of the ongoing conflict in the region.

The Zionists suggested that 80 percent of Palestine should be a Jewish state, while the rest could either become an independent Arab Palestinian state or be annexed and handed to the Kingdom of Jordan. Jordan itself was ambivalent towards the UN efforts as a result: on the one hand, they were being offered a possible extension of their arid kingdom into parts of fertile Palestine; on the other hand, they did not wish to be seen as betraying the Palestinian cause. The dilemma became even more acute when the Jewish leadership offered the Hashemites in Jordan an agreement to this effect. In a way, at the end of the 1948 war, Palestine was more or less divided in such a manner between the Zionist movement and Jordan.[23]

Nevertheless, there was no absolute Zionist control over UNSCOP. The committee, which deliberated on the solution between February and November 1947, revised the Zionists' plans. It expanded the area allocated to the Palestinians and insisted that there would be two independent states. They implicitly hoped that the two states would form an economic union and a joint immigration policy, and that each community would have the option to vote in the other state, should they wish to do so. As the declassified documents reveal, the

Zionist leadership accepted the new map and the terms offered by the UN because they knew about the rejection of the plan by the other side. They also knew that the final division of territory would be determined by action on the ground rather than negotiations in a committee room.[24] The most important result was the international legitimization of the Jewish state, including the borders of the future state. In retrospect we can appreciate that from the perspective of the Zionist leadership in 1948, they had adopted the correct approach when it came to setting out the state without fixing the borders.

This leadership was not idle between the partition plan and the end of the Mandate in May 1948. They had to be active. In the Arab world the pressure on governments to use force against the new Jewish state was growing. In the meantime, on the ground in Palestine, local paramilitary groups began to stage attacks, mainly on Jewish transportation and isolated colonies, trying to pre-empt the implementation of an international decision to turn their homeland into a Jewish state. These moments of resistance were quite limited and petered out in the weeks after the UN partition was announced. At the same time, the Zionist leadership was acting on three discrete fronts. The first involved preparing itself for the possibility of a military invasion by the Arab countries. This did happen and we now know that the Jewish military benefited from the Arab forces' lack of real preparation, purpose, and coordination. The Arab political elites were still quite reluctant to interfere in Palestine. There was a tacit agreement with Jordan that it would take over parts of Palestine, later to become the West Bank, in return for a limited participation in the war effort. This proved a crucial factor in the balance of power. The Jordanian army was the best-trained army in the Arab world.

On the diplomatic front, the months of February and March 1948 were a particularly tense time for the Zionist movement. The United States, through its envoys on the ground, realized that the UN partition plan of November 1947 was flawed. Instead of bringing calm and hope to the country, the plan itself had been the main reason for the recent eruption of violence. There were already reports of Palestinians being

forced out of their homes and of killings on both sides. Both sides attacked each other's public transport, and skirmishes on the lines dividing Arab and Jewish neighborhoods in the mixed towns continued for few days. The US president, Harry Truman, agreed to rethink the idea of partition and suggested a new plan. Through his ambassador to the UN he proposed an international trusteeship over the whole of Palestine for five years, so as to give more time to the search for a solution.

This move was abruptly halted by vested interests. It was the first time the Jewish lobby in the United States was used to change the position of the American administration. AIPAC did not exist yet, but the method was already in place to connect the domestic political scene in America with the interests of Zionism, and later of Israel, in Palestine. In any case, it worked, and the US administration returned to its support of the partition plan. Interestingly, the USSR was even more loyal to the Zionist position and had no second thoughts at all. With the help of members of the Palestine Communist Party (PCP) they facilitated the supply of arms from Czechoslovakia to the Jewish forces before and after May 1948. Readers today may raise an eyebrow at this, but the PCP's support for the Zionist cause was possible for two reasons. First the Soviet Union believed the new Jewish state would be socialist and anti-British (and therefore more inclined towards the Eastern Bloc in the emerging Cold War). Secondly, the PCP believed that national liberation was a necessary phase on the way to their more complete social revolution, and they recognized both the Palestinians and the Zionists as national movements (this is why the party still today supports the two-states solution).[25]

While struggling to secure international approval, the Zionist leadership was busy preparing its community for war, imposing compulsory recruitment and taxation, intensifying military preparations, and escalating arms purchases. They were also quite efficient at gathering intelligence that exposed the lack of preparation in the rest of the Arab world. Working on two fronts—military and diplomatic—did not affect the Zionist strategy towards the most important issue troubling the movement's leaders: how to create a state that was both

democratic and Jewish located on however much of Palestine they might succeed in getting their hands on? Or, put a different way: what to do with the Palestinian population in the future Jewish state?

The various deliberations on this question ended on March 10, 1948, when the high command produced the infamous Plan Dalet, Plan D, which gave an indication of the fate of the Palestinians who lived in the areas to be occupied by the Jewish forces. The debates were led by the leader of the Jewish community, David Ben-Gurion, who was determined to secure demographic exclusivity for the Jews in any future state. This was an obsession that not only informed his actions before 1948, but also long after the creation of the state of Israel. As we shall see, this led him in 1948 to orchestrate the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, and in 1967 to oppose the occupation of the West Bank.

In the days after the Partition Resolution was adopted, Ben-Gurion told his colleagues in the leadership that a Jewish state in which Jews made up only 60 percent was not viable. However, he did not reveal what percentage of Palestinians would make the future state unviable. The message he conveyed to his generals, and through them to the troops on the ground, was nonetheless clear: the fewer Palestinians in a Jewish state the better. This is why, as Palestinian scholars such as Nur Masalha and Ahmad Sa'di have proved, he also tried to get rid of the Palestinians who were left within the Jewish state after the war ("the Arab minority").[26]

Something else happened in the period between November 29, 1947 (when the UN Resolution was adopted) and May 15, 1948 (when the British Mandate ended) that helped the Zionist movement to better prepare for the days ahead. As the end of the Mandate approached, the British forces withdrew into the port of Haifa. Any territory they left, the military forces of the Jewish community took over, clearing out the local population even before the end of the Mandate. The process began in February 1948 with a few villages, and culminated in April with the cleansing of Haifa, Jaffa, Safad, Beisan, Acre, and Western Jerusalem. These last stages had already been systematically planned under the master plan, Plan D,

prepared alongside the high command of the Haganah, the main military wing of the Jewish community. The plan included the following clear reference to the methods to be employed in the process of cleansing the population:

> Destruction of villages (setting fire to, blowing up, and planting mines in the debris), especially those population centers which are difficult to control continuously …
>
> Mounting search and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the village and conducting a search inside it. In the event of resistance, the armed force must be destroyed and the population must be expelled outside the borders of the state.[27]

How could the small Israeli army engage in large-scale ethnic cleansing operations while, from May 15, also being confronted with regular forces from the Arab world? First of all, it is noteworthy that the urban population (apart from three towns: Lydd, Ramleh, and Bir Saba) had already been cleansed before the Arab armies arrived. Second, the rural Palestinian area was already under Israeli control, and the confrontations with the Arab armies occurred on borders of these rural areas not inside them. In one case where the Jordanians could have helped the Palestinians, in Lydd and Ramleh, the British commander of the Jordanian army, Sir John Glubb, decided to withdraw his forces and avoided confrontation with the Israeli army.[28] Finally, the Arab military effort was woefully ineffective and short lived. After some success in the first three weeks, its presence in Palestine was a shambolic story of defeat and hasty withdrawal. After a short lull towards the end of 1948, the Israeli ethnic cleansing thus continued unabated.

From our present vantage point, there is no escape from defining the Israeli actions in the Palestinian countryside as a war crime. Indeed, as a crime against humanity. If one ignores this hard fact one will never understand what lies behind Israel's attitude towards Palestine and the Palestinians as a political system and a society. The crime committed by the leadership of the Zionist movement, which became the government of Israel, was that of ethnic cleansing. This is not mere rhetoric but an indictment with far-reaching political, legal, and moral implications. The definition of the crime was

clarified in the aftermath of the 1990s civil war in the Balkans: ethnic cleansing is any action by one ethnic group meant to drive out another ethnic group with the purpose of transforming a mixed ethnic region into a pure one. Such an action amounts to ethnic cleansing regardless of the means employed to obtain it—from persuasion and threats to expulsions and mass killings.

Moreover, the act itself determines the definition; as such, certain policies have been regarded as ethnic cleansing by the international community, even when a master plan for their execution was not discovered or exposed. Consequently, the victims of ethnic cleansing include both people who have left their homes out of fear and those expelled forcefully as part on an ongoing operation. The relevant definitions and references can be found on the websites of the US State Department and the United Nations.[29] These are the principal definitions that guide the international court in The Hague when it is tasked with judging those responsible for planning and executing such operations.

A study of the writings and thoughts of the early Zionist leaders shows that by 1948 this crime was inevitable. The goal of Zionism had not changed: it was dedicated to taking over as much of Mandatory Palestine as possible and removing most of the Palestinian villages and urban neighborhoods from the space carved out for the future Jewish state. The execution was even more systematic and comprehensive than anticipated in the plan. In a matter of seven months, 531 villages were destroyed and eleven urban neighborhoods emptied. The mass expulsion was accompanied by massacres, rape, and the imprisonment of males over the age of ten in labor camps for periods of over a year.[30]

The political implication is that Israel is exclusively culpable for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, for which it bears the legal as well as moral responsibility. The legal implication is that even if there is a statute of limitations, after such a long period, for those who committed a deed understood as a crime against humanity, the deed itself is still a crime for which nobody was ever brought to justice. The

moral implication is that the Jewish state was born out of sin—like many other states, of course—but the sin, or the crime, has never been admitted. Worse, among certain circles in Israel it is acknowledged, but in the same breath fully justified both in hindsight and as a future policy against the Palestinians, wherever they are. The crime is still committed today.

All these implications were totally ignored by the Israeli political elite. Instead a very different lesson has been learned from the events of 1948: that one can, as a state, expel half of a country's population and destroy half its villages with impunity. The consequences of such a lesson, immediately after 1948 and beyond, were inevitable—the continuation of the ethnic cleansing policy by other means. There have been well-known landmarks in this process: the expulsion of more villagers between 1948 and 1956 from Israel proper; the forced transfer of 300,000 Palestinians from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip during the 1967 war; and a very measured, but constant, cleansing of Palestinians from the Greater Jerusalem area, calculated as more than 250,000 by the year 2000.[31]

After 1948, the policy of ethnic cleansing took many forms. In various parts of the occupied territories and inside Israel, the policy of expulsion was replaced by a prohibition on people leaving their villages or neighborhoods. Restricting Palestinians to where they lived served the same purpose as expelling them. When they are besieged in enclaves—such as areas A, B and C under the Oslo Accord in the West Bank, or in villages and neighborhoods in Jerusalem that are declared part of the West Bank, or in the Gaza Ghetto—they are not counted demographically in either official or informal censuses, which is what matters to the Israeli policy makers more than anything else.

As long as the full implications of Israel's past and present ethnic cleansing policies are not recognized and tackled by the international community, there will be no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ignoring the issue of the Palestinian refugees will repeatedly undermine any attempt to reconcile the two conflicting parties. This is why it is so

important to recognize the 1948 events as an ethnic cleansing operation, so as to ensure that a political solution will not evade the root of the conflict; namely, the expulsion of the Palestinians. Such evasions in the past are the main reason for the collapse of all previous peace accords.

If the legal lessons are not learned, there will always remain retributive impulses and revengeful emotions on the Palestinian side. The legal recognition of the 1948 Nakbah as an act of ethnic cleansing would pave the way for some form of restitutive justice. This would be the same as the process that has taken place recently in South Africa. The acknowledgement of past evils is not done in order to bring criminals to justice, but rather to bring the crime itself to public attention and trial. The final ruling there will not be retributive—there will be no punishment—but rather restitutive: the victims will be compensated. The most reasonable compensation for the particular case of the Palestinian refugees was stated clearly already in December 1948 by the UN General Assembly in its Resolution 194: the unconditional return of the refugees and their families to their homeland (and homes where possible). Without some such restitution, the state of Israel will continue to exist as a hostile enclave at the heart of the Arab world, the last reminder of a colonialist past that complicates Israel's relationship not only with the Palestinians, but with the Arab world as a whole.

It is important to note, however, that there are Jews in Israel who have absorbed all these lessons. Not all Jews are indifferent to or ignorant about the Nakbah. Those who are not are currently a small minority, but one which makes its presence felt, demonstrating that at least some Jewish citizens are not deaf to the cries, pain, and devastation of those killed, raped, or wounded throughout 1948. They have heard of the thousands of Palestinian citizens arrested and imprisoned in the 1950s, and they acknowledge the Kafr Qasim massacre in 1956, when citizens of the state were murdered by the army just because they were Palestinians. They know about the war crimes committed throughout the 1967 war and the callous bombing of the refugee camps in 1982. They have not forgotten the physical abuse meted out to Palestinian youth in

the occupied territories in the 1980s and afterwards. These Israeli Jews are not deaf and can still today hear the voices of the military officers ordering the execution of innocent people and the laughter of the soldiers standing by and watching.

They are also not blind. They have seen the remains of the 531 destroyed villages and the ruined neighborhoods. They see what every Israeli can see, but for the most part chooses not to: the remnants of villages under the houses of the Kibbutzim and beneath the pine trees of the JNF (Jewish National Fund) forests. They have not forgotten what happened even when the rest of their society has. Perhaps because of that they understand fully the connection between the 1948 ethnic cleansing and the events that followed up to the present. They recognize the link between the heroes of Israel's war of independence and those who commanded the cruel suppression of the two Intifadas. They never mistook Yitzhak Rabin or Ariel Sharon for peace heroes. They also refuse to ignore the obvious connection between the building of the wall and the wider policy of ethnic cleansing. The expulsions of 1948 and the imprisonment of people within walls today are the inevitable consequences of the same racist ethnic ideology. Nor can they fail to recognize the link between the inhumanity inflicted on Gaza since 2006 and these past policies and practices. Such inhumanity is not born in a vacuum; it has a history and an ideological infrastructure that justifies it.

Since the Palestinian political leadership has neglected this aspect of the conflict, it is Palestinian civil society that is leading the effort to relocate the 1948 events at the center of the national agenda. Inside and outside Israel, Palestinian NGOs such as BADIL, ADRID, and Al-Awda, are coordinating their struggle to preserve the memory of 1948 and explain why it is crucial to engage with the events of that year for the sake of the future.

Chapter 6

The June 1967 War Was a War of "No Choice"

In June 1982, following Israel's assault on Lebanon, there was much debate concerning the official announcement that the nation had "no choice" but to follow the violent course of action it had taken. At that time, the Israeli public was divided between those who deemed the campaign necessary and justified and those who doubted its moral validity. In making their points both sides used the 1967 war as a benchmark, identifying the earlier conflict as an unimpeachable example of a war of "no choice." This is a myth.[1]

According to this accepted narrative, the 1967 war forced Israel to occupy the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and keep it in custody until the Arab world, or the Palestinians, were willing to make peace with the Jewish state. Consequently another myth emerges—which I will discuss in a separate chapter—namely that the Palestinian leaders are intransigent and that therefore peace is impossible. This argument thus generates the impression that the Israeli rule is temporary: the territories have to remain in custody pending a more "reasonable" Palestinian position.

In order to re-evaluate the 1967 war we first need to go back to the war of 1948. The Israeli political and military elite regarded the latter as a missed opportunity: a historical moment in which Israel could, and should, have occupied the whole of historical Palestine from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea. The only reason they did not do so was because of an agreement they had with neighboring Jordan. This collusion was negotiated during the last days of the

British Mandate, and when finalized it limited the military participation of the Jordanian army in the general Arab war effort in 1948. In return, Jordan was allowed to annex areas of Palestine that became the West Bank. David Ben-Gurion, who kept the pre-1948 agreement intact, called the decision to allow Jordan to take the West Bank *bechiya ledorot*—which literally means that future generations would lament the decision. A more metaphorical translation might choose to translate it as "a fatal historical mistake."[2]

Ever since 1948, important sections of the Jewish cultural, military, and political elites had been looking for an opportunity to rectify this mistake. From the mid-1960s onwards, they carefully planned how to create a greater Israel that would include the West Bank.[3] There were several historical junctures in which they almost executed the plan only to draw back at the very last moment. The most famous are 1958 and 1960, when David Ben-Gurion aborted the execution of the plan due to fears of international reaction in the first instance and for demographic reasons in the second (calculating that Israel could not incorporate such a large number of Palestinians). The best opportunity came with the 1967 war. Later in this chapter I will explore the origins of that war, arguing that whatever the historical narrative of its causes, one has to look closely at Jordan's role in it. Was it, for example, necessary to occupy and retain the West Bank in order to maintain the relatively good relationship Israel had had with Jordan since 1948? If the answer is no, as I think it is, then the question arises as to why Israel pursued this policy, and what it tells us about the likelihood of Israel ever giving up the West Bank in the future. Even if, as the official Israeli mythology has it, the West Bank was occupied in retaliation for the Jordanian aggression of June 5, 1967, the question remains as to why Israel remained in the West Bank after the threat had dissipated. After all, there are plenty of examples of aggressive military actions that did not end with a territorial expansion of the state of Israel. As I will attempt to show in this chapter, incorporating the West Bank and the Gaza Strip within Israel had been the plan since 1948, even if it was only implemented in 1967.

Was the 1967 war inevitable? We can begin our answer in 1958— described in the scholarly literature on the modern Middle East as the revolutionary year. In that year, the progressive, radical ideas that brought the Egyptian Free Officers to power in Cairo began to make an impact all over the Arab world. This trend was supported by the Soviet Union and almost inevitably challenged by the United States. This "playing out" of the Cold War in the Middle East opened up opportunities for those in Israel looking for a pretext to correct the "fatal historical mistake" of 1948. It was driven by a powerful lobby within the Israeli government and army, led by the war heroes of 1948, Moshe Dayan and Yigal Alon. When a consensus developed in the West that the "radicalism" emerging in Egypt might engulf other countries, including Jordan, the lobby recommended that Prime Minister Ben-Gurion approach NATO to promote the idea of a pre-emptive Israeli takeover of the West Bank.[4]

This scenario became even more plausible after Iraq fell into the hands of progressive, even radical, officers. On July 14, 1958, a group of Iraqi officers staged a military coup that brought down the Hashemite dynasty. The Hashemites had been put in power by the British in 1921 to keep Iraq within the Western sphere of influence. Economic recession, nationalism, and strong connections to Egypt and the USSR triggered a protest movement that brought the officers to power. It was led by a group calling itself the Free Officers, headed by Abd al-Karim Qasim, which, emulating the group that had overthrown the monarchy in Egypt six years earlier, replaced the monarchy with the republic of Iraq.

