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JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING



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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 90-97

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2537367>

Accessed: 22/09/2012 03:39

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A CRITIQUE OF BENNY MORRIS

NUR MASALHA

Since the publication in 1988 of *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Benny Morris has come to be seen as the ultimate authority on the Palestinian exodus of 1948. And indeed, his work has contributed to demolishing some of the long-held (at least in Israel and in the West) misconceptions surrounding Israel's birth. His newly published collection of essays, *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians*, revisits the ground covered in *Birth*, bringing to light new material he discovered or which became available only after completion of the first book.

Morris's work belongs to what he calls the "New Historiography." He does not like the term "revisionist" historiography, in part because it "con-jures up" images of the Revisionist Movement in Zionism, and thus causes "confusion." He further eschews the term because "Israel's old historians, by and large, were not really historians, and did not produce real history. In reality they were chroniclers, and often apologetic." (1948, p. 6) Morris examines this "old"—orthodox and official—historiography in the opening essay of his new volume, referring to the historians who produced it over three decades since 1948 as "less candid," "deceitful," and "misleading." (p. 2) As examples, he cites the accounts provided by Lieutenant-Colonel (ret.) Elhanan Orren, a former officer at the Israel Defense Force (IDF) History Branch, in his *Baderckh el Ha'ir* (On the Road to the City), a detailed account

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of Operation Dani, published by the IDF Press in 1976, and *Toldot Milhemet Hakomemiyut* (History of the War of Independence), produced by the General Staff/History Branch, as well as Ben-Gurion's own "histories" *Mideinat Yisrael Hamehudeshet* and *Behilahem Yisrael*. (pp. 2–5) The "new" histories, on the other hand, include the works of Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé, Simha Flapan, Uri Milstein, Michael Cohen, Anita Shapira, Uri Bar-Joseph, and others. (p. 8) Clearly those histories thoroughly demolished a variety of assumptions which formed the core of the "old" history. And although those who argue the case of "revisionism" are a fringe group in Israel, they are an important one.

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

Morris central thesis, as first expounded in *Birth*, is summed up in the following passage from his new collection:

What occurred in 1948 lies somewhere in between the Jewish "robber state" [i.e., a state which had "systematically and forcibly expelled the Arab population"] and the "Arab order" explanations. While from the mid-1930's most of the Yishuv's leaders, including Ben-Gurion, wanted to establish a Jewish state without an Arab minority, or with as small an Arab minority as possible, and supported a "transfer solution" to this minority problem, the Yishuv did not enter the 1948 War with a master plan for expelling the Arabs, nor did its political or military leaders ever adopt such a master plan. What happened was largely haphazard and a result of the War. There were Haganah/IDF expulsions of Arab communities, some of them at the initiative or with the *post facto* approval of the cabinet or the defense minister, and most with General Staff sanctions. . . . But there was no grand design, no blanket policy of expulsion. (p. 17)

In other words, only in "smaller part" were Haganah/IDF expulsions carried out and these were impromptu, ad hoc measures dictated by the military circumstances, a conclusion that deflects serious responsibility for the 1948 exodus from the Zionist leadership. But can his claim that there was no transfer design and expulsion policy in 1948 be sustained? Does the fact that there was no "master plan" for expelling the Palestinians absolve the Zionist

leadership of responsibility, given, *inter alia*, its campaign of psychological warfare (documented by Morris) designed to precipitate Arab evacuation? How can Morris be so categorical that there was no Israeli expulsion policy when his own work rests on carefully released partial documentation and when much of the Israeli files and documents relating to the subject are still classified and remain closed to researchers? Is it inconceivable that such a “transfer” policy was based on an understanding between Ben-Gurion and his lieutenants rather than on a blueprint? Morris himself writes in an article in *Ha’Aretz*, (entitled “The New History and the Old Propagandists,” 9 May 1989) in which he discusses the transfer notion and Ben-Gurion’s role in 1948: “One of the hallmarks of Ben Gurion’s greatness was that the man knew what to say and what not to say in certain circumstances; what is allowed to be recorded on paper and what is preferable to convey orally or in hint.” Ben-Gurion’s admiring biographer Michael Bar-Zohar states: “In internal discussions, in instructions to his men [in 1948] the Old Man [Ben-Gurion] demonstrated a clear position: It would be better that as few a number as possible of Arabs should remain in the territory of the [Jewish] state.” (Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion* [in Hebrew], vol. 2, p. 703)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ben-Gurion. . . understood that war changed everything; a different set of "rules" had come to apply. Land could and would be conquered and retained; there would be demographic changes. This approach emerged explicitly in Ben Gurion's address at the meeting of the Mapai Council on 7 February: Western Jerusalem's Arab districts had been evacuated and a similar permanent demographic change would be expected in much of the country as the war spread. (1948, pp. 39–40)

Other prominent Mapai leaders such as Eliahu Lulu (Hacarmeli), a Jerusalem branch leader, and Shlomo Lavi, an influential Kibbutz movement leader, echoed the same approach. In an internal debate at the Mapai Centre on 24 July 1948, held against the background of the expulsion of Lydda and Ramle, Shlomo Lavi stated that "the. . . transfer of Arabs out of the country in my eyes is one of the most just, moral and correct things that can be done. I have thought this. . . for many years." (1948, p. 43) Lavi's views were backed by another prominent Mapai leader, Avraham Katznelson: There is nothing "more moral, from the viewpoint of universal human ethics, than the emptying of the Jewish State of the Arabs and their transfer elsewhere. . . This requires the use of force." (1948, p. 44) Contrary to what Morris claims, there was nothing new about this approach of "forcible transfer," nor did it emerge out of the blue merely as a result of the outbreak of hostilities in 1948.