At the time, it was also feared in the West that Lebanon could be the next region be taken over by revolutionary forces. NATO decided to preempt this scenario by dispatching its own forces (US Marines to Lebanon and British Special Forces to Jordan). There was no need, and no wish, to involve Israel in this developing cold war in the Arab world.[5] When the Israeli idea of "saving" at least the West Bank was voiced, it was firmly rejected by Washington. It seems, however, that Ben-Gurion was quite happy to be warned off at this stage. He had no wish to undermine the demographic achievement of 1948

—he did not want to change the balance between Jews and Arabs in a new "greater" Israel by incorporating the Palestinians living in the West Bank.[6] In his diary he reported that he had explained to his ministers that occupying the West Bank would constitute a grave demographic danger: "I told them about the danger of incorporating one million Arabs into a state that has a population of one and three quarter million."[7] For the same reason he pre-empted another attempt by the more hawkish lobby to exploit a new crisis two years later in 1960. As long as Ben-Gurion was in power, the lobby, so brilliantly described in Tom Segev's book *1967*, would not have its way. However, by 1960, it had become much more difficult to restrain the lobby. In fact, in that year, all the ingredients that would later mark the crisis of 1967 were in place and carried the same threat of erupting into a war. But war was averted, or at least delayed.

In 1960, the first significant actor on the scene was the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, who conducted a dangerous policy of brinkmanship, as he would six years later. Nasser heightened the war rhetoric against Israel, threatening to move troops into the demilitarized Sinai Peninsula and to block the passage of ships into the southern city of Eilat. His motives for doing so were the same in 1960 as they were in 1967. He feared that Israel would attack Syria, which between 1958 and 1962 was in a formal union with Egypt called the United Arab Republic. Ever since Israel and Syria had concluded an armistice agreement in the summer of 1949, there had been quite a few issues unresolved. Among them were pieces of land, called "no-man's land" by the UN, which both sides coveted. Every now and then, Israel encouraged members of the Kibbutzim and settlements adjacent to these lands to go and cultivate them, knowing full well that this would trigger a Syrian response from the Golan Heights above them. This is exactly what happened in 1960, and a predictable cycle of escalating tit for tat then followed: the Israeli air force were employed to gain some real battle experience and show their supremacy over the Russian jets employed by the Syrian air force. Dogfights ensued, artillery was exchanged,

complaints were submitted to the armistice committee, and an uneasy lull reigned until violence erupted once more.[8]

A second source of friction between Israel and Syria concerned the Israeli construction of a national water carrier (this is the official Israeli name in English for a huge project that includes viaducts, pipelines, and canals) between the estuaries of the River Jordan and the south of the state. Work on the project began in 1953 and included siphoning off some of the water resources that were desperately needed both in Syria and in Lebanon. In response, the Syrian leaders succeeded in convincing their Egyptian allies in the UAR that Israel might launch an all-out military campaign against Syria in order to secure the strategic Golan Heights, and the sources of the River Jordan.

Nasser had another motive for tipping the precarious balance in and around historical Palestine. He wanted to break the diplomatic stasis of the period and challenge the global indifference to the Palestine question. As Avi Shlaim showed in his book *The Iron Wall*, Nasser had some hope of finding a way out of the deadlock when he negotiated with Moshe Sharett, Israel's dovish foreign minister and, for a short while in the mid-1950s, its prime minister.[9] However, Nasser understood that power lay in the hands of Ben-Gurion, and once the latter returned to the prime minister's office in 1955, there was little hope of advancing peace between the two states.

While these negotiations took place, the two sides discussed the possibility of an Egyptian land passage in the Negev in return for ending the standoff. This was an early tentative idea on the agenda that was not developed further, and we have no way of knowing whether it would have led to a bilateral peace treaty. What we do know is that there was little chance of any bilateral peace agreement between Israel and Egypt as long as Ben-Gurion was Israel's prime minister. Even out of power, Ben-Gurion used his connections with the army to convince its commanders to launch several provocative military operations against the Egyptian forces in the Gaza Strip while these negotiations were taking place. The

pretext for these operations was the infiltrations of Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip into Israel, which gradually became more militarized and eventually constituted a real guerilla warfare against the Jewish state. Israel reacted by destroying Egyptian bases and killing Egyptian troops.[10]

The peace efforts died for all intents and purposes once Ben-Gurion returned to power and joined Britain and France in a military alliance aimed at bringing down Nasser in 1956. No wonder that, four years later, when contemplating a war against Israel, Nasser deemed his maneuvers a pre-emptive move to save his regime from a possible Anglo-French-Israeli attack. Thus, in 1960, when the tension on the Israeli-Syrian border grew and there was no progress whatsoever on the diplomatic front, Nasser probed a new strategy, referred to earlier as "brinkmanship." The purpose of this exercise was to constantly test the boundaries of possibility. In this case, to examine how far military preparations and threats can change the political reality, without actually going to war. The success of such brinkmanship depends not only on the person who initiates it but also on the unforeseeable responses of those against whom the policy is directed. And that is where it can go terribly wrong, as it did in 1967.

Nasser implemented this strategy for the first time in 1960, and repeated it in a similar way in 1967. He sent forces into the Sinai Peninsula—which was supposed to be a demilitarized zone according to the agreement that ended the 1956 war. The Israeli government and the UN acted very sensibly in 1960 in the face of this threat. The UN secretary-general, Dag Hammarskjöld, took a firm position demanding the immediate withdrawal of the Egyptian forces. The Israeli government called up its reserves but sent a clear message it would not start a war.[11]

On the eve of 1967 war, all these factors played a role in the outbreak of violence. Two personalities, however, were no longer involved: David Ben-Gurion and Dag Hammarskjöld. Ben-Gurion had left the political scene in 1963. Ironically, it was only after his departure that the Greater Israel lobby was able to plan its next step. Until then, Ben-Gurion's

demographic obsession had prevented the takeover of the West Bank, but also produced the by now familiar military rule Israel had imposed on different Palestinian groups. The abolition of this regime in 1966 allowed a ready-made apparatus to control both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip even before the June 1967 war erupted. The military rule Israel had imposed on the Palestinian minority in 1948 was based on British Mandatory emergency regulations that treated the civilian population as a potential alien group, hence robbing it of its basic human and civil rights. Military governors were installed across the Palestinian areas with executive, judicial, and legislative authority. This was a quite a well-oiled machinery by 1966, including hundreds of employees who would serve as the nucleus for a similar regime when it was imposed on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Thus, the military rule that was abolished in 1966 was imposed in 1967 on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; and all was in place for an invasion. Since 1963 a group of Israeli experts from the army, civil service, and academia had planned for the transition, putting together a detailed manual for how to run a Palestinian territory according to emergency regulations, should the opportunity rise.[12] This gave absolute power to the army in every sphere of life. The opportunity for moving this apparatus from one Palestinian group (the Palestinian minority in Israel) to another (the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) came in 1967, when Nasser was encouraged in his brinkmanship by the Soviet leadership, who believed strongly that an Israeli attack on Syria was imminent in the last days of 1966.[13] In the summer of that year, a new group of officers and ideologues had staged a military coup and taken over the Syrian state (known as the new “Ba’ath”). One of the first acts of the new regime was to deal more firmly with the Israeli plans to exploit the waters of the River Jordan and its estuaries. They began building their own national carrier and diverted the river for their own needs. The Israeli army bombed the new project, which led to frequent and gradually more intensified dogfights between the two air forces. The new regime in Syria also looked favorably on the newly formed Palestinian national liberation movement. This in turn

encouraged Fatah to stage a guerrilla war against Israel in the Golan Heights, using Lebanon as a launching pad for attacks. This only added to the tension between the two states.

It seems that until April 1967 Nasser still hoped that his histrionics would be enough to force a change in the status quo, without recourse to war. He signed a defense alliance with Syria in November 1966, declaring his intention to come to the latter's aid should Israel attack. Yet the deterioration on the Israeli-Syrian border hit a new low in April 1967. Israel staged a military attack on Syrian forces in the Golan Heights that was intended, according the then general chief of staff of the Israeli army, Yitzhak Rabin, "to humiliate Syria."[14] By this stage it seemed as if Israel was doing all it could to push the Arab world into war. It was only then that Nasser felt compelled to repeat his gambit of 1960—dispatching troops into the Sinai Peninsula and closing the Tiran straights, a narrow passage that connected the Gulf of Aqaba with the Red Sea and hence could stop, or hinder, maritime traffic into Israel's most southern port, Eilat. As in 1960, Nasser waited to see how the UN would react. Back in 1960, Dag Hammarskjöld was not impressed and had not withdrawn the UN troops who had been stationed there since 1956. The new secretary-general, U Thant, was less assertive and withdrew the UN forces when the Egyptian troops entered the Peninsula. This had the effect of escalating the tension further.

However, the most important factor in the rush to war was the absence of any authoritative challenge to the warmongering within the Israeli leadership at the time. This might have offered some form of internal friction delaying the hawks' pursuit of conflict, allowing the international community to look for a peaceful resolution. A diplomatic effort led by the United States was still in its early stages when Israel launched its attack on all its Arab neighbors on June 5, 1967. There was no intention in the Israeli cabinet of providing the necessary time to the peace brokers. This was a golden opportunity not to be missed.

In crucial Israeli cabinet meetings before the war, Abba Eban naively asked the chiefs of staff and his colleagues what the difference was between the 1960 crisis and the 1967

situation, as he thought the latter could have been resolved in the same way.[15] It "is a matter of honor and deterrence" was the reply. Eban replied that losing young soldiers only for the sake of honor and deterrence was too high a human price to be paid. I suspect that other things were said to him that have not been recorded in the minutes, probably about his need to understand that this was a historical opportunity to correct the "fatal historical mistake" of not occupying the West Bank in 1948.

The war began early in the morning of June 5 with an Israeli attack on the Egyptian air force, which nearly destroyed it. This was followed the same day with similar assaults on the air forces of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. Israeli forces also invaded the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula and in the next few days reached the Suez Canal, occupying the whole of the peninsula. The attack on the Jordanian air force triggered the Jordanian capture of a small UN zone between the two parts of Jerusalem. Within three days, after fierce fighting, the Israeli army had captured East Jerusalem (on June 7), and two days later they drove the Jordanian army out of the West Bank.

On June 7, the Israeli government was still uncertain about opening a new front against the Syrians on the Golan Heights, but the remarkable successes on the other front convinced the politicians to allow the army to occupy the Golan Heights. By June 11, Israel had become a mini-empire, controlling the Golan Heights, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula. In this chapter I will focus on the Israeli decision to occupy the West Bank.

On the eve of the war, Jordan had entered into a military alliance with Egypt and Syria according to which, the moment Israel attacked Egypt, Jordan was obliged to enter the war. Notwithstanding this commitment, King Hussein sent clear messages to Israel that if war began he would have to do something, but that it would be short and would not entail a real war (this was very similar to his grandfather's position in 1948). In practice, the Jordanian involvement was more than symbolic. It included a heavy bombardment of West Jerusalem and the eastern suburbs of Tel Aviv. However, it is important to note what Jordan was reacting to: its air force had been

totally destroyed by Israel a couple of hours earlier, at noon on June 5. King Hussein thus felt obliged to react more forcefully than he probably intended.

The problem was that the army was not under his control, but was commanded by an Egyptian general. The common narrative of these events is based on Hussein's own memoirs and those of Dean Rusk, the American Secretary of State at the time. According to this narrative, Israel sent a conciliatory message to Hussein urging him to stay out of the war (even though it had destroyed the Jordanian air force). On the first day Israel was still willing not to go too far in its assault on Jordan, but the latter's reaction to the destruction of its air force led Israel into a much wider operation on the second day. Hussein actually wrote in his memoirs that he hoped all the time someone would stop the madness as he could not disobey the Egyptians nor risk a war. On the second day he urged the Israelis to calm down and only then, according to this narrative, did Israel proceed to a larger operation.[16]

There are two problems with this narrative. How can one reconcile the assault on the Jordanian air force with the sending of a reconciliatory message? More importantly, even if Israel was still hesitant about its policy towards Jordan on the first day, it is clear even from this narrative that by the second day it did not wish to give Jordan any respite. As Norman Finkelstein has rightly noted, if you wanted to destroy what was left of the Jordanian army and retain your relationship with the one Arab country most loyal to Israel, a short operation in the West Bank, without occupying it, would have sufficed.[17] The Israeli historian Moshe Shemesh has examined the Jordanian sources and concluded that, after Israel attacked the Palestinian village of Samua in November 1966, in an attempt to defeat the Palestinian guerrillas, the Jordanian high command was persuaded that Israel intended to occupy the West Bank by force.[18] They were not wrong.

This did not happen as feared in 1966, but a year later. The whole of Israeli society was galvanized around the messianic project of "liberating" the holy places of Judaism, with Jerusalem as the jewel in the new crown of Greater Israel.

Left- and right-wing Zionists, and Israel's supporters in the West, were also caught up in, and mesmerized by, this euphoric hysteria. In addition, there was no intention of leaving the West Bank and the Gaza Strip immediately after their occupation; in fact there was no desire to leave them at all. This should stand as further proof of Israeli responsibility for the final deterioration of the May 1967 crisis into a full-blown war.

How important this historical juncture was for Israel can be seen from the way the government withstood the strong international pressure to withdraw from all the territories occupied in 1967, as demanded in the famous UN Security Council Resolution 242 very shortly after the war ended. As readers probably know, a Security Council resolution is more binding than a resolution by the General Assembly. And this was one of the few Security Council resolutions criticizing Israel that was not vetoed by the United States.

We now have access to the minutes of a meeting of the Israeli government in the immediate days after the occupation. This was the thirteenth government of Israel and its composition is very relevant to the argument I am making here. It was a unity government of a kind not seen before, or after, in Israel. Every shade of the Zionist and Jewish political spectrum was represented. Apart from the Communist Party, every other party had a representative in the government, from left to right and center. Socialist parties such as Mapam, right-wing parties like Menachem Begin's Herut, the liberals, and the religious parties were all included. The sense you get from reading the minutes is that the ministers knew they represented a wide consensus in their own society. This conviction was further energized by the euphoric atmosphere that engulfed Israel after the triumphant blitzkrieg that lasted only six days. Against this background, we can better understand the decisions these ministers took in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Moreover, many of these politicians had been waiting since 1948 for this moment. I would go even further and say that the takeover of the West Bank in particular, with its ancient biblical sites, was a Zionist aim even before 1948 and

it fitted the logic of the Zionist project as a whole. This logic can be summarized as the wish to take over as much of Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians as possible. The consensus, the euphoria, and the historical context explain why none of the subsequent Israeli governments have ever deviated from the decisions these ministers took.

The first decision they made was that Israel could not exist without the West Bank. Direct and indirect methods of controlling the region were offered by the minister of agriculture, Yigal Alon, when he distinguished between areas where Jewish settlements could be built and areas that were densely populated by Palestinians, which should be ruled indirectly.[19] Alon changed his mind within a few years about the method of indirect rule. At first he hoped that the Jordanians would be tempted to help Israel rule parts of the West Bank (probably, although this was never spelled out, by maintaining Jordanian citizenships and laws in the "Arab areas" of the West Bank). However, a lukewarm Jordanian response to this plan tilted him towards Palestinian self-rule in those areas as the best way forward.

The second decision was that the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza Strip would not be incorporated into the state of Israel as citizens. This did not include the Palestinians living in what Israel regarded at the time as the new "Greater Jerusalem" area. The definition of that area, and who in it was entitled to Israeli citizenship, changed whenever this space grew in size. The greater the Greater Jerusalem became, the larger the number of Palestinians in it. Today there are 200,000 Palestinians within what is defined as the Greater Jerusalem area. To ensure that not all of them are counted as Israeli citizens, quite a few of their neighborhoods were declared to be West Bank villages.[20] It was clear to the government that denying citizenship on the one hand, and not allowing independence on the other, condemned the inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to life without basic civil and human rights.

The next question therefore was how long the Israeli army would occupy the Palestinian areas. It seems that for most

ministers the answer was, and still is: for a very long time. For instance, Moshe Dayan, the minister of defense, on one occasion threw into the air a period of fifty years.[21] We are now in the fiftieth year of the occupation.

The third decision was associated with the peace process. As mentioned earlier, the international community expected Israel to return the territories it had occupied in exchange for peace. The Israeli government was willing to negotiate with Egypt over the future of the Sinai Peninsula and with Syria over the Golan Heights, but not over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In one brief press conference in 1967, the prime minister at the time, Levy Eshkol, said as much.[22] But soon his colleagues understood that public declarations of this kind were unhelpful, to put it mildly. Therefore, this strategic position was never explicitly acknowledged again in the public domain. What we do have is clear statements from a few individuals, most prominent among them Dan Bavli, who were part of the senior team of officials charged with strategizing the policy towards the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In retrospect, Bavli reports that the unwillingness to negotiate, especially over the West Bank, underlined the Israeli policy at the time (and I would add: and ever since).[23] Bavli described this policy as an "addition to belligerence and short sightedness" that replaced any search for a solution: "The various Israeli governments talked a lot about peace but did very little to achieve it."[24] What the Israelis invented there and then is what Noam Chomsky has called a "complete farce."[25] They understood that talking about peace does not mean they cannot establish on the ground irreversible facts that will defeat the very idea of peace.

Readers may ask, and rightly so, whether there was no peace camp or liberal Zionist position at the time that genuinely sought peace. Indeed there was, and perhaps there still is one today. However, from the very beginning it was marginal and had the support of only a small section of the electorate. Decisions are made in Israel by a core group of politicians, generals, and strategists who lay down policy, regardless of public debates. Moreover, the only way to judge,

in hindsight at least, what the Israeli strategy might be is not through the discourse of the state's policy makers but through their actions on the ground. For example, the policy declarations of the 1967 unity government might have differed from those of the Labor governments that ruled Israel until 1977, and from those voiced by the Likud governments that have ruled Israel intermittently up until today (with the exception of a few years in which the now extinct Kadima party led the Sharon and Olmert governments in the first decade of the twenty-first century). The actions of each regime, however, have been the same, remaining loyal to the three strategic decisions that became the catechism of Zionist dogma in post-1967 Israel.

The most crucial action on the ground was the construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, along with the commitment to their expansion. The government located these settlements at first in less densely populated Palestinian areas in the West Bank (since 1968) and Gaza (since 1969). However, as is so chillingly described in the brilliant book by Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *The Lords of the Land*, the ministers and planners succumbed to pressure from the messianic settler movement, Gush Emunim, and also settled Jews at the heart of the Palestinian neighborhoods.[26]

Another way of judging what the real Israeli intentions have been since 1967 is to look at these policies from the point of view of the Palestinian victims. After the occupation, the new ruler confined the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in an impossible limbo: they were neither refugees nor citizens—they were, and still are, citizenless inhabitants. They were inmates, and in many respects still are, of a huge prison in which they have no civil and human rights and no impact on their future. The world tolerates this situation because Israel claims— and the claim was never challenged until recently— that the situation is temporary and will continue only until there is a proper Palestinian partner for peace. Not surprisingly, such a partner has not been found. At the time of writing, Israel is still incarcerating a third generation of Palestinians by various means and methods, and depicting

these mega-prisons as temporary realities that will change once peace comes to Israel and Palestine.

What can the Palestinians do? The Israeli message is very clear: If they comply with the expropriations of land, the severe restrictions on movement, the harsh bureaucracy of occupation, then they may reap a few benefits. These may be the right to work in Israel, to claim some autonomy, and, since 1993, even the right to call some of these autonomous regions a state. However, if they choose the path of resistance, as they have done occasionally, they will feel the full might of the Israeli army. The Palestinian activist Mazin Qumsiyeh has counted fourteen such uprisings that have attempted to escape this mega-prison—all were met with a brutal, and in the case of Gaza, even genocidal, response.[27]

Thus we can see that the takeover of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip represents a completion of the job that began in 1948. Back then, the Zionist movement took over 80 percent of the Palestine—in 1967 they completed the takeover. The demographic fear that haunted Ben-Gurion—a greater Israel with no Jewish majority—was cynically resolved by incarcerating the population of the occupied territories in a non-citizenship prison. This is not just a historical description; in many ways it is still the reality in 2017.

PART II

THE FALLACIES OF THE PRESENT

Chapter 7

Israel Is the Only Democracy in the Middle East

In the eyes of many Israelis and their supporters worldwide—even those who might criticize some of its policies—Israel is, at the end of the day, a benign democratic state, seeking peace with its neighbors, and guaranteeing equality to all its citizens. Those who do criticize Israel assume that if anything went wrong in this democracy then it was due to the 1967 war. In this view, the war corrupted an honest and hardworking society by offering easy money in the occupied territories, allowing messianic groups to enter Israeli politics, and above all else turning Israel into an occupying and oppressive entity in the new territories.

The myth that a democratic Israel ran into trouble in 1967 but still remained a democracy is propagated even by some notable Palestinian and pro-Palestinian scholars—but it has no historical foundation. Before 1967, Israel definitely could not have been depicted as a democracy. As we have seen in previous chapters, the state subjected one-fifth of its citizenship to military rule based on draconian British Mandatory emergency regulations that denied the Palestinians any basic human or civil rights. Local military governors were the absolute rulers of the lives of these citizens: they could devise special laws for them, destroy their houses and livelihoods, and send them to jail whenever they felt like it. Only in the late 1950s did a strong Jewish opposition to these abuses emerge, which eventually eased the pressure on the Palestinian citizens.

For the Palestinians who lived in pre-war Israel and those who lived in the post-1967 West Bank and the Gaza Strip, this regime allowed even the lowest-ranking soldier in the IDF to rule, and ruin, their lives. They were helpless if such a solider, or his unit or commander, decided to demolish their homes, or hold them for hours at a checkpoint, or incarcerate them without trial. There was nothing they could do.[1] At every moment from 1948 until today, there had been some group of Palestinians undergoing such an experience. The first group to suffer under such a yoke was the Palestinian minority inside Israel. It began in the first two years of statehood when they were pushed into ghettoes, such as the Haifa Palestinian community living on the Carmel mountain, or expelled from the towns they had inhabited for decades, as such as Safad. In the case of Isdud, the whole population was expelled to the Gaza Strip.[2] In the countryside, the situation was even worse. The various Kibbutz movements coveted Palestinian villages on fertile land. This included the socialist Kibbutzim, Hashomer Ha-Zair, which was allegedly committed to binational solidarity. Long after the fighting of 1948 had subsided, villagers in Ghabsiyyeh, Iqrit, Birim, Qaidta, Zaytun, and many others, were tricked into leaving their homes for a period of two weeks, the army claiming it needed their lands for training, only to find out on their return that their villages had been wiped out or handed to someone else.[3]

This state of military terror is exemplified by the Kafr Qasim massacre of October 1956, when, on the eve of the Sinai operation, forty-nine Palestinian citizens were killed by the Israeli army. The authorities alleged that they were late returning home from work in the fields when a curfew had been imposed on the village. This was not the real reason, however. Later proofs show that Israel had seriously considered the expulsion of Palestinians from the whole area called the Wadi Ara and the Triangle in which the village sat. These two areas—the first a valley connecting Afula in the east and Hadera on the Mediterranean coast; the second expanding the eastern hinterland of Jerusalem—were annexed to Israel under the terms of the 1949 armistice agreement with Jordan. As we have seen, additional territory was always

welcomed by Israel, but an increase in the Palestinian population was not. Thus, at every juncture, when the state of Israel expanded, it looked for ways of restricting the Palestinian population in the recently annexed areas.

Operation "Hafarfert" (mole) was the codename of a set of proposals for the expulsion of Palestinians when a new war broke out with the Arab world. Many scholars today now think that the 1956 massacre was a practice run to see if the people in the area could be intimidated to leave. The perpetrators of the massacre were brought to trial thanks to the diligence and tenacity of two members of the Knesset: Tawfiq Tubi from the Communist Party and Latif Dori of the Left Zionist party Mapam. However, the commanders responsible for the area, and the unit itself that committed the crime, were let off very lightly, receiving merely small fines.[4] This was further proof that the army was allowed to get away with murder in the occupied territories.

Systematic cruelty does not only show its face in a major event like a massacre. The worst atrocities can also be found in the regime's daily, mundane presence. Palestinians in Israel still do not talk much about that pre-1967 period, and the documents of that time do not reveal the full picture. Surprisingly, it is in poetry that we find an indication of what it was like to live under military rule. Natan Alterman was one of the most famous and important poets of his generation. He had a weekly column, called "The Seventh Column," in which he commented on events he had read or heard about. Sometimes he would omit details about the date or even the location of the event, but would give the reader just enough information to understand what he was referring to. He often expressed his attacks in poetic form:

> The news appeared briefly for two days, and disappeared.
> And no one seem to care, and no one seems to know.
> In the far away village of Um al-Fahem,
> Children—should I say citizens of the state—played in the mud
> And one of them seemed suspicious to one of our brave soldiers who
> shouted at him: Stop!
> An order is an order

An order is an order, but the foolish boy did not stand,

He ran away

So our brave soldier shot, no wonder

And hit and killed the boy.

And no one talked about it.[5]

On one occasion he wrote a poem about two Palestinian citizens who were shot in Wadi Ara. In another instance, he told the story of a very ill Palestinian woman who was expelled with her two children, aged three and six, with no explanation, and sent across the River Jordan. When she tried to return, she and her children were arrested and put into a Nazareth jail. Alterman hoped that his poem about the mother would move hearts and minds, or at least elicit some official response. However, he wrote a week later:

And this writer assumed wrongly

That either the story would be denied or explained

But nothing, not a word.[6]

There is further evidence that Israel was not a democracy prior to 1967. The state pursued a shoot-to-kill policy towards refugees trying to retrieve their land, crops, and husbandry, and staged a colonial war to topple Nasser's regime in Egypt. Its security forces were also trigger-happy, killing more than fifty Palestinian citizens during the period 1948–67.

The litmus test of any democracy is the level of tolerance it is willing to extend towards the minorities living in it. In this respect, Israel falls far short of being a true democracy. For example, after the new territorial gains several laws were passed ensuring a superior position for the majority: the laws governing citizenship, the laws concerning land ownership, and most important of all, the law of return. The latter grants automatic citizenship to every Jew in the world, wherever he or she was born. This law in particular is a flagrantly undemocratic one, for it was accompanied by a total rejection of the Palestinian right of return—recognized internationally by the UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1948. This rejection refuses to allow the Palestinian citizens of Israel to unite with their immediate families or with those who were

expelled in 1948. Denying people the right of return to their homeland, and at the same time offering this right to others who have no connection to the land, is a model of undemocratic practice.

Added to this was a further layering of denial of the rights of the Palestinian people. Almost every discrimination against the Palestinian citizens of Israel is justified by the fact that they do not serve in the army.[7] The association between democratic rights and military duties is better understood if we revisit the formative years in which Israeli policy makers were trying to make up their minds about how to treat one-fifth of the population. Their assumption was that Palestinian citizens did not want to join the army anyway, and that assumed refusal, in turn, justified the discriminatory policy against them. This was put to the test in 1954 when the Israeli ministry of defense decided to call up those Palestinian citizens eligible for conscription to serve in the army. The secret service assured the government that there would be a widespread rejection of the call-up. To their great surprise, all those summoned went to the recruiting office, with the blessing of the Communist Party, the biggest and most important political force in the community at the time. The secret service later explained that the main reason was the teenagers' boredom with life in the countryside and their desire for some action and adventure.[8]

Notwithstanding this episode, the ministry of defense continued to peddle a narrative that depicted the Palestinian community as unwilling to serve in the military. Inevitably, in time, the Palestinians did indeed turn against the Israeli army, who had become their perpetual oppressors, but the government's exploitation of this as a pretext for discrimination casts huge doubt on the state's pretense to being a democracy. If you are a Palestinian citizen and you did not serve in the army your rights to government assistance as a worker, student, parent, or as part of a couple, are severely restricted. This affects housing in particular, as well as employment—where 70 percent of all Israeli industry is considered to be security-sensitive and therefore closed to these citizens as a place to find work.[9]

The underlying assumption of the ministry of defense was not only that Palestinians do not wish to serve but that they are potentially an enemy within who cannot be trusted. The problem with this argument is that in all the major wars between Israel and the Arab world the Palestinian minority did not behave as expected. They did not form a fifth column or rise up against the regime. This, however, did not help them: to this day they are seen as a "demographic" problem that has to be solved. The only consolation is that still today most Israeli politicians do not believe that the way to solve "the problem" is by the transfer or expulsion of the Palestinians (at least not in peacetime).

The claim to being a democracy is also questionable when one examines the budgetary policy surrounding the land question. Since 1948, Palestinian local councils and municipalities have received far less funding than their Jewish counterparts. The shortage of land, coupled with the scarcity of employment opportunities, creates an abnormal socioeconomic reality. For example, the most affluent Palestinian community, the village of Me'ilya in the upper Galilee, is still worse off than the poorest Jewish development town in the Negev. In 2011, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that "average Jewish income was 40% to 60% higher than average Arab income between the years 1997 to 2009."[10]

Today more than 90 percent of the land is owned by the Jewish National Fund (JNF). Landowners are not allowed to engage in transactions with non-Jewish citizens and public land is prioritized for the use of national projects, which means that new Jewish settlements are being built while there are hardly any new Palestinian settlements. Thus, the biggest Palestinian city, Nazareth, despite the tripling of its population since 1948, has not expanded one square kilometer, whereas the development town built above it, Upper Nazareth, has tripled in size, on land expropriated from Palestinian landowners.[11]

Further examples of this policy can be found in Palestinian villages throughout Galilee, revealing the same story: how they have been downsized by 40 percent, sometimes even 60

percent, since 1948, and how new Jewish settlements have been built on expropriated land. Elsewhere this has initiated full-blown attempts at "Judaization." After 1967, the Israeli government became concerned about the lack of Jews living in the north and south of the state and so planned to increase the population in those areas. Such a demographic change necessitated the confiscation of Palestinian land for the building of Jewish settlements.

Worse was the exclusion of Palestinian citizens from these settlements. This blunt violation of a citizen's right to live wherever he or she wishes continues today, and all efforts by human rights NGOs in Israel to challenge this apartheid have so far ended in total failure. The Supreme Court in Israel has only been able to question the legality of this policy in a few individual cases, but not in principle. Imagine if in the UK or the United States, Jewish citizens, or Catholics for that matter, were barred by law from living in certain villages, neighborhoods, or maybe whole towns? How can such a situation be reconciled with the notion of democracy?

Thus, given its attitude towards two Palestinian groups—the refugees and the community in Israel—the Jewish state cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be assumed to be a democracy. But the most obvious challenge to that assumption is the ruthless Israeli attitude towards a third Palestinian group: those who have lived under its direct and indirect rule since 1967, in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. From the legal infrastructure put in place at the outset of the war, through the unquestioned absolute power of the military inside the West Bank and outside the Gaza Strip, to the humiliation of millions of Palestinians as a daily routine, the "only democracy" in the Middle East behaves as a dictatorship of the worst kind.

The main Israeli response, diplomatic and academic, to the latter accusation is that all these measures are temporary—they will change if the Palestinians, wherever they are, behave "better." But if one researches, not to mention lives in, the occupied territories, one will understand how ridiculous these arguments are. Israeli policy makers, as we have seen, are determined to keep the occupation alive for as long as the

Jewish state remains intact. It is part of what the Israeli political system regards as the status quo, which is always better than any change. Israel will control most of Palestine and, since it will always include a substantial Palestinian population, this can only be done by non-democratic means.

In addition, despite all the evidence to the contrary, the Israeli state claims that the occupation is an enlightened one. The myth here is that Israel came with good intentions to conduct a benevolent occupation but was forced to take a tougher attitude because of the Palestinian violence. In 1967 the government treated the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as natural part of "Eretz Israel," the land of Israel, and this attitude has continued ever since. When you look at the debate between the right-and left-wing parties in Israel on this issue, their disagreements have been about how to achieve this goal, not about its validity.

Among the wider public, however, there was a genuine debate between what one might call the "redeemers" and the "custodians." The "redeemers" believed Israel had recovered the ancient heart of its homeland and could not survive in the future without it. In contrast, the "custodians" argued that the territories should be exchanged for peace with Jordan, in the case of the West Bank, and Egypt in the case of the Gaza Strip.[12] However, this public debate had little impact on the way the principal policy makers were figuring out how to rule the occupied territories. The worst part of this supposed "enlightened occupation" has been the government's methods for managing the territories. At first the area was divided into "Arab" and potential "Jewish" spaces. Those areas densely populated with Palestinians became autonomous, run by local collaborators under a military rule. This regime was only replaced with a civil administration in 1981. The other areas, the "Jewish" spaces, were colonized with Jewish settlements and military bases. This policy was intended to leave the population both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in disconnected enclaves with neither green spaces nor any possibility for urban expansion.

Things only got worse when, very soon after the occupation, Gush Emunim started settling in the West Bank

and the Gaza Strip, claiming to be following a biblical map of colonization rather than the governmental one. As they penetrated the densely populated Palestinian areas, the space left for the locals was shrunk even further.

What every colonization project primarily needs is land—in the occupied territories this was achieved only through the massive expropriation of land, deporting people from where they had lived for generations, and confining them in enclaves with difficult habitats. When you fly over the West Bank, you can see clearly the cartographic results of this policy: belts of settlements that divide the land and carve the Palestinian communities into small, isolated, and disconnected communities. The Judaization belts separate villages from villages, villages from towns, and sometime bisect a single village. This is what scholars call a geography of disaster, not least since these policies turned out to be an ecological disaster as well: drying up water sources and ruining some of the most beautiful parts of the Palestinian landscape. Moreover, the settlements became hotbeds in which Jewish extremism grew uncontrollably—the principal victims of which were the Palestinians. Thus, the settlement at Efrat has ruined the world heritage site of the Wallajah valley near Bethlehem, and the village of Jafneh near Ramallah, which was famous for its fresh water canals, lost its identity as a tourist attraction. These are just two small examples out of hundreds of similar cases.

House demolition is not a new phenomenon in Palestine. As with many of the more barbaric methods of collective punishment used by Israel since 1948, it was first conceived and exercised by the British Mandatory government during the Great Arab Revolt of 1936–39. This was the first Palestinian uprising against the pro-Zionist policy of the British Mandate, and it took the British army three years to quell it. In the process, they demolished around 2,000 houses during the various collective punishments meted out to the local population.[13] Israel demolished houses from almost the first day of its military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The army blew up hundreds of homes every year in response to various acts undertaken by individual family members.[14] From minor violations of military rule to

participation in violent acts against the occupation, the Israelis were quick to send in their bulldozers to wipe out not only a physical building but also a focus of life and existence. In the greater Jerusalem area (as inside Israel) demolition was also a punishment for the unlicensed extension of an existing house or the failure to pay bills.

Another form of collective punishment that has recently returned to the Israeli repertoire is that of blocking up houses. Imagine that all the doors and windows in your house are blocked by cement, mortar, and stones, so you can't get back in or retrieve anything you failed to take out in time. I have looked hard in my history books to find another example, but found no evidence of such a callous measure being practiced elsewhere.

Finally, under the "enlightened occupation," settlers have been allowed to form vigilante gangs to harass people and destroy their property. These gangs have changed their approach over the years. During the 1980s, they used actual terror—from wounding Palestinian leaders (one of them lost his legs in such an attack), to contemplating blowing up the mosques on Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. In this century, they have engaged in the daily harassment of Palestinians: uprooting their trees, destroying their yields, and shooting randomly at their homes and vehicles. Since 2000, there have been at least 100 such attacks reported per month in some areas such as Hebron, where the 500 settlers, with the silent collaboration of the Israeli army, harassed the locals living nearby in an even more brutal way.[15]

From the very beginning of the occupation then, the Palestinians were given two options: accept the reality of permanent incarceration in a mega-prison for a very long time, or risk the might of the strongest army in the Middle East. When the Palestinians did resist—as they did in 1987, 2000, 2006, 2012, 2014, and 2016—they were targeted as soldiers and units of a conventional army. Thus, villages and towns were bombed as if they were military bases and the unarmed civilian population was shot at as if it was an army on the battlefield. Today we know too much about life under occupation, before and after Oslo, to take seriously the claim

that non-resistance will ensure less oppression. The arrests without trial, as experienced by so many over the years; the demolition of thousands of houses; the killing and wounding of the innocent; the drainage of water wells—these are all testimony to one of the harshest contemporary regimes of our times. Amnesty International annually documents in a very comprehensive way the nature of the occupation. The following is from their 2015 report:

> In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Israeli forces committed unlawful killings of Palestinian civilians, including children, and detained thousands of Palestinians who protested against or otherwise opposed Israel's continuing military occupation, holding hundreds in administrative detention. Torture and other ill-treatment remained rife and were committed with impunity. The authorities continued to promote illegal settlements in the West Bank, and severely restricted Palestinians' freedom of movement, further tightening restrictions amid an escalation of violence from October, which included attacks on Israeli civilians by Palestinians and apparent extrajudicial executions by Israeli forces. Israeli settlers in the West Bank attacked Palestinians and their property with virtual impunity. The Gaza Strip remained under an Israeli military blockade that imposed collective punishment on its inhabitants. The authorities continued to demolish Palestinian homes in the West Bank and inside Israel, particularly in Bedouin villages in the Negev/Naqab region, forcibly evicting their residents.[16]

Let's take this in stages. Firstly, assassinations—what Amnesty's report calls "unlawful killings": about 15,000 Palestinians have been killed "unlawfully" by Israel since 1967. Among them were 2,000 children.[17] Another feature of the "enlightened occupation" is imprisonment without trial. Every fifth Palestinian in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has undergone such an experience.[18] It is interesting to compare this Israeli practice with similar American policies in the past and the present, as critics of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement claim that US practices are far worse. In fact, the worst American example was the imprisonment without trail of 100,000 Japanese citizens during World War II, with 30,000 later detained under the so-called "war on terror." Neither of these numbers comes even close to the number of Palestinians who have experienced such a process: including the very young, the old, as well as the long-term incarcerated.[19] Arrest without trial is a traumatic experience. Not knowing the charges against you, having no

contact with a lawyer and hardly any contact with your family are only some of the concerns that will affect you as a prisoner. More brutally, many of these arrests are used as means to pressure people into collaboration. Spreading rumors or shaming people for their alleged or real sexual orientation are also frequently used as methods for leveraging complicity.