The Yishuv's leaders "obsessively" pursued transfer schemes from the mid-1930s onwards. Transfer Committees were set up by the Jewish Agency between 1937 and 1942 and a number of Zionist transfer schemes were formulated in secret. (A thorough discussion of these schemes will be found in my forthcoming book on the transfer concept.) Shortly after the publication of the Peel Commission report, which endorsed the transfer idea, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary (12 July 1937): "The compulsory transfer of the Arabs from the valleys of the proposed Jewish state could give us something which we never had. . . a Galilee free of Arab population." (Ben-Gurion, *Zichronot* vol. 4, 12 July 1937, pp. 297–99) Already in 1937, he believed that the Zionists could rid themselves of "old habits" and put pressure on the Mandatory authorities to carry out forced removal. "We have to stick to this conclusion," Ben-Gurion wrote,

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

Ben-Gurion went on to note: "We must prepare ourselves to carry out" the transfer. (ibid., p. 299) Ben-Gurion was also convinced that few, if any, of

the Palestinians would be willing to transfer themselves “voluntarily,” in which case the “compulsory” provisions would eventually have to be put into effect. In an important letter to his 16-year-old son Amos, dated 5 October 1937, Ben-Gurion wrote: “We must expel Arabs and take their places. . . and if we have to use force—not to dispossess the Arabs of the Negev and Transjordan, but to guarantee our own right to settle those places—when we have force at our disposal.” (Shabtai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs*. Oxford, 1985, p. 189) It is explicit in the letter of 5 October that the transfer had become clearly associated with expulsion in Ben-Gurion’s thinking. In reflecting on such expulsion and the eventual enlargement and breaking through of the Peel partition borders, Ben-Gurion used the language of force, increasingly counting on Zionist armed strength. He also predicted a decisive war in which the Palestinian Arabs aided by neighboring Arab states would be defeated by the Haganah. (ibid.) From the mid-1930s onwards he repeatedly stated his advocacy of transfer.

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

This transfer, even if it were to be carried out through compulsion—all moral enterprises are carried out through compulsion—will be justified in all senses. And if we negate all right to transfer, we would need to negate everything we have done until now: the transfer from Emek Hefer [Wadi al-Hawarith] to Beit Shean, from the Sharon [coastal plain] to Ephraem Mountains, etc. . . .the transfer. . . is a just, logical, moral, and humane programme in all senses.¹

During the same debate, Shlomo Lavi expressed a similar view: “The demand that the Arabs should move and evacuate the place for us, because they have sufficient place to move to. . . in itself is very just and very moral. . . .”² There were, of course, Zionist leaders who supported “voluntary” transfer, but to suggest as Morris does that the notion of “forcible transfer” is merely an “Arab contention” or that it was only in 1948 that Mapai leaders such as Ben-Gurion adopted the radical new approach of using force to transform Palestine’s demographic reality is a misrepresentation of the facts, of which Morris must be aware.

Is Morris’s conclusion that a Zionist transfer/expulsion policy was never formulated borne out by the evidence he adduces in *Birth* and in *1948*? In *Birth*, Morris describes how the Yishuv military establishment, presided over by Ben-Gurion, formulated in early March 1948 and began implementing in early April Plan Dalet in anticipation of Arab military operations. According to Morris, the essence of Plan Dalet “was the clearing of hostile and potentially hostile forces out of the interior of the prospective territory of the Jewish State. . . .As the Arab irregulars were based and quartered in the villages and as the militias of many villages were participating in the anti-Yishuv hostili-

ties, the Haganah regarded most of the villages as actively or potentially hostile.” (*Birth*, p. 62) Morris goes on to explain that Plan Dalet “constituted a strategic–ideological anchor and basis for expulsions by front, district, brigade and battalion commanders. . .and it gave commanders, *post facto*, a formal, persuasive covering note to explain their actions.” (*Birth*, p. 63) In 1948 (p. 21), Morris states:

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

He further notes: “if the denial of the right to return. . .was a form of ‘expulsion’, then a great many villagers—who had waited near their villages for the battle to die down before trying to return home—can be considered ‘expellees’.” (*Birth*, p. 343, note 7) Even if we do accept that Plan Dalet was not a political blueprint or a “master plan” for a blanket expulsion of the Arab population, and even if the plan “was governed by military considerations,” how can Morris square his own explanations with his conclusion that there existed no Haganah/IDF “plan” or policy decision to expel Arabs from the prospective Jewish state?

Furthermore, in the context of “decision-making” and “transfer” policy, Morris shows in his essay “Yosef Weitz and the Transfer Committees, 1948–49,” how Weitz, the Jewish National Fund executive in charge of land acquisition and its distribution among Jewish settlements and an ardent advocate of mass Arab transfer since the 1930s—he was on the Jewish Agency’s Transfer Committees between 1937 and 1942—“was well placed [in 1948] to shape and influence decision-making regarding the Arab population on the national level and to oversee the implementation of policy on the local level.” (1948, p. 91) From early 1948, Weitz began to exploit the conditions of war to expel Arab villagers and tenant-farmers, some of whom cultivated lands owned by Jewish institutions. He personally supervised many local evictions during the early months of war, frequently with the assistance of local Haganah commanders. (1948, pp. 92–98) Moreover, Morris explains:

Everyone, at every level of military and political decision-making, understood that a Jewish state without a large Arab minority would be stronger and more viable both militarily and politically. The tendency of local military commanders to “nudge” Palestinians into flight increased as the war went on. Jewish atrocities. . . (massacres of Arabs at Ad Dawayima, Eilaboun, Jish, Safsaf, Majd al Kurum, Hule (in Lebanon) Saliha, and Sasa, besides Dayr Yasin and Lydda and other places—also contributed significantly to the exodus. (1948, p. 22)

I cannot see how the above explanation regarding “decision-making” can be reconciled