As for torture, the reliable website Middle East Monitor published a harrowing article describing the 200 methods used by the Israelis to torture Palestinians. The list is based on a UN report and a report from the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem.[20] Among other methods it includes beatings, chaining prisoners to doors or chairs for hours, pouring cold and hot water on them, pulling fingers apart, and twisting testicles.

What we must challenge here, therefore, is not only Israel's claim to be maintaining an enlightened occupation but also its pretense to being a democracy. Such behavior towards millions of people under its rule gives the lie to such political chicanery. However, although large sections of civil societies throughout the world deny Israel its pretense to democracy, their political elites, for a variety of reasons, still treat it as a member of the exclusive club of democratic states. In many ways, the popularity of the BDS movement reflects the frustrations of those societies with their governments' policies towards Israel.

For most Israelis these counterarguments are irrelevant at best and malicious at worst. The Israeli state clings to the view that it is a benevolent occupier. The argument for "enlightened occupation" proposes that, according to the average Jewish citizen in Israel, the Palestinians are much better off under occupation and they have no reason in the world to resist it, let alone by force. If you are a non-critical supporter of Israel abroad, you accept these assumptions as well.

There are, however, sections of Israeli society that do recognize the validity of some of the claims made here. In the 1990s, with various degrees of conviction, a significant number of Jewish academics, journalists, and artists voiced their doubts about the definition of Israel as a democracy. It

takes some courage to challenge the foundational myths of one's own society and state. This is why quite a few of them later retreated from this brave position and returned to toeing the general line. Nevertheless, for a while during the last decade of the last century, they produced works that challenged the assumption of a democratic Israel. They portrayed Israel as belonging to a different community: that of the non-democratic nations. One of them, the geographer Oren Yiftachel from Ben-Gurion University, depicted Israel as an ethnocracy, a regime governing a mixed ethnic state with a legal and formal preference for one ethnic group over all the others.[21] Others went further, labeling Israel an apartheid state or a settler colonial state.[22] In short, whatever description these critical scholars offered, "democracy" was not among them.

Chapter 8

The Oslo Mythologies

On September 13, 1993, Israel and the PLO signed a declaration of principles, known as the Oslo Accord, on the White House lawn under the auspices of President Bill Clinton. The PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and the Israeli foreign minister, Shimon Peres, would later receive a Nobel Peace prize for this Accord. It ended a long period of negotiations that had begun in 1992. Until that year, Israel had refused to negotiate directly with the PLO over the fate of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or about the Palestinian question in general. Successive Israeli governments preferred negotiating with Jordan, but since the mid-1980s they had allowed PLO representatives to join the Jordanian delegations.

There were several reasons for the change in the Israeli position that enabled direct negotiations with the PLO. The first was the victory of the Labor party in the 1992 elections (for the first time since 1977) and the formation of a government that was more interested in a political solution than the previous Likud-led administrations. The new government understood that the attempts to negotiate directly with the local Palestinian leadership about autonomy were stalled because every Palestinian decision was referred back to the PLO headquarters in Tunis; thus, a direct line was more useful.

The second reason concerned Israeli apprehensions arising from the Madrid peace initiative—an American enterprise to bring Israel, the Palestinians, and the rest of the Arab world together to agree on a solution in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. President George Bush Sr. and his secretary of state, William Baker, fathered this initiative in 1991. Both politicians

asserted that Israel was an obstacle to peace and pressured the Israeli government to agree to a halt in settlement building so as to give the two-states solution a chance. Israeli–American relations at the time were at an unprecedented low. The new Israeli administration also initiated direct contact with the PLO themselves. The Madrid conference of 1991 and the peace efforts conducted under its auspices were probably the first genuine American effort to find a solution for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip based on Israeli withdrawal. The Israeli political elite wanted to thwart the move by nipping it in the bud. They preferred to initiate their own peace proposal and convince the Palestinians to accept it. Yasser Arafat was also unhappy with the Madrid initiative since in his eyes the local Palestinian leadership in the occupied territories, headed by the Gazan leader, Haidar Abdel-Shafi, and Faysal al-Husseini from Jerusalem, threatened his leadership and popularity by taking the lead in the negotiations.

Thus the PLO in Tunis and the Israeli foreign office in Jerusalem began behind-the-scenes negotiations while the Madrid peace effort continued. They found a willing mediator in Fafo, a Norwegian peace institute based in Oslo. The two teams eventually met in the open in August 1993 and with American involvement finalized the Declaration of Principles (DOP). The DOP was hailed as the end of the conflict when it was signed, with a lot of histrionics on the White House lawn in September 1993.

There are two myths associated with the Oslo process. The first is that it was a genuine peace process; the second that Yasser Arafat intentionally undermined it by instigating the Second Intifada as a terrorist operation against Israel.

The first myth was born out the desire of both sides in 1992 to reach a solution. However, when this failed, it quickly became a game of who to blame. Israeli hardliners pointed the finger at the Palestinian leadership. A more nuanced, liberal Zionist version of this assumption laid the blame on Yasser Arafat but also on the Israeli right, in particular Benjamin Netanyahu, for the impasse after the PLO leader’s death in 2004. In either scenario, the peace process is considered a real one, albeit a failure. However, the truth is more complex. The

terms of the agreement were impossible to fulfill. The claim that Arafat refused to respect the Palestinian pledges made in the 1993 Accord does not bear scrutiny. He could not enforce pledges that were impossible to keep. For example, the Palestinian authorities were called upon to act as Israel's security subcontractor inside the occupied territories and ensure that there would be no resistance activity. More implicitly, Arafat was expected to accept the Israeli interpretation of the final settlement emerging from the Accord without debate. The Israelis presented this fait accompli to the PLO leader in the summer of 2000 at the Camp David summit, where the Palestinian leader was negotiating the final agreement with the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, and the US President, Bill Clinton.

Barak demanded a demilitarized Palestinian state, with a capital in a village near Jerusalem, Abu Dis, and without parts of the West Bank such as the Jordan Valley, the big Jewish settlement blocs, and areas in Greater Jerusalem. The future state would not have an independent economic and foreign policy and would be autonomous only in certain domestic aspects (such as running the educational system, tax collection, municipalities, policing, and maintaining the infrastructures on the ground). The formalization of this arrangement was to signify the end of the conflict and terminate any Palestinian demands in the future (such as the right of return for the 1948 Palestinian refugees).

The peace process was a busted flush from the outset. To understand the failure of Oslo, one has to widen the analysis and relate the events to two principles that remained unanswered throughout the Accord. The first was the primacy of geographical or territorial partition as the exclusive foundation of peace; the second the denial of the Palestinian refugees' right of return and its exclusion from the negotiating table.

The proposition that the physical partition of the land was the best solution for the conflict appeared for the first time in 1937 as part of the British Royal Commission, the Peel Report. At that time the Zionist movement suggested that Jordan—Transjordan in those days—should annex the "Arab

parts of Palestine," but the idea was rejected by the Palestinians.[1] It was later re-adopted as the best way forward in the UN Partition Resolution of November 1947. The UN appointed a special commission of inquiry (UNSCOP) to try to find a solution. The members of the committee came from countries that had very little interest in or knowledge about Palestine. The Palestinian representative body, the Arab Higher Committee, and the Arab League, boycotted UNSCOP and refused to cooperate with it. This left a vacuum that was filled by the Zionist diplomats and leadership, who fed UNSCOP with their ideas for a solution. They suggested the creation of a Jewish state over 80 percent of Palestine; the Commission reduced it to 56 percent.[2] Egypt and Jordan were willing to legitimize the Israelis' takeover of Palestine in 1948 in return for bilateral agreements with them (which were eventually signed in 1979 with Egypt and in 1994 with Jordan).

The idea of partition then reappeared under different names and references in the efforts led by the Americans after 1967. It was implicit in the new discourse that emerged: that of "territories for peace," which every peace negotiator treated as a sanctified formula—the more territory Israel withdrew from the more peace it would get. Now the territory that Israel could withdraw from was within the 20 percent it had not taken over in 1948. In essence then, the idea was to build peace on the basis of partitioning the remaining 20 percent between Israel and whomever it would legitimize as a partner for peace (the Jordanians until the late 1980s, and the Palestinians ever since).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, this became the cornerstone of the logic that informed the opening discussions in Oslo. It was easily forgotten, however, that historically every time partition had been offered, it was followed by more bloodshed and failed to produce the desired peace. Indeed, the Palestinian leaders at no point ever demanded partition. It was always a Zionist and, later, an Israeli idea. In addition, the proportion of territory demanded by the Israelis grew as their power increased. Thus, as the idea of partition gained growing global support, it increasingly appeared to the Palestinians as an

offensive strategy by other means. It was due only to the lack of alternatives that the Palestinian parties accepted this set of circumstances as a lesser evil within the terms of negotiation. In the early 1970s, Fatah acknowledged partition as a necessary means on the way to full liberation, but not as a final settlement by itself.[3]

So, in truth, without the application of extreme pressure, there is no reason in the world why a native population would ever volunteer to partition its homeland with a settler population. And therefore we should acknowledge that the Oslo process was not a fair and equal pursuit of peace, but a compromise agreed to by a defeated, colonized people. As a result, the Palestinians were forced to seek solutions that went against their interests and endangered their very existence.

The same argument can be made about the debates concerning the "two-states solution" that was offered in Oslo. This offer should be seen for what it is: partition under a different wording. Even in this scenario, although the terms of the debate appear different, Israel would not only decide how much territory it was going to concede but also what would happen in the territory it left behind. While the promise of statehood initially proved persuasive to the world and to some Palestinians, it soon came to sound hollow. Nonetheless, these two intertwined notions of territorial withdrawal and statehood were successfully packaged as parts of a peace deal in Oslo in 1993. Yet within weeks of the joint signature on the White House lawn, the writing was on the wall. By the end of September, the Accord's vague principles had already been translated into a new geopolitical reality on the ground under the terms of what was called the Oslo II (or Taba[4]) agreement. This included not just partitioning the West Bank and the Gaza Strip between "Jewish" and "Palestinian" zones, but partitioning further all the Palestinian areas into small cantons or Bantustans. The peace cartography of 1995 amounted to a bisected series of Palestinian zones that resembled, in the words of quite a few commentators, a Swiss cheese.[5]

Once this program became clear, the decline of the negotiations was swift. Before the final summit meeting in the

summer of 2000, Palestinian activists, academics, and politicians had realized that the process they supported did not involve an actual Israeli military withdrawal from the occupied territories, nor did it promise the creation of a real state. The charade was revealed and progress ground to a halt. The ensuing sense of despair contributed to the outburst of the second Palestinian uprising in the autumn of 2000.

The Oslo peace process did not fail simply due to its adherence to the principle of partition. In the original Accord there was an Israeli promise that the three issues that trouble the Palestinians most—the fate of Jerusalem, the refugees, and the Jewish colonies—would be negotiated when the interim period of five years came to a successful end. Within this interim period, the Palestinians had to prove they could serve effectively as Israel's security subcontractors, preventing any guerrilla or terror attacks against the Jewish state, its army, settlers, and citizens. Contrary to the promise made in the Oslo DOP, when the five years of the first stage were over, the second stage, in which the more substantial issues for the Palestinians were meant to be discussed, did not commence. The Netanyahu government claimed that it was unable to initiate this second phase because of Palestinian "misbehavior" (which included "incitement in schools" and weak condemnations of terror attacks against soldiers, settlers, and citizens). In truth, however, the process was stalled mainly by the assassination of the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, in November 1995. The murder was followed by the victory of the Likud party, headed by Netanyahu, in the 1996 national elections. The new prime minister's overt objection to the Accord put the brake on the process. Even when the Americans forced him to restart negotiations, progress was extremely slow until the return to power of the Labor party, under Ehud Barak, in 1999. Barak was determined to complete the process with a final peace agreement, an impulse fully supported by the Clinton administration.

Israel's final offer, delivered during discussions at Camp David in the summer of 2000, proposed a small Palestinian state, with a capital in Abu Dis, but without significant dismantling of any settlements and no hope for return of the

refugees. After the Palestinians rejected the offer, there was an informal attempt by the deputy Israeli foreign minister, Yossi Beilin, to offer a more reasonable deal. On the issue of refugees he now agreed to their return to a future Palestinian state and symbolic repatriation to Israel. But these informal terms were never ratified by the state. (Thanks to the leaking of key documents, known as the Palestine papers, we now have a better insight into the nature of the negotiations, and readers who wish to examine other aspects of the negotiations between 2001 and 2007 are advised to consult this accessible source.[6]) And yet, as negotiations collapsed, it was the Palestinian leadership, rather than the Israeli politicians, who were accused of being intransigent, leading to the collapse of Oslo. This does a disservice to those involved and to how seriously the prospects of partition were taken.

The exclusion of the Palestinian right of return from the agenda is the second reason why the Oslo Accord was irrelevant as a peace process. While the partition principle reduced "Palestine" to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the exclusion of the refugee issue, and of that of the Palestinian minority inside Israel, shrank the "Palestinian people" demographically to less than half of the Palestinian nation. This lack of attention to the refugee question was not new. Ever since the beginning of the peace efforts in post-Mandatory Palestine, the refugees have been exposed to a campaign of repression and negligence. Ever since the first peace conference on post-1948 Palestine, the Lausanne meeting of April 1949, the refugee problem has been excluded from the peace agenda and disassociated from the concept of "The Palestine Conflict." Israel participated in that conference only because it was a precondition for its acceptance as a full member of the UN,[7] who also demanded that Israel sign a protocol, called the May Protocol, committing itself to the terms of Resolution 194, which included an unconditional call for the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes or to be given compensation. A day after it was signed in May 1949, Israel was admitted to the UN and immediately retracted its commitment to the protocol.

In the wake of the June 1967 war, the world at large accepted the Israeli claim that the conflict in Palestine began with that war and was essentially a struggle over the future of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Several Arab regimes also accepted this notion, abandoning the refugee problem as an issue. However, the refugee camps soon became sites of intensive political, social, and cultural activity. It was there, for example, that the Palestinian liberation movement was reborn. Only the UN continued to mention in several of its resolutions the obligation of the international community to ensure the full and unconditional repatriation of the Palestinian refugees—the commitment first made in Resolution 194 in 1948. Still today the UN includes a body named "the committee for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian refugees," but it has had little effect on the peace process.

The Oslo Accord was no different. In this document, the refugee issue was buried in a subclause, almost invisible in the mass of words. The Palestinian partners to the Accord contributed to this obfuscation, probably out of negligence rather than intentionally, but the result was the same. The refugee problem—the heart of the Palestine conflict, a reality acknowledged by all Palestinians, wherever they are, and by anyone sympathizing with the Palestinian cause—was marginalized in the Oslo documents. Instead, the issue was handed to a short-lived multilateral group who were asked to focus on the 1967 refugees, the Palestinians who were expelled or left after the June war. The Oslo Accord in fact substituted for an embryonic attempt, born out of the 1991 Madrid peace process, to form a multilateral group that would discuss the refugee issue on the basis of UN General Assembly Resolution 194. The group was led by the Canadians, who regarded the right of return as a myth, throughout 1994, and then it petered out. In any case, without any official announcement, the group stopped meeting and the fate of even the 1967 refugees (more than 300,000 of them) was abandoned.[8]

The implementation of the Accord after 1993 only made things worse. The rules of the agreement required the abandonment by the Palestinian leadership of the right of

return. Thus only five years after the cantonization of "the Palestinian entity" and its transformation into a Bantustan, the Palestinian leadership was given permission to express its wish to deal with the refugee problem as part of the negotiations over the permanent settlement of the Palestine question. Nevertheless, the Israeli state was able to define the terms of discussion and so chose to distinguish between, on the one hand, the introduction of the "refugee problem" as a legitimate Palestinian grievance, and, on the other, the demand for the "right of return," which it was able to describe as a Palestinian provocation.

In the last ditch attempt to save the agreement at the Camp David summit in 2000, the refugee issue did not fare any better. In January 2000, the Barak government presented a paper, endorsed by the American negotiators, defining the parameters of the negotiations. This was an Israeli diktat, and until the summit was convened in the summer, the Palestinians failed to produce a counterproposal. The final "negotiations" were in essence a combined Israeli and American effort to get the Palestinians to accept the paper, which included, among other things, an absolute and categorical rejection of the Palestinian right of return. It left open for discussion the number of refugees that might be allowed to return to the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority, although all involved understood that these crammed areas were unable to absorb more people, while there was plenty of space for repatriating refugees in the rest of Israel and Palestine. This part of the discussion was a meaningless gesture, introduced simply to silence any criticism without offering a real solution.

The peace process of the 1990s was thus no such thing. The insistence on partition and the exclusion of the refugee issue from the agenda rendered the Oslo process at best a military redeployment and a rearrangement of Israeli control in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. At worst, it inaugurated a new system of control that made life for the Palestinians in the occupied territories far worse than it was before.

After 1995, the impact of the Oslo Accord as a factor that ruined Palestinian society, rather than bringing peace, became painfully clear. Following Rabin's assassination and the

election of Netanyahu in 1996, the Accord became a discourse of peace that had no relevance to the reality on the ground. During the period of the talks—between 1996 and 1999—more settlements were built, and more collective punishments were inflicted on the Palestinians. Even if you believed in the two-states solution in 1999, a tour of either the West Bank or the Gaza Strip would have convinced you of the words of the Israeli scholar, Meron Benvenisti, who wrote that Israel had created irreversible facts on the ground: the two-states solution was killed by Israel.[9] Since the Oslo process was not a genuine peace process, the Palestinians' participation in it, and their reluctance to continue it, was not a sign of their alleged intransigence and violent political culture, but a natural response to a diplomatic charade that solidified and deepened Israeli control over the occupied territories.

This then leads on to the second myth concerning the Oslo process: that Arafat's intransigence ensured the failure of the Camp David Summit in 2000. Two questions have to be answered here. Firstly, what happened in the summer of 2000 at Camp David—who was responsible for the summit's failure? Secondly, who was responsible for the violence of the Second Intifada? The two questions will help us engage directly with the common assumption that Arafat was a warmonger who came to Camp David to destroy the peace process and returned to Palestine with a determination to start a new Intifada.

Before we answer these questions, we should remember the reality in the occupied territories on the day Arafat left for Camp David. My main argument here is that Arafat came to Camp David to change that reality while the Israelis and the Americans arrived there determined to maintain it. The Oslo process had transformed the occupied territories into a geography of disaster, which meant that the Palestinians' quality of life was far worse after the Accord that it was before. Already in 1994, Rabin's government forced Arafat to accept its interpretation of how the Accord would be implemented on the ground. The West Bank was divided to the infamous areas A, B, and C. Area C was directly controlled by Israel and constituted half of the West Bank. The movement

between, and inside, these areas became nearly impossible, and the West Bank was cut off from the Gaza Strip. The Strip was also divided between Palestinians and Jewish settlers, who took over most of the water resources and lived in gated communities cordoned off with barbered wire. Thus the end result of this supposed peace process was a deterioration in the quality of Palestinian lives.

This was Arafat's reality in the summer of 2000 when he arrived at Camp David. He was being asked to sign off as a final settlement the irreversible facts on the ground that had turned the idea of a two-states solution into an arrangement that at best would allow the Palestinians two small Bantustans and at worst would allow Israel to annex more territory. The agreement would also force him to give up any future Palestinian demands or propose a way of alleviating some of the daily hardships most Palestinians suffered from.

We have an authentic and reliable report of what happened at Camp David from the State Department's Hussein Agha and Robert Malley.[10] Their detailed account appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and begins by dismissing the Israeli claim that Arafat ruined the summit. The article makes the point that Arafat's main problem was that, in the years since Oslo, life for the Palestinians in the occupied territories had only got worse. Quite reasonably, according to these two American officials, he suggested that instead of rushing within two weeks "to end the conflict for once and for all," Israel should agree to certain measures that might restore the Palestinians' faith in the usefulness and benefits of the peace process. The period of two weeks, incidentally, was not an Israeli demand, but a foolish time frame insisted upon by Bill Clinton, who was considering his own legacy.

There were two major proposals that Arafat signaled as potential areas of discussion, which, if accepted, might improve the reality on the ground. The first was to de-escalate the intensive colonization of the West Bank that had increased after Oslo. The second was to put an end to the daily brutalization of normal Palestinian life, manifested in severe restrictions of movement, frequent collective punishments, arrests without trial, and constant humiliations at the

checkpoints. All these practices occurred in every area where there was a contact between the Israeli army or civil administration (the body running the territories) and the local population.

According to the testimony of the American officials, Barak refused to change Israel's policy towards the Jewish colonies or the daily abuse of the Palestinians. He took a tough position that left Arafat with no choice. Whatever Barak proposed as a final settlement did not mean much if he could not promise immediate changes in the reality on the ground. Predictably, Arafat was blamed by Israel and its allies for being a warmonger who, immediately after returning from Camp David, encouraged the Second Intifada. The myth here is that the Second Intifada was a terrorist attack sponsored and perhaps even planned by Yasser Arafat. The truth is, it was a mass demonstration of dissatisfaction at the betrayals of Oslo, compounded by the provocative actions of Ariel Sharon. In September 2000, Sharon ignited an explosion of protest when, as the leader of the opposition, he toured Haram al-Sharif, the Temple Mount, with a massive security and media presence.

The initial Palestinian anger was expressed in non-violent demonstrations that were crushed with brutal force by Israel. This callous repression led to a more desperate response—the suicide bombers who appeared as the last resort in the face of the strongest military power in the region. There is telling evidence from Israeli newspaper correspondents of how their reports on the early stages of the Intifada—as a non-violent movement crushed by the Israeli army—were shelved by their editors so as to fit the narrative of the government. One of them was a deputy editor of *Yeidot Ahronoth*, the main daily in the state, who wrote a book about the misinformation produced by the Israeli media in the early days of the Second Intifada.[11] Israeli propagandists claimed the Palestinians' behavior only confirmed the famous saying of the veteran Israeli super-diplomat, Abba Eban, that the Palestinians do not miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity for peace.

We have a better understanding today of what triggered the furious Israeli reaction. In their book *Boomerang*, two senior Israeli journalists, Ofer Shelah and Raviv Drucker, interview

the Israeli general chief of staff and strategists in the ministry of defense, providing us with inside knowledge on the way these officials were thinking about the issue.[12] Their conclusion was that in the summer of 2000 the Israeli army was frustrated after its humiliating defeat at the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon. There was a fear that this defeat made the army look weak, and so a show of force was needed. A reassertion of their dominance within the occupied territories was just the kind of display of sheer power the "invincible" Israeli army needed. It was ordered to respond with all its might, and so it did. When Israel retaliated against a terror attack on a hotel in the sea resort of Netanya in April 2002 (in which thirty people were killed), it was the first time the military had used airplanes to bomb the dense Palestinian towns and refugee camps in the West Bank. Instead of hunting down the individuals who had carried out the attacks, the most lethal heavy weapons were brought to bear on innocent people.

Another common reference in the blame game Israel and the United States played after the failure at Camp David was that of reminding public opinion that there was a chronic problem with Palestinian leaders, who at the moment of truth would expose their warmongering ways. The claim that "there is no one to talk to on the Palestinian side" resurfaced in that period as a common analysis from pundits and commentators in Israel, Europe, and the United States. Such allegations were particularly cynical. The Israeli government and army had tried by force to impose its own version of Oslo—one that was meant to perpetuate the occupation forever but with Palestinian consent—and even an enfeebled Arafat could not accept it. He and so many other leaders who could have led their people to reconciliation were targeted by the Israelis, and most of them, including probably Arafat himself, were assassinated. The targeted killing of Palestinian leaders, including moderate ones, was not a new phenomenon in the conflict. Israel began this policy in 1972 with the assassination of Ghassan Kanafani, a poet and writer who also could have led his people to reconciliation. The fact that he was targeted, as a secular and leftist activist, is symbolic of the role Israel

played in killing those Palestinians it later "regretted" not being there as partners for peace.

In May 2001, President George Bush Jr. appointed Senator Robert Mitchell as a special envoy to the Middle East. Mitchell produced a report about the causes of the Second Intifada, deciding, "We have no basis on which to conclude that there was a deliberate plan by the PA to initiate a campaign of violence at the first opportunity; or to conclude that there was a deliberate plan by the [Government of Israel] to respond with lethal force."[13] On the other hand, he blamed Ariel Sharon for provoking unrest by visiting and violating the sacredness of the al-Aqsa mosque and the holy places of Islam.

In short, even the disempowered Arafat realized that the Israeli interpretation of Oslo in 2000 meant the end of any hope for normal Palestinian life and doomed the Palestinians to more suffering in the future. This scenario was not only morally wrong in his eyes, but would also, as he was well aware, strengthen the hand of those who regarded the armed struggle against Israel as the only way to liberate Palestine. At any given moment, Israel could have stopped the Second Intifada, but the army needed a show of "success"; only when this was achieved through the barbaric operation of "Defensive Shield" in 2002 and the building of the infamous "apartheid wall" did they succeed temporarily in quelling the uprising.

Chapter 9

The Gaza Mythologies

The issue of Palestine is closely associated in international public opinion with the Gaza Strip. Ever since the first Israeli assault on the Strip in 2006, and up to the recent 2014 bombardment of the 1.8 million Palestinians living there, this part of the region epitomized the Palestine question for the world at large. I will present in this chapter three myths which mislead public opinion about the causes of the ongoing violence in Gaza, and which explain the helplessness felt by anyone wishing to end the misery of the people crammed into one of the world's most densely populated pieces of land.

The first myth refers to one of the main actors on the ground in the Strip: the Hamas movement. Its name is the Arabic acronym for "Islamic Resistance Movement," and the word *hamas* also literally means "enthusiasm." It grew out of a local branch of the Islamic fundamentalist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt in the second half of the 1980s. It began as a charity and educational organization but was transformed into a political movement during the First Intifada in 1987. The following year it published a charter asserting that only the dogmas of political Islam had a chance of liberating Palestine. How these dogmas were to be implemented or what they really mean was never fully explained or demonstrated. From its inception up to the present, Hamas has been involved in an existential struggle against the West, Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Egypt.

When Hamas surfaced in the late 1980s, its main rival in the Gaza Strip was the Fatah movement, the main organization within, and founder of, the PLO. It lost some support among the Palestinian people when it negotiated the Oslo Accord and

founded the Palestinian Authority (hence the chair of the PLO is also the president of the PA and the head of Fatah). Fatah is a secular national movement, with strong left-wing elements, inspired by the Third World liberation ideologies of the 1950s and 1960s and in essence still committed to the creation in Palestine of a democratic and secular state for all. Strategically, however, Fatah has been committed to the two-states solution since the 1970s. Hamas, for its part, is willing to allow Israel to withdraw fully from all the occupied territories, with a ten-year armistice to follow before it will discuss any future solution.

Hamas challenged Fatah's pro-Oslo policy, its lack of attention to social and economic welfare, and its basic failure to end the occupation. The challenge became more significant when, in the mid-2000s, Hamas decided to run as a political party in municipal and national elections. Hamas's popularity in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had grown thanks to the prominent role it played in the Second Intifada in 2000, in which its members were willing to become human bombs, or at least to take a more active role in resisting the occupation (one should point out that during that Intifada young members of Fatah also showed the same resilience and commitment, and Marwan Barghouti, one of their iconic leaders, is still in jail in Israel for his role in the uprising).

Yasser Arafat's death in November 2004 created a political vacuum in the leadership, and the Palestinian Authority, in accordance with its own constitution, had to conduct presidential elections. Hamas boycotted these elections, claiming that they would be too closely associated with the Oslo process and less so with democracy. It did, however, participate that same year, 2005, in municipal elections, in which it did very well, taking control of over one-third of the municipalities in the occupied territories. It did even better in the elections in 2006 to the parliament—the legislative assembly of the PA as it is called. It won a comfortable majority in the assembly and therefore had the right to form the government—which it did for a short while, before clashing with both Fatah and Israel. In the ensuing struggle, it was ousted from official political power in the West Bank, but

took over the Gaza Strip. Hamas's unwillingness to accept the Oslo Accord, its refusal to recognize Israel, and its commitment to armed struggle form the background to the first myth I examine here. Hamas is branded as a terrorist organization, both in the media and in legislation. I will claim that it is a liberation movement, and a legitimate one at that.

The second myth I examine concerns the Israeli decision that created the vacuum in the Gaza Strip which enabled Hamas not only to win the elections in 2006 but also to oust Fatah by force in the same year. This was the 2005 unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Strip after nearly forty years of occupation. The second myth is that this withdrawal was a gesture of peace or reconciliation, which was reciprocated by hostility and violence. It is crucial to debate, as I do in this chapter, the origins of the Israeli decision and to look closely at the impact it has had on Gaza ever since. In fact, I claim that the decision was part of a strategy intended to strengthen Israel's hold over the West Bank and to turn the Gaza Strip into a mega-prison that could be guarded and monitored from the outside. Israel not only withdrew its army and secret service from the Strip but also pulled out, in a very painful process, the thousands of Jewish settlers the government had sent there since 1969. So, I will claim that viewing this decision as a peaceful gesture is a myth. It was more a strategic deployment of forces that enabled Israel to respond harshly to the Hamas victory, with disastrous consequences for the population of Gaza.

And indeed, the third and last myth I will look at is Israel's claim that its actions since 2006 have been part of a self-defensive war against terror. I will venture to call it, as I have done elsewhere, an incremental genocide of the people of Gaza.

Hamas Is a Terrorist Organization

The victory of Hamas in the 2006 general elections triggered a wave of Islamophobic reaction in Israel. From this moment on, the demonization of the Palestinians as abhorred "Arabs" was enhanced with the new label of "fanatical Muslims." The language of hate was accompanied by new aggressive anti-

Palestinian policies that aggravated the situation in the occupied territories beyond its already dismal and atrocious state.

There have been other outbreaks of Islamophobia in Israel in the past. The first was in the late 1980s, when a very small number of Palestinian workers—forty people out of a community of 150,000—were involved in stabbing incidents against their Jewish employers and passersby. In the aftermath of the attacks Israeli academics, journalists, and politicians related the stabbing to Islam—religion and culture alike—without any reference to the occupation or the slavish labor market that developed on its margins.[1] A far more severe wave of Islamophobia broke out during the Second Intifada in October 2000. Since the militarized uprising was mainly carried out by Islamic groups—especially suicide bombers—it was easier for the Israeli political elite and media to demonize "Islam" in the eyes of many Israelis.[2] A third wave began in 2006, in the wake of Hamas's victory in the elections to the Palestinian parliament. The same characteristics of the previous two waves were apparent in this one as well. The most salient feature is the reductionist view of everything Muslim as being associated with violence, terror, and inhumanity.

As I have shown in my book, *The Idea of Israel*,[3] between 1948 and 1982 Palestinians were demonized by comparisons with the Nazis.[4] The same process of "Nazifying" the Palestinians is now applied to Islam in general, and to activists in its name in particular. This has continued for as long as Hamas and its sister organization, Islamic Jihad, have engaged in military, guerrilla, and terror activity. In effect, the rhetoric of extremism wiped out the rich history of political Islam in Palestine, as well as the wide-ranging social and cultural activities that Hamas has undertaken ever since its inception.

A more neutral analysis shows how far-fetched the demonized image of Hamas as a group of ruthless and insane fanatics is.[5] Like other movements within political Islam, the movement reflected a complex local reaction to the harsh realities of occupation, and a response to the disorientated

paths offered by secular and socialist Palestinian forces in the past. Those with a more engaged analysis of this situation were well prepared for the Hamas triumph in the 2006 elections, unlike the Israeli, American, and European governments. It is ironic that it was the pundits and orientalists, not to mention Israeli politicians and chiefs of intelligence, who were taken by surprise by the election results more than anyone else. What particularly dumbfounded the great experts on Islam in Israel was the democratic nature of the victory. In their collective reading, fanatical Muslims were meant to be neither democratic nor popular. These same experts displayed a similar misunderstanding of the past. Ever since the rise of political Islam in Iran and in the Arab world, the community of experts in Israel had behaved as if the impossible was unfolding in front of their eyes.

Misunderstandings, and therefore false predictions, have characterized the Israeli assessment of the Palestinians for a long time, especially with regard to the political Islamic forces within Palestine. In 1976, the first Rabin government allowed municipal elections to take place in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. They calculated, wrongly, that the old cadre of pro-Jordanian politicians would be elected in the West Bank and the pro-Egyptian ones in the Strip. The electorate voted overwhelmingly for PLO candidates.[6] This surprised the Israelis, but it should not have. After all, the expansion of the PLO's power and popularity ran parallel to a concerted effort by Israel to curb, if not altogether eliminate, the secular and socialist movements within Palestinian society, whether in the refugee camps or inside the occupied territories. Indeed, Hamas became a significant player on the ground in part thanks to the Israeli policy of encouraging the construction of an Islamic educational infrastructure in Gaza as a counterbalance to the grip of the secular Fatah movement on the local population.

In 2009, Avner Cohen, who served in the Gaza Strip around the time Hamas began to gain power in the late 1980s, and was responsible for religious affairs in the occupied territories, told the *Wall Street Journal*, "the Hamas, to my great regret, is Israel's creation."[7] Cohen explains how Israel

helped the charity al-Mujama al-Islamiya (the "Islamic Society"), founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in 1979, to become a powerful political movement, out of which the Hamas movement emerged in 1987. Sheikh Yassin, a crippled, semi-blind Islamic cleric, founded Hamas and was its spiritual leader until his assassination in 2004. He was originally approached by Israel with an offer of help and the promise of a license to expand. The Israelis hoped that, through his charity and educational work, this charismatic leader would counterbalance the power of the secular Fatah in the Gaza Strip and beyond. It is noteworthy that in the late 1970s Israel, like the United States and Britain, saw secular national movements (whose absence today they lament) as the worst enemy of the West.

In his book *To Know the Hamas*, the Israeli journalist Shlomi Eldar tells a similar story about the strong links between Yassin and Israel.[8] With Israel's blessing and support, the "Society" opened a university in 1979, an independent school system, and a network of clubs and mosques. In 2014, the *Washington Post* drew its own very similar conclusions about the close relationship between Israel and the "Society" until its transformation into Hamas in 1988.[9] In 1993, Hamas became the main opposition to the Oslo Accord. While there was still support for Oslo, it saw a drop in its popularity; however, as Israel began to renege on almost all the pledges it had made during the negotiations, support for Hamas once again received a boost. Particularly important was Israel's settlement policy and its excessive use of force against the civilian population in the territories.

But Hamas's popularity among the Palestinians did not depend solely on the success or failure of the Oslo Accord. It also captured the hearts and minds of many Muslims (who make up the majority in the occupied territories) due the failure of secular modernity to find solutions to the daily hardships of life under occupation. As with other political Islamic groups around the Arab world, the failure of secular movements to provide employment, welfare, and economic security drove many people back into religion, which offered solace as well as established charity and solidarity networks.

In the Middle East as a whole, as in the world at large, modernization and secularization benefited the few but left many unhappy, poor, and bitter. Religion seemed a panacea—and at times even a political option.

Hamas struggled hard to win a large share of public support while Arafat was still alive, but his death in 2004 created a vacuum that it was not immediately able to fill. Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) did not enjoy the same legitimacy and respect as his predecessor. The fact that Arafat was delegitimized by Israel and the West, while Abu Mazen was accepted by them as Palestinian president, reduced his popularity among the younger generation, in the de-developed rural areas, and in the impoverished refugee camps. The new Israeli methods of oppression introduced during the Second Intifada—particularly the building of the wall, the roadblocks, and the targeted assassinations—further diminished the support for the Palestinian Authority and increased the popularity and prestige of Hamas. It would be fair to conclude, then, that successive Israeli governments did all they could to leave the Palestinians with no option but to trust, and vote for, the one group prepared to resist an occupation described by the renowned American author Michael Chabon as "the most grievous injustice I have seen in my life."[10]

The only explanation for the rise of Hamas offered by most Israeli "experts" on Palestinian affairs, inside and outside the establishment, involved appealing to Samuel Huntington's neoconservative model of the "clash of civilizations" as a way of understanding how history works. Huntington divided the world into two cultures, rational and irrational, which inevitably came into conflict. By voting for Hamas the Palestinians were supposedly proving themselves to be on the "irrational" side of history—an inevitable position given their religion and culture. Benjamin Netanyahu put it in even cruder terms when he talked about the cultural and moral abyss that separates the two peoples.[11]

The obvious failure of the Palestinian groups and individuals who had come to prominence on the promise of

negotiations with Israel clearly made it seem as if there were very few alternatives. In this situation the apparent success of the Islamic militant groups in driving the Israelis out of the Gaza Strip offered some hope. However, there is more to it than this. Hamas is now deeply embedded in Palestinian society thanks to its genuine attempts to alleviate the suffering of ordinary people by providing schooling, medicine, and welfare. No less important, Hamas's position on the 1948 refugees' right of return, unlike the PA's stance, was clear and unambiguous. Hamas openly endorsed this right, while the PA sent out ambiguous messages, including a speech by Abu Mazen in which he rescinded his own right to return to his hometown of Safad.

The Israeli Disengagement Was an Act of Peace

The Gaza Strip amounts to slightly more than 2 percent of the landmass of Palestine. This small detail is never mentioned whenever the Strip is in the news, nor was it mentioned in the Western media coverage of the dramatic events in Gaza in the summer of 2014. Indeed, it is such a small part of the country that it has never existed as a separate region in the past. Before the Zionization of Palestine in 1948, Gaza's history was not unique or different from the rest of Palestine, and it had always been connected administratively and politically to the rest of the country. As one of Palestine's principal land and sea gates to the world, it tended to develop a more flexible and cosmopolitan way of life, not dissimilar to other gateway societies in the Eastern Mediterranean in the modern era. Its location on the coast and on the Via Maris from Egypt up to Lebanon brought with it prosperity and stability—until this was disrupted and nearly destroyed by the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948.

The Strip was created in the last days of the 1948 war. It was a zone into which the Israeli forces pushed hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from the city of Jaffa and its southern regions down into the town of Bir-Saba (Beersheba of today). Others were expelled to the zone from towns such as Majdal (Ashkelon) as late as 1950, in the final phases of the ethnic cleansing. Thus, a small pastoral part of Palestine became the biggest refugee camp on earth. It still like this

today. Between 1948 and 1967, this huge refugee camp was delineated and severely restricted by the respective Israeli and Egyptian policies. Both states disallowed any movement out of the Strip, and as a result, living conditions became ever harsher as the number of inhabitants doubled. On the eve of the Israeli occupation in 1967, the catastrophic nature of this enforced demographic transformation was evident. Within two decades this once pastoral coastal part of southern Palestine became one of the world's most densely inhabited areas, without the economic and occupational infrastructure to support it.

During the first twenty years of occupation, Israel did allow some movement outside the area, which was cordoned off with a fence. Tens of thousands of Palestinians were permitted to join the Israeli labor market as unskilled and underpaid workers. The price Israel demanded for this was total surrender. When this was not complied with, the free movement for laborers was withdrawn. In the lead up to the Oslo Accord in 1993, Israel attempted to fashion the Strip as an enclave, which the peace camp hoped would become either autonomous or a part of Egypt. Meanwhile the nationalist, right-wing camp wished to include it in the "Eretz Israel" they dreamed of establishing in place of Palestine.

The Oslo agreement enabled the Israelis to reaffirm the Strip's status as a separate geopolitical entity—not just outside of Palestine as a whole, but also apart from the West Bank. Ostensibly, both were under Palestinian Authority control, but any human movement between them depended on Israel's good will. This was a rare feature in the circumstances, and one that almost disappeared when Netanyahu came to power in 1996. At the same time, Israel controlled, as it still does today, the water and electricity infrastructure. Since 1993 it has used this control to ensure the well-being of the Jewish settler community on the one hand, and to blackmail the Palestinian population into submission on the other. Over the last fifty years, the people of the Strip have thus had to choose between being internees, hostages, or prisoners in an impossible human space.

It is in this historical context that we should view the violent clashes between Israel and Hamas since 2006. In light of that context, we must reject the description of Israeli actions as part of the "war against terror," or as a "war of self-defense." Nor should we accept the depiction of Hamas as an extension of al-Qaeda, as part of the Islamic State network, or as a mere pawn in a seditious Iranian plot to control the region. If there is an ugly side to Hamas's presence in Gaza, it lies in the group's early actions against other Palestinian factions in the years 2005 to 2007. The main clash was with Fatah in the Gaza Strip, and both sides contributed to the friction that eventually erupted into an open civil war. The clash erupted after Hamas won the legislative elections in 2006 and formed the government, which included a Hamas minister responsible for the security forces. In an attempt to weaken Hamas, President Abbas transferred that responsibility to the head of the Palestinian secret service—a Fatah member. Hamas responded by setting up its own security forces in the Strip.

In December 2006, a violent confrontation in the Rafah crossing between the Presidential Guard and the Hamas security forces triggered a confrontation that would last until the summer of 2007. The Presidential Guard was a Fatah military unit, 3,000 strong, consisting mostly of troops loyal to Abbas. It had been trained by American advisers in Egypt and Jordan (Washington had allocated almost 60 million dollars to its maintenance). The incident was triggered by Israel's refusal to allow the Hamas prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh, to enter the Strip—he was carrying cash donations from the Arab world, reported to be tens of millions of dollars. The Hamas forces then stormed the border control, manned by the Presidential Guard, and fighting broke out.[12]

The situation deteriorated quickly thereafter. Haniyeh's car was attacked after he crossed into the Strip. Hamas blamed Fatah for the attacks. Clashes broke out in the Strip and in the West Bank as well. In the same month, the Palestinian Authority decided to remove the Hamas-led government and replace it with an emergency cabinet. This sparked the most serious clashes between the two sides, which lasted until the end of May 2007, leaving dozens of dead and many wounded

(it is estimated that 120 people died). The conflict only ended when the government of Palestine was split into two: one in Ramallah and one in Gaza.[13]

While both sides were responsible for the carnage, there was also (as we have learned from the Palestine papers, leaked to Al Jazeera in 2007) an external factor that pitted Fatah against Hamas. The idea of preempting a possible Hamas stronghold in the Gaza Strip, once the Israelis withdrew, was suggested to Fatah as early as 2004 by the British intelligence agency MI6, who drew up a security plan that was meant to "encourage and enable the Palestinian Authority to fully meet its security obligations … by degrading the capabilities of the rejectionists (which later on the document names as the Hamas)."[14] The British prime minister at the time, Tony Blair, had taken a special interest in the Palestine question, hoping to have an impact that would vindicate, or absolve, his disastrous adventure in Iraq. The *Guardian* summarized his involvement as that of encouraging Fatah to crack down on Hamas.[15] Similar advice was given to Fatah by Israel and the United States, in a bid to keep Hamas from taking over the Gaza Strip. However, things got scrappy and the preemptive plan backfired in multiple ways.

This was in part a struggle between politicians who were democratically elected and those who still found it hard to accept the verdict of the public. But that was hardly the whole story. What unfolded in Gaza was a battle between the United States' and Israel's local proxies—mainly Fatah and PA members, most of whom became proxies unintentionally, but nonetheless danced to Israel's tune—and those who opposed them. The way Hamas acted against other factions was later reciprocated by the action the PA took against them in the West Bank. One would find it very hard to condone or cheer either action. Nevertheless, one can fully understand why secular Palestinians would oppose the creation of a theocracy, and, as in many other parts of the Middle East, the struggle over the role of religion and tradition in society will also continue in Palestine. However, for the time being, Hamas enjoys the support, and in many ways the admiration, of many secular Palestinians for the vigor of its struggle against Israel.

Indeed, that struggle is the real issue. According to the official narrative, Hamas is a terrorist organization engaging in vicious acts perpetrated against a peaceful Israel that has withdrawn from the Gaza Strip. But did Israel withdraw for the sake of peace? The answer is a resounding no.

To get a better understanding of the issue we need to go back to April 18, 2004, the day after the Hamas leader Abdul Aziz al-Rantissi was assassinated. On that day, Yuval Steinitz, chairman of the foreign affairs and defense committee in the Knesset and a close aide to Benjamin Netanyahu, was interviewed on Israeli radio. Before becoming a politician, he had taught Western philosophy at the University of Haifa. Steinitz claimed that his worldview had been shaped by Descartes, but it seems that as a politician he was more influenced by romantic nationalists such as Gobineau and Fichte, who stressed purity of race as a precondition for national excellence.[16] The translation of these European notions of racial superiority into the Israeli context became evident as soon as the interviewer asked him about the government's plans for the remaining Palestinian leaders. Interviewer and interviewee giggled as they agreed that the policy should involve the assassination or expulsion of the entire current leadership, that is all the members of the Palestinian Authority— about 40,000 people. "I am so happy," Steinitz said, "that the Americans have finally come to their senses and are fully supporting our policies."[17] On the same day, Benny Morris of Ben-Gurion University repeated his support for the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, claiming that this was the best way of solving the conflict.[18]

Opinions that used to be considered at best marginal, at worst lunatic, were now at the heart of the Israeli Jewish consensus, disseminated by establishment academics on prime-time television as the one and only truth. Israel in 2004 was a paranoid society, determined to bring the conflict to an end by force and destruction, whatever the cost to its society or its potential victims. Often this elite was supported only by the US administration and the Western political elites, while the rest of the world's more conscientious observers watched helpless and bewildered. Israel was like a plane flying on

autopilot; the course was preplanned, the speed predetermined. The destination was the creation of a Greater Israel, which would include half the West Bank and a small part of the Gaza Strip (thus amounting to almost 90 percent of historical Palestine). A Greater Israel without a Palestinian presence, with high walls separating it from the indigenous population, who were to be crammed into two huge prison camps in Gaza and what was left of the West Bank. In this vision, the Palestinians in Israel could either join the millions of refugees languishing in the camps, or submit to an apartheid system of discrimination and abuse.

That same year, 2004, the Americans supervised what they called the "Road Map" to peace. This was a ludicrous idea initially put forward in the summer of 2002 by President Bush, and even more far-fetched than the Oslo Accord. The idea was that the Palestinians would be offered an economic recovery plan, and a reduction in the Israeli military presence in parts of the occupied territories, for about three years. After that another summit would, somehow, bring the conflict to an end for once and for all.

In many parts of the Western world, the media took the Road Map and the Israeli vision of a Greater Israel (including autonomous Palestinian enclaves) to be one and the same—presenting both as offering the only safe route to peace and stability. The mission of making this vision a reality was entrusted to "the Quartet" (aka the Middle East Quartet, or occasionally the Madrid Quartet), set up in 2002 to allow the UN, the United States, Russia, and the EU to work together towards peace in Israel-Palestine. Essentially a coordinating body consisting of the foreign ministers of all four members, the Quartet became more active in 2007 when it appointed Tony Blair as its special envoy to the Middle East. Blair hired the whole new wing of the legendary American Colony hotel in Jerusalem as his headquarters. This, like Blair's salary, was an expensive operation that produced nothing.

The Quartet's spokespersons employed a discourse of peace that included references to a full Israeli withdrawal, the end of Jewish settlements, and a two-states solution. This inspired hope among some observers who still believed that

this course made sense. However, on the ground, the Road Map, like the Oslo Accord, allowed Israel to continue to implement its unilateral plan of creating the Greater Israel. The difference was that, this time, it was Ariel Sharon who was the architect, a far more focused and determined politician than Rabin, Peres, or Netanyahu. He had one surprising gambit that very few predicted: offering to evict the Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip. Sharon threw this proposal into the air in 2003, and then pressured his colleagues to adopt it, which they did within a year and half. In 2005, the army was sent in to evict the reluctant settlers by force. What lay behind this decision?

Successive Israeli governments had been very clear about the future of the West Bank, while not so sure about what should happen with the Gaza Strip.[19] The strategy for the West Bank was to ensure it remained under Israeli rule, direct or indirect. Most governments since 1967, including Sharon's, hoped that this rule would be organized as part of a "peace process." The West Bank could become a state in this vision—if it remained a Bantustan. This was the old idea of Yigal Alon and Moshe Dayan from 1967; areas densely populated by Palestinians should be controlled from the outside. But things were different when it came to the Gaza Strip. Sharon had agreed with the original decision of the early governments, most of them Labor, to send settlers into the heart of the Gaza Strip, just as he supported the building of settlements in the Sinai Peninsula, which were evicted to the last under the bilateral peace agreement with Egypt. In the twenty-first century, he came to accept the pragmatic views of leading members of both the Likud and Labor parties on the possibility of leaving Gaza for the sake of keeping the West Bank.[20]

Prior to the Oslo process, the presence of Jewish settlers in the Strip did not complicate things, but once the new idea of a Palestinian Authority emerged, they became a liability to Israel rather than an asset. As a result, many Israeli policy makers, even those who did not immediately take to the idea of eviction, were looking for ways of pushing the Strip out of their minds and hearts. This became clear when, after the

Accord was signed, the Strip was encircled with a barbed-wire fence and the movement of Gazan workers into Israel and the West Bank was severely restricted. Strategically, in the new setup, it was easier to control Gaza from the outside, but this was not entirely possible while the settler community remained inside.

One solution was to divide the Strip into a Jewish area, with direct access to Israel, and a Palestinian area. This worked well until the outbreak of the Second Intifada. The road connecting the settlements' sprawl, the Gush Qatif block as it was called, was an easy target for the uprising. The vulnerability of the settlers was exposed in full. During this conflict the Israeli army tactics included massive bombardments and destruction of rebellious Palestinian pockets, which in April 2002 led to the massacre of innocent Palestinians in the Jenin refugee camp. These tactics were not easily implemented in the dense Gaza Strip due to the presence of the Jewish settlers. It was not surprising, then, that a year after the most brutal military assault on the West Bank, operation "Defensive Shield," Sharon contemplated the removal of the Gaza settlers so as to facilitate a retaliation policy. In 2004, however, unable to force his political will on the Strip, he called instead for a series of assassinations of Hamas leaders. Sharon hoped to influence the future with the assassinations of the two chief leaders, Abdul al-Rantisi and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (killed on March 17, 2004). Even a sober source such as *Haaretz* assumed that after these assassinations, Hamas would lose its power base in the Gaza Strip and be reduced to an ineffective presence in Damascus, where, if need be, Israel would attack it too. The newspaper also was impressed by the US support for the assassinations (although both the paper and the Americans would be much less supportive of the policy later on).[21]

These killings took place before Hamas won the 2006 elections and took over the Gaza Strip. In other words, the Israeli policy did not undermine Hamas; on the contrary, it enhanced its popularity and power. Sharon wanted the Palestinian Authority to take control of Gaza and treat it like Area A in the West Bank; but this outcome did not materialize.

So Sharon had to deal with Gaza in one of two ways: either clear out the settlers so that he could retaliate against Hamas without the risk of hurting Israeli citizens; or depart altogether from the region in order to refocus his efforts on annexing the West Bank, or parts of it. In order to ensure that the second alternative was understood internationally, Sharon orchestrated a charade that everybody fell for. As he began to make noises about evicting the settlers from the Strip, Gush Emunim compared the action to the Holocaust and staged a real show for the television when they were physically evicted from their homes. It seemed as if there were a civil war in Israel between those who supported the settlers and those on the left, including formidable foes of Sharon in the past, who supported his plan for a peace initiative.[22]

Inside Israel this move weakened, and in some cases entirely wiped out, dissenting voices. Sharon proposed that with the withdrawal from Gaza and the ascendance of Hamas therein, there was no point in pushing forward grand ideas such as the Oslo Accord. He suggested, and his successor after his terminal illness in 2007, Ehud Olmert, agreed, that the status quo be maintained for the time being. There was a need to contain Hamas in Gaza, but there was no rush to find a solution to the West Bank. Olmert called this policy unilateralism: since there were be no significant negotiations in the near future with the Palestinians, Israel should unilaterally decide which parts of the West Bank it wanted to annex, and which parts could be run autonomously by the Palestinian Authority. There was a sense among Israeli policy makers that, if not in public declarations, then at least as a reality on the ground, this course of action would be acceptable to both the Quartet and the PA. Until now, it had seemed to work.

With no strong international pressure and a feeble PA as a neighbor, most Israelis did not feel the strategy towards the West Bank to be an issue of great interest. As the election campaigns since 2005 have shown, Jewish society has preferred to debate socioeconomic issues, the role of religion in society, and the war against Hamas and Hezbollah. The main opposition party, the Labor Party, has more or less shared

the vision of the coalition government, hence it has been both inside and outside government since 2005. When it came to the West Bank, or the solution to the Palestine question, Israeli Jewish society appeared to have reached a consensus. What cemented that sense of consensus was the eviction of the Gaza settlers by Sharon's right-wing administration. For those who considered themselves to the left of the Likud, Sharon's move was a peace gesture, and a brave confrontation with the settlers. He became a hero of the left as well of the center and moderate right, like de Gaulle taking the *pied noir* out of Algeria for the sake of peace. The Palestinian reaction in the Gaza Strip and criticism from the PA of Israeli policies ever since were seen as a proof of the absence of any sound or reliable Palestinian partner for peace.

Apart from brave journalists such as Gideon Levy and Amira Hass at *Haaretz*, a few members of the small left Zionist party Meretz, and some anti-Zionist groups, Jewish society in Israel became effectively silent, giving governments since 2005 carte blanche to pursue any policy towards the Palestinians they deem fit. This was why, in the 2011 protest movement that galvanized half a million Israelis (out of a population of 7 million) against the governments' policies, the occupation and its horrors were not mentioned as part of the agenda. This absence of any public discourse or criticism had already allowed Sharon in his last year in power, 2005, to authorize more killings of unarmed Palestinians and, by way of curfews and long periods of closure, to starve the society under occupation. And when the Palestinians in the occupied territories occasionally rebelled, the government now had a license to react with even greater force and determination.

Previous American governments had supported Israeli policies regardless of how they affected, or were perceived by, the Palestinians. This support, however, used to require negotiation and some give and take. Even after the outbreak of the Second Intifada in October 2000, some in Washington tried to distance the United States from Israel's response to the uprising. For a while, Americans seemed uneasy about the fact that several Palestinians a day were being killed, and that a large number of the victims were children. There was also

some discomfort about Israel's use of collective punishments, house demolitions, and arrests without trial. But they got used to all this, and when the Israeli Jewish consensus sanctioned the assault on the West Bank in April 2002—an unprecedented episode of cruelty in the vicious history of the occupation—the US administration objected only to the unilateral acts of annexation and settlement that were expressly forbidden in the EU–American-sponsored Road Map.

In 2004, Sharon asked for US and UK support for the colonialization in the West Bank in return for withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, and he got it. His plan, which passed in Israel for a consensual peace plan, was at first rejected by the Americans as unproductive (the rest of the world condemned it in stronger terms). The Israelis, however, hoped that the similarities between the American and British conduct in Iraq and Israel's policies in Palestine would lead the United States to change its position, and they were right. It is noteworthy that, until the very last moment, Washington hesitated before giving Sharon the green light for the withdrawal from Gaza. On April 13, 2004, a bizarre scene unfolded on the tarmac of Ben-Gurion airport. The prime minister's jet remained stationary for a few hours after its scheduled departure. Inside, Sharon had refused to allow it to take off for Washington until he got US approval for his new so-called disengagement plan. President Bush supported the disengagement per se. What his advisors found hard to digest was the letter Sharon had asked Bush to sign as part of the US endorsement. It included an American promise not to pressure Israel in the future about progress in the peace process, and to exclude the right of return from any future negotiations. Sharon convinced Bush's aides that he would not be able to unite the Israeli public behind his disengagement program without American support.[23]

In the past, it had usually taken a while for US officials to submit to Israeli politicians' need for a consensus. This time, it took only three hours. We now know that there was another reason for Sharon's sense of urgency: he knew that he was being investigated by the police on serious charges of corruption, and he needed to persuade the Israeli public to trust

him in the face of a pending court case. “The wider the investigation, the wider the disengagement,” said the left-wing member of Knesset Yossi Sarid, referring to the linkage between Sharon’s troubles in court and his commitment to the withdrawal.[24] It ought to have taken the US administration much longer than it did to reach a decision. In essence, Sharon was asking President Bush to forgo almost every commitment the Americans had made over Palestine. The plan offered an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the closure of the handful of settlements there, as well as several others in the West Bank, in return for the annexation of the majority of the West Bank settlements to Israel. The Americans also knew all too well how another crucial piece fitted into this puzzle. For Sharon, the annexation of those parts of the West Bank he coveted could only be executed with the completion of the wall Israel had begun building in 2003, bisecting the Palestinian parts of the West Bank. He had not anticipated the international objection—the wall became the most iconic symbol of the occupation, to the extent that the international court of justice ruled that it constituted a human rights violation. Time will tell whether or not this was a meaningful landmark.[25]

As Sharon waited in his jet, Washington gave its support to a scheme that left most of the West Bank in Israeli hands and all of the refugees in exile—and gave its tacit agreement to the wall. Sharon chose the ideal US president as a potential ally for his new plans. President George W. Bush was heavily influenced by Christian Zionists, and maybe even shared their view that the presence of the Jews in the Holy Land was part of the fulfilment of a doomsday scenario that might inaugurate the Second Coming of Christ. Bush’s more secular neocon advisers had been impressed by the war against Hamas, which accompanied Israel’s promises of eviction and peace. The seemingly successful Israeli operations— mostly the targeted assassinations in 2004—were a proof by proxy that America’s own “war against terror” was bound to triumph. In truth, Israel’s “success” was a cynical distortion of the facts on the ground. The relative decline in Palestinian guerrilla and terror activity was achieved by curfews and closures and by confining more than 2 million people in their homes without

work or food for protracted periods of time. Even neoconservatives should have been able to grasp that this was not going to provide a long-term solution to the hostility and violence provoked by an occupying power, whether in Iraq or Palestine.

Sharon's plan was approved by Bush's spin doctors, who were able to present it as another step towards peace and use it as a distraction from the growing debacle in Iraq. It was probably also acceptable to more even-handed advisers, who were so desperate to see some progress that they persuaded themselves that the plan offered a chance for peace and a better future. These people long ago forgot how to distinguish between the mesmerizing power of language and the reality it purports to describe. As long as the plan contained the magic term "withdrawal," it was seen as essentially a good thing even by some usually cool-headed journalists in the United States, by the leaders of the Israeli Labor party (bent on joining Sharon's government in the name of the sacred consensus), and by the newly elected leader of the Israeli left party, Meretz, Yossi Beilin.[26]

By the end of 2004, Sharon knew he had no reason to fear outside pressure. The governments of Europe and the United States were unwilling or unable to stop the occupation and prevent the further destruction of the Palestinians. Those Israelis who were willing to take part in anti-occupation movements were outnumbered and demoralized in the face of the new consensus. It is not surprising that, around that time, civil societies in Europe and in the United States woke up to the possibility of playing a major role in the conflict and were galvanized around the idea of the Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions movement. Quite a few organizations, unions, and individuals were committed to a new public effort, vowing to do all they could to make the Israelis understand that policies such as Sharon's came at a price.

Since then, from the academic boycott to economic sanctions, every possible means has been attempted in the West. The message at home was also clear: their governments were no less responsible than Israel for the past, present, and future catastrophes of the Palestinian people. The BDS

movement demanded a new policy to counter Sharon's unilateral strategy, not only for moral or historical reasons, but also for the sake of the West's security and even survival. As the violence since the events of September 11, 2001 has so painfully shown, the Palestine conflict undermined the multicultural fabric of Western society, as it pushed the United States and the Muslim world further and further apart and into a nightmarish relationship. Putting pressure on Israel seemed a small price to pay for the sake of global peace, regional stability, and reconciliation in Palestine.

Thus, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was not part of a peace plan. According to the official narrative it was a gesture of peace that the ungrateful Palestinians responded to first by electing Hamas, and then by launching missiles into Israel. Ergo, there was no point or wisdom in any further withdrawal from any occupied Palestinian territory. All Israel could do was defend itself. Moreover, the "trauma" that "nearly led to a civil war" was meant to persuade Israeli society that it is not an episode worth repeating.

Was the War on Gaza a War of Self-Defense?

Although I have coauthored a book (with Noam Chomsky) under the title *The War on Gaza*, I am not sure that "war" is the right term to describe what happened in the various Israeli assaults on the Strip, beginning in 2006. In fact, after the onset of Operation Cast Lead in 2009, I have opted to call the Israeli policy an incremental genocide. I hesitated before using this highly charged term, and yet cannot find another to accurately describe what happened. Since the responses I received, among others from some leading human rights activists, indicated that a certain unease accompanies such usage of the term, I was inclined to rethink it for a while, but came back to employing it recently with an even stronger conviction: it is the only appropriate way of describing what the Israeli army has been doing in the Gaza Strip since 2006.

On December 28, 2006, the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem published its annual report on the atrocities in the occupied territories. In that year Israeli forces killed 660 citizens, more than triple that of the previous year

when around 200 Palestinians were killed. According to B'Tselem, in 2006, 141 children were among the dead. Most of the casualties were from the Gaza Strip, where the Israeli forces demolished almost 300 houses and crushed entire families. This means that since 2000, almost 4,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces, half of them children; more than 20,000 were wounded.[27]

B'Tselem is a conservative organization, and the numbers of the dead and injured may be higher. However, the issue is not just about the escalating intentional killing, it is about the strategy behind such acts. Throughout the last decade, Israeli policy makers faced two very different realities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the former, they were closer than ever to completing the construction of their eastern border. The internal ideological debate was over, and the master plan for annexing half of the West Bank was being implemented at an escalating pace. The last phase was delayed due to the promises made by Israel, under the terms of the Road Map, not to build any new settlements. But the policy makers quickly found two ways of circumventing this alleged prohibition. First they redefined a third of the West Bank as part of Greater Jerusalem, which allowed them to build towns and community centers within this new annexed area. Secondly, they expanded old settlements to such proportions that there was no need to build new ones.

Overall, the settlements, the army bases, the roads, and the wall put Israel into a position to officially annex almost half of the West Bank whenever it deemed it necessary. Within these territories there were a considerable number of Palestinians, against whom the Israeli authorities would continue to implement slow and creeping transfer policies. This was too boring a subject for the Western media to bother with, and too elusive for human rights organizations to make a general point about them. There was no rush as far as the Israelis were concerned—they had the upper hand: the daily abuse and dehumanization exercised by the dual mechanism of the army and the bureaucracy was as effective as ever in contributing to the dispossession process.

Sharon's strategic thinking was accepted by everyone who joined his last government, as well has his successor Ehud Olmert. Sharon even left the Likud and founded a centrist party, Kadima, that reflected this consensus on the policy towards the occupied territories.[28] On the other hand, neither Sharon nor anyone who followed him could offer a clear Israeli strategy vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip. In the eyes of the Israelis, the Strip is a very different geopolitical entity to that of the West Bank. It remains in the hands of Hamas, while the Palestinian Authority seems to run the fragmented West Bank with Israeli and American blessing. There is no chunk of land in the Strip that Israel covets and there is no hinterland, like Jordan, into which it can expel the Palestinians. Ethnic cleansing as the means to a solution is ineffective here.

The earliest strategy adopted in the Strip was the ghettoization of the Palestinians, but this was not working. The besieged community expressed its will to life by firing primitive missiles into Israel. The next attack on this community was often even more horrific and barbaric. On September 12, 2005, Israeli forces left the Gaza Strip. Simultaneously, the Israeli army invaded the town of Tul-Karim, made arrests on a massive scale, especially activists of the Islamic Jihad, an ally of Hamas, and killed a few of its people. The organization launched nine missiles that killed no one. Israel responded with Operation "First Rain."[29] It is worth dwelling for a moment on the nature of that operation. Inspired by punitive measures adopted first by colonialist powers, then by dictatorships, against rebellious imprisoned or banished communities, "First Rain" began with supersonic jets flying over Gaza to terrorize the entire population. This was followed by the heavy bombardment of vast areas from sea, sky, and land. The logic, the Israeli army spokespersons explained, was to build up a pressure that would weaken the community's support for the rocket launchers.[30] As was to be expected, not least by the Israelis, the operation only increased the support for the fighters and gave extra impetus to their next attempt. The real purpose of that particular operation was experimental. The Israeli generals wanted to know how such operations might be received at home, in the region generally,

and in the wider world. When the international condemnation proved to be very limited and short-lived, they were satisfied with the result.

Since “First Rain” all subsequent operations have followed a similar pattern. The difference has been in their escalation: more firepower, more causalities, and more collateral damage, and, as expected, more Qassam missiles in response. Another dimension was added after 2006 when the Israelis employed the more sinister means of imposing a tight siege on the people of the Strip through boycott and blockade. The capturing of the IDF soldier, Gilad Shalit, in June 2006 did not change the balance of power between Hamas and Israel, but it nonetheless provided an opportunity for the Israelis to escalate even further their tactical and allegedly punitive missions. After all, there was no strategic clarity over what to do beyond continuing with the endless cycle of punitive actions.

The Israelis also continued to give absurd, indeed sinister, names to their operations. “First Rain” was succeeded by “Summer Rains,” the name given to the punitive operations that began in June 2006. “Summer Rains” brought a novel component: a land invasion into parts of the Gaza Strip. This enabled the army to kill citizens even more effectively and to present this as a consequence of heavy fighting within dense populated areas; that is, as an inevitable result of the circumstances rather than of Israeli policy. With the end of the summer came operation “Autumn Clouds,” which was even more efficient: on November 1, 2006, seventy civilians were killed in less than forty-eight hours. By the end of that month, almost 200 had been killed, half of them children and women. Some of this activity ran in parallel to the Israeli attacks on Lebanon, making it easier to complete these operations without much external attention, let alone criticism.

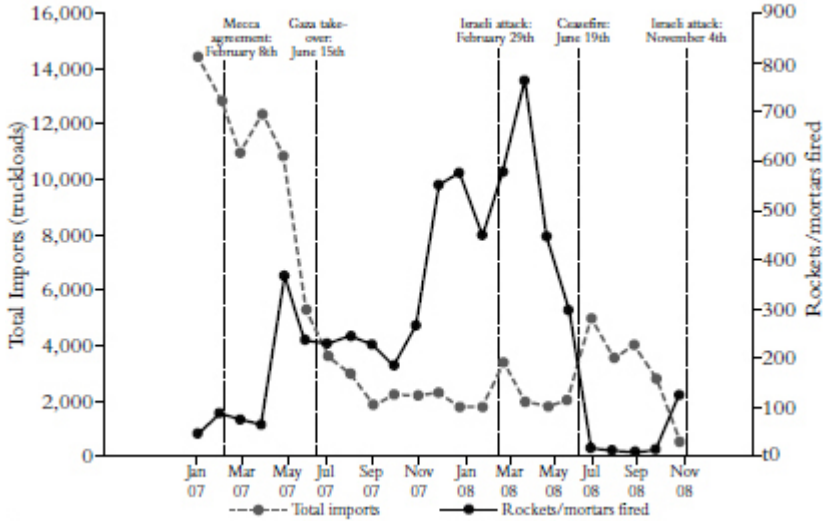
From “First Rain” to “Autumn Clouds” one can see escalation in every area. Firstly, there was the disappearance of the distinction between “civilian” and “non-civilian” targets: the senseless killing had turned the population at large into the main target of the operation. Secondly, there was the escalation in the employment of every possible killing machine the Israeli army possesses. Thirdly, there was the

conspicuous rise in the number of casualties. Finally, and most importantly, the operations gradually crystallized into a strategy, indicating the way Israel intends to solve the problem of the Gaza Strip in the future: through a measured genocidal policy. The people of the Strip, however, continued to resist. This led to further genocidal Israeli operations, but still today a failure to reoccupy the region.

In 2008, the "Summer" and the "Autumn" operations were succeeded by operation "Hot Winter." As anticipated, the new round of attacks caused even more civilian deaths, more than 100 in the Gaza Strip, which was bombarded once more from air, sea, and land, and also invaded. This time at least, it seemed for a moment that the international community was paying attention. The EU and the UN condemned Israel for its "disproportionate use of force," and accused it of violating international law; the American criticism was "balanced." However, it was enough to lead to a ceasefire, one of many, that would occasionally be violated by another Israeli attack.[31] Hamas was willing to prolong the ceasefire, and authorized the strategy in religious terms, calling it *tahadiah*—meaning a lull in Arabic, and ideologically a very long period of peace. It also succeeded in convincing most factions to stop launching rockets into Israel. Mark Regev, the Israeli government spokesperson, admitted as much himself.[32]

The success of the ceasefire might have been assured had there been a genuine easing of the Israeli siege. Practically this meant increasing the amount of goods allowed into the Strip and easing the movement of people in and out. Yet Israel did not comply with its promises in this regard. Israeli officials were very candid when they told their US counterparts that the plan was to keep the Gaza economy "on the brink of collapse."[33] There was a direct correlation between the intensity of the siege and the intensity of the rocket launches into Israel, as the accompanying diagram prepared by the Carter Peace Center illustrates so well.

Import of Goods into Gaza–Rockets and Mortars Fired from Gaza



Source: The Carter Center, "Gaza Timeline Analysis: Movement and Fatalities", 2009

Israel broke the ceasefire on November 4, 2008, on the pretext that it had exposed a tunnel excavated by Hamas—planned, so they claimed, for another abduction operation. Hamas had been building tunnels out of the Gaza ghetto in order to bring in food, move people out, and indeed as part of its resistance strategy. Using a tunnel as a pretext for violating the ceasefire would be akin to a Hamas decision to violate it because Israel has military bases near the border. Hamas officials claimed that tunnel in question had been built for defensive reasons. They never shied away from boasting about a different function in other cases, so this might be true. The Irish Palestine solidarity group Sadaka published a very detailed report compiling evidence showing that Israeli officers knew there was no danger whatsoever from the tunnel. The government just needed a pretext for yet another attempt to destroy Hamas.[34]

Hamas responded to the Israeli assault with a barrage of missiles that injured no one and killed no one. Israel stopped its attack for a short period, demanding that Hamas agree to a ceasefire under its conditions. Hamas's refusal led to the infamous "Cast Lead" operation at the end of 2008 (the code names were now changed to even more ominous ones). The preliminary bombardment this time was unprecedented—it reminded many of the carpet bombing of Iraq in 2003. The

main target was the civilian infrastructure; nothing was spared —hospitals, schools, mosques—everything was hit and destroyed. Hamas responded by launching missiles into Israeli towns not targeted before, such as Beersheba and Ashdod. There were a few civilian casualties, but most of the Israelis killed, thirteen in total, were soldiers killed by friendly fire. In sharp contrast, 1,500 Palestinians lost their lives in the operation.[35]

A new cynical dimension was now added: international and Arab donors promised aid running into the billions to rebuild what Israel would only destroy again in the future. Even the worst disaster can be profitable.

The next round came in 2012 with two operations: "Returning Echo," which was smaller in comparison to the previous attacks, and the more significant "Pillar of Defense" in July 2012, which brought an end to the social protest movement of that summer, with its potential to bring down the government for the failure of its economic and social policies. There is nothing like a war in the south to convince young Israelis to stop protesting and go out and defend the homeland. It had worked before, and it worked this time as well.

In 2012, Hamas reached Tel Aviv for the first time—with missiles that caused little damage and no casualties. Meanwhile, with the familiar imbalance, 200 Palestinians were killed, including tens of children. This was not a bad year for Israel. The exhausted EU and US governments did not even condemn the 2012 attacks; in fact they repeatedly invoked "Israel's right to defend itself." No wonder that two years later the Israelis understood that they could go even further. Operation "Protective Edge," in the summer of 2014, had been in the planning for two years; the abduction and killing of three settlers in the West Bank provided the pretext for its execution, during which 2,200 Palestinians were killed. Israel itself was paralyzed for a while, as Hamas's rockets even reached Ben-Gurion airport.

For the first time, the Israeli army fought face to face with the Palestinian guerrillas in the Strip, and lost sixty-six soldiers in the process. In this battle between desperate

Palestinians, their backs to their wall, enraged by a long and cruel siege, and the Israeli army, the former had the upper hand. The situation was like that of a police force entering a maximum security prison it had controlled mainly from outside, only to be faced with the desperation and resilience of prisoners who have been systematically starved and strangulated. It is frightening to think what Israel's operational conclusions will be after this clash with brave Hamas fighters.

The war in Syria and the resulting refugee crisis did not leave much space for international action or interest in Gaza. However, it seems everything is poised for yet another round of attacks against the people of the Strip. The UN has predicted that, at the current rate of destruction, by 2020 the Strip will have become uninhabitable. This will be brought about not only by military force but also by what the UN calls "de-development"—a process whereby development is reversed:

> Three Israeli military operations in the past six years, in addition to eight years of economic blockade, have ravaged the already debilitated infrastructure of Gaza, shattered its productive base, left no time for meaningful reconstruction or economic recovery and impoverished the Palestinian population in Gaza, rendering their economic wellbeing worse than the level of two decades previous.[36]

This death sentence has become even more likely since the military coup in Egypt. The new regime there has now closed the only opening Gaza had outside of Israel. Since 2010, civil society organizations have sent flotillas to show solidarity and break the siege. One of them was viciously attacked by Israeli commandoes, who killed nine of the passengers on board the *Mavi Marmara* and arrested the others. Other flotillas were treated better. However, the 2020 prospect is still there, and it seems that to prevent this infliction of a slow death the people of Gaza will need more than peaceful flotillas to persuade the Israelis to relent.

PART III

LOOKING AHEAD

Chapter 10

The Two-States Solution Is the Only Way Forward

This familiar myth is usually delivered in an affirmative voice claiming that there is a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and that it is waiting for us just around the corner. However, the reality of the current colonization of vast parts of the West Bank by Israel renders any two-states solution an improbable vision. At best, the most one can hope for is a Palestinian Bantustan. But such a political arrangement would create a state with no proper sovereignty, divided into several cantons, with no means of protecting or sustaining itself independently of Israel. Any expectation of a more independent entity, should there be a miraculous change of mind on Israel's part, does not turn the two-states solution into a final act in the conflict. It is unthinkable that a national struggle for liberation, now almost 150 years old, might end with conditional autonomous rule over just 20 percent of the homeland. Moreover, no diplomatic accord or document could ever define who is and who is not part of the agreement. For example, it would be impossible to declare those who live in the West Bank Palestinians, but not those in the Gaza Strip. This would be the current situation, because both the Gaza Strip and many parts of Jerusalem seem to be excluded from negotiations and are not included in the envisaged state.

The two-states solution, as noted earlier, is an Israeli invention that was meant to square a circle. It responds to the question of how to keep the West Bank under Israeli control

without incorporating the population that lives there. Thus it was suggested that part of the West Bank would be autonomous, a quasi-state. In return, the Palestinians would have to give up all their hopes for return, for equal rights for Palestinians in Israel, for the fate of Jerusalem, and for leading a normal life as human beings in their homeland.

Any criticism of this myth is often branded as anti-Semitism. However, in many ways the opposite is true: there is a connection between the new anti-Semitism and the myth itself. The two-states solution is based on the idea that a Jewish state is the best solution for the Jewish problem; that is, Jews should live in Palestine rather than anywhere else. This notion is also close to the hearts of anti-Semites. The two-states solution, indirectly one should say, is based on the assumption that Israel and Judaism are the same. Thus, Israel insists that what it does, it does in the name of Judaism, and when its actions are rejected by people around the world the criticism is not only directed toward Israel but also towards Judaism. The leader of the UK Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, attracted of a lot of criticism when he explained, to my mind correctly, that blaming Judaism for Netanyahu's policies is like blaming Islam for the actions of the Islamic State. This is a valid comparison, even if it rattled some people's sensitivities.[1]

The two-states solution is like a corpse taken out in the morgue every now and then, dressed up nicely, and presented as a living thing. When it has been proven once more that there is no life left in it, it is returned to the morgue. In the future, the only thing that might change is the United Nations admitting Palestine as a full member. At the same time, we might also see the completion of the Israeli takeover of Area C (more than 50 percent of the West Bank). The tension between the two—the symbolic act in the UN Security Council and the reality on the ground—may be too much for the international community to bear. The best scenario imaginable might be that such circumstances force everyone to go back to the drawing board and rethink a solution to the conflict from first principles.

The charade will end soon, peacefully or violently, but either way painfully. It seems that nothing is going to stop Israel now from completing its colonization of the West Bank and continuing its siege on Gaza. This might be achieved with international blessing, but there are quite enough politicians in Israel who seem willing to proceed without that blessing. In either case, Israel will need to use brutal force to implement its vision of a "solution": annexing half of the West Bank, ghettoizing the other half as well as the Gaza Strip, and imposing an apartheid regime of a sort on its own Palestinian citizens. Such a situation will render any discourse on the two-states solution irrelevant and obsolete.

In ancient times, the dead were buried with their beloved artifacts and belongings. This coming funeral will probably follow a similar ritual. The most important item to go six feet under is the dictionary of illusion and deception with its famous entries such as "the peace process," "the only democracy in the Middle East," "a peace-loving nation," "parity and reciprocity," and "a humane solution to the refugee problem." A replacement dictionary has been in the making for many years, redefining Zionism as colonialism, Israel as an apartheid state, and the Nakbah as ethnic cleansing. It will be much easier to put it into common use once the two-states solution has been pronounced dead.[2]

The maps of the dead solution will also be lying next to the body. The cartography that reduced Palestine to a tenth of its historical self, and which was presented as a map of peace, will hopefully be gone forever. There is no need to prepare an alternative map. Since 1967, the geography of the conflict has never changed in reality, even while it was constantly transformed in the discourse of liberal Zionist politicians, journalists, and academics. Palestine was always the land between the river and the sea. It still is. Its changing fortunes are characterized not by geography but by demography. The settler movement that arrived there in the late nineteenth century now accounts for half the population and controls the other half through a matrix of racist ideology and apartheid policies. Peace is not a matter of demographic change, nor a redrawing of maps: it is the elimination of these ideologies and

policies. Who knows, it may be easier now than ever to do this.

The funeral will expose the fallacy of the Israeli mass protest movement of 2012, while at the same time highlighting its positive potential. For seven weeks in that summer, middle-class Israeli Jews protested in huge numbers against their government's social and economic policies. In order to ensure as big a protest as possible, its leaders and coordinators did not dare mention occupation, colonization, or apartheid. The source of every evil, they claimed, was the brutal capitalist policies of the government. On a certain level, they had a point. These policies prevented the master race of Israel from enjoying fully and equally the fruits of Palestine's rape and dispossession. However, a fairer division of the spoils will not ensure a normal life for either Jews or Palestinians; only an end to the looting and pillaging will. And yet the demonstrators also expressed their skepticism and distrust concerning what their media and politicians tell them about the socioeconomic reality; this may open the way for a better understanding of the lies they have been fed about the "conflict" and their "national security" over so many years.

The funeral should energize us all to follow the same distribution of labor as before. As urgently as ever, Palestinians need to solve the issue of representation. And the progressive Jewish forces in the world need to be more intensively recruited to the BDS and solidarity campaigns. In Palestine itself, the time has come to move the discourse of the one-state solution into political action, and maybe to adopt the new dictionary. Since the dispossession is everywhere, the repossession and reconciliation will have to occur everywhere. If the relationship between Jews and Palestinians is to be reframed on a just and democratic basis, then we can accept neither the old, buried map of the two-states solution nor its logic of partition. This also means that the sacred distinction between Jewish settlements in Israel (before 1967) and those in the West Bank (after 1967) should be consigned to the grave as well. The distinction should instead be made between those Jews who are willing to discuss a reformulation of the

relationship, a change of regime, and equal status, and those who are not, regardless of where they live now.

There are some surprising phenomena in this respect if one studies the human and political fabric of contemporary Israel-Palestine: the willingness to enter into dialogue is sometimes more evident beyond the green line than inside it. The dialogues within about a change of regime, the question of representation, and the BDS campaign are all part and parcel of the same effort to bring justice and peace to Palestine. Once the two-states solution is buried, one major obstacle to a just peace in Israel and Palestine will have been removed.

Conclusion: The Settler Colonial State of Israel in the Twenty-First Century

In 2017, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will have lasted for fifty years. After such a long period, the term "occupation" becomes somewhat redundant and irrelevant. Two generations of Palestinians have already lived under this regime. Although they themselves will still call it occupation, what they are living through is rooted in something else much harder to defeat or change—colonization. The term colonization, as I noted in the opening chapters, is not easily applied to the present—it is more often than not associated with past events. This is why, with the help of recent and exciting research, scholars writing on Israel are more frequently using another term: settler colonialism.

Colonialism can be described as the movement of Europeans to different parts of the world, creating new "white" nations where indigenous people had once had their own kingdoms. These nations could only be created if the settlers employed two logics: the logic of elimination— getting rid by all means possible of the indigenous people, including by genocide; and the logic of dehumanization—regarding the non-Europeans as inferior and thus as not deserving the same rights as the settlers. In South Africa these twin logics led to the creation of the Apartheid system, founded officially in 1948, the same year that the Zionist movement translated the same logics into an ethnic cleansing operation in Palestine.

As this book attempts to show, from a settler colonial perspective events such as the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Oslo Process, and the disengagement

from Gaza in 2005 are all part of the same Israeli strategy of taking as much of Palestine as possible with as few Palestinians in it as possible. The means of achieving this goal have changed over time, and it remains uncompleted. However, it is the main fuel that feeds the fire of the conflict.

In this manner, the horrific connection between the logics of dehumanization and elimination, so apparent in the spread of European settler colonialism throughout the world, first found its way into the authoritarian states of the Middle East. It was ruthlessly manifest, among a multitude of other examples, in the destruction of the Kurds by Saddam Hussein as well as in the punitive actions carried out by the Assad regime in 2012. It was then also employed by groups opposing that regime: the worst example being the genocidal policies of the Islamic State.

This barbarization of human relations in the Middle East can only be stopped by the people of the region themselves. However, they should be aided by the outside world. Together the region should return to its not so distant past, when the guiding principle was "live and let live." No serious discussion about ending human rights abuses in the region as a whole can bypass a conversation about the 100 years of human rights abuses in Palestine. The two are intimately connected. The exceptionalism enjoyed by Israel, and before that by the Zionist movement, makes a mockery of any Western critique of human rights abuses in the Arab world. Any discussion of the abuse of the Palestinians' human rights needs to include an understanding of the inevitable outcome of settler colonial projects such as Zionism. The Jewish settlers are now an organic and integral part of the land. They cannot, and will not, be removed. They should be part of the future, but not on the basis of the constant oppression and dispossession of the local Palestinians.

We have wasted years talking about the two-states solution as if it had any relevance to the issue described above. But we needed that time to persuade both Israeli Jews and the world at large that when you found a state—even one with a thriving culture, a successful high-tech industry, and a powerful military—on the basis of dispossessing another people, your

moral legitimacy will always be questioned. Confining the question of legitimacy only to the territories Israel occupied in 1967 will never resolve the issue at the heart of the problem. Of course it will help if Israel withdraws from the West Bank, but there is a possibility that it will just monitor the region in the same way it has policed the Gaza Strip since 2006. This will not hasten an end to the conflict, it will just transform it into a conflict of a different kind.

There are deep layers of history that will need to be addressed if a genuine attempt is to be made at a resolution. After World War II, Zionism was allowed to become a colonialist project at a time when colonialism was being rejected by the civilized world because the creation of a Jewish state offered Europe, and West Germany in particular, an easy way out of the worst excesses of anti-Semitism ever seen. Israel was the first to declare its recognition of "a new Germany"—in return it received a lot of money, but also, far more importantly, a carte blanche to turn the whole of Palestine into Israel. Zionism offered itself as the solution to anti-Semitism, but became the main reason for its continued presence. The "deal" also failed to uproot the racism and xenophobia that still lies at the heart of Europe, and which produced Nazism on the continent and a brutal colonialism outside of it. That racism and xenophobia is now turned against Muslims and Islam; since it is intimately connected to the Israel–Palestinian question, it could be reduced once a genuine answer to that question is found.

We all deserve a better ending to the story of the Holocaust. This could involve a strong multicultural Germany showing the way to the rest of Europe; an American society dealing bravely with the racial crimes of its past that still resonate today; an Arab world that expunges its barbarism and inhumanity …

Nothing like that could happen if we continue to fall into the trap of treating mythologies as truths. Palestine was not empty and the Jewish people had homelands; Palestine was colonized, not "redeemed"; and its people were dispossessed in 1948, rather than leaving voluntarily. Colonized people, even under the UN Charter, have the right to struggle for their

liberation, even with an army, and the successful ending to such a struggle lies in the creation of a democratic state that includes all of its inhabitants. A discussion of the future, liberated from the ten myths about Israel, will hopefully not only help to bring peace to Israel and Palestine, but will also help Europe reach a proper closure on the horrors of World War II and the dark era of colonialism.

Timeline

1881	Waves of Russian pogroms lasting until 1884. The Zionist movement appears in Europe.
1882	First Aliyah (1882–1904). The foundation of Rishon LeZion, Zichron Yaacov, and Rosh Pina in Palestine.
1897	The First Zionist Congress in Basel. The establishment of the World Zionist Congress.
1898	The Second Zionist Congress.
1899	The Third Zionist Congress.
1901	The Jewish National Fund (JNF) founded.
1904	The Second Aliyah (1904–14).
1908	The Palestine Office is established (in 1929 it became the Jewish Agency).
1909	Degania, the first Kibbutz (Kvutzat Degania), is founded. The building of Tel Aviv. The Hashomer founded.
1915–16	The Hussein–McMahon correspondence.
1916	The Sykes-Picot agreement.
1917	The Balfour Declaration. Britain occupies Palestine and governs it through a military administration (until 1920).
1920	The Haganah is founded. The Histadrut is founded. The San Remo Conference grants Britain the Mandate over Palestine.
1922	Britain recognizes Transjordan as a separate political entity and Amir Abdullah as its ruler. The US Congress endorses the Balfour Declaration.
1923	The British Mandate over Palestine and Transjordan is authorized first by the League of Nations, then at the Treaty of Lausanne.
1931	The Irgun splits from the Haganah.

1936 Arab Revolt breaks out and would last until 1939.

1937 The Peel Royal Commission.

1940 “Lehi” (Stern gang) splits from the Irgun. The Village Files Project launched.

1946 The Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry.

1947 Britain announces the end of the Mandate and transfers the question of Palestine to the UN. The UN forms a special committee, UNSCOP, which recommends partition. This is approved by the United Nations’ General Assembly (Resolution 181).

1948 The ethnic cleansing of Palestine: British Mandate ends, the State of Israel declared and recognized by the United States and the USSR. Israel at war with troops entering Palestine from neighboring Arab countries while completing the expulsion of half of Palestine’s population, demolishing half of its villages, and emptying and destroying eleven of its twelve towns.

1949 UNGA Resolution 194 (calling for the return of the Palestinian refugees). Armistice agreements between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. Military rule is imposed on the remaining Palestinian citizens inside Israel, which will remain in place until 1966.

1950 The immigration of Jews from Arab countries begins.

1956 Israel joins Britain and France in a war against Egypt’s Nasser, occupying the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. The Kafr Qasim massacre.

1959 Wadi Salib riots (Mizrahi riots in Haifa protesting discrimination).

1963 The end of the Ben-Gurion era.

1967 The Six-Day War: Israel occupies the Sinai and the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank. UNSC Resolution 242 calls on Israel to withdraw from all occupied territories. Israeli settlement project in the West Bank and Gaza begins.

1973 The October War: Israel occupies part of Egypt proper and retains control of the Golan Heights after a bloody conflict that took the state by surprise.

1974 UN Security Council Resolution 338 reaffirms the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination and national independence.

1976 The Land Day Protests of the Palestinians in Israel against the Judaization of the Galilee.

1977 The Likud under Menachem Begin wins the national elections after thirty

years of Labor rule. President Anwar Sadat of Egypt visits Jerusalem and begins bilateral talks with Israel.

1978 Peace treaty signed between Israel and Egypt. PLO attack on Tel Aviv reciprocated by Operation "Litani"—Israel occupies part of southern Lebanon.

1981 Annexation of the Golan Heights to Israel.

1982 Sinai returned to Egypt. Operation "Peace for the Galilee" in which Israel invades Lebanon in an attempt to destroy the PLO.

1987 The First Palestinian Intifada.

1989 Collapse of the USSR and mass migration of Jews and non-Jews from across the Eastern Bloc to Israel.

1991 First Gulf War. US convenes international conference on Palestine in Madrid.

1992 Labor returns to power and Yitzhak Rabin becomes prime minister for the second time.

1993 The PLO and Israel sign the Oslo Declaration of Principles in the White House.

1994 The Palestinian National Authority is formed and Yasser Arafat, the PLO chairman, arrives in the occupied territories to become president of the PNA. Israel and Jordan sign peace treaty.

1995 Oslo II signed (interim agreement for Palestinian control of parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip). Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated.

1996 Likud returns to power and the first Benjamin Netanyahu government is formed.

1999 Labor's Ehud Barak elected as prime minister.

2000 Israel withdraws from southern Lebanon. The Second Intifada erupts.

2001 Ariel Sharon, head of the Likud, elected as prime minister. Later forms his own party (Kadima) and wins the 2005 elections.

2002 The West Bank Wall project is approved; implementation begins in 2003.

2005 Sharon re-elected. Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement is launched. Israel evacuates from Gaza settlements and military bases.

2006 Hamas wins the elections for the second Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Israel, the Middle East Quartet (United States, Russia, United Nations, and European Union), several Western states, and the Arab states impose sanctions on the Palestinian Authority, suspending all

	foreign aid. The siege on Gaza begins. Second Lebanon War and Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip.
2006	Ehud Olmert elected as prime minister (in February 2016 Olmert began a nineteen-month prison sentence for bribery and obstruction of justice).
2008	Gaza War— Operation "Cast Lead." The UN and human rights organizations count more than 1,400 Palestinian deaths, of which 926 were unarmed civilians. Three Israeli civilians were killed and six soldiers.
2009–13	Second Netanyahu Government.
2011	Social protest across Israel (The Tent Movement).
2012	Operation "Pillar of Cloud." Four Israeli civilians and two soldiers were killed in Palestinian rocket attacks. According to the UN, 174 Palestinians in total died, 107 of them civilians.
2013–15	Third Netanyahu Government.
2014	Operation "Protective Edge." According to the main estimates, between 2,125 and 2,310 Gazans were killed (1,492 civilians, including 551 children and 299 women), and between 10,626 and 10,895 were wounded (including 3,374 children, of whom over 1,000 were left permanently disabled). Sixty-six Israeli soldiers, five Israeli civilians (including one child), and one Thai civilian were killed, and 469 IDF soldiers and 261 Israeli civilians were injured. Israel destroyed about 17,000 homes, and partially destroyed 30,000.
2015	Fourth Netanyahu Government.

I would like to thank my friend Marcelo Svirsky for compiling this timeline.

Notes

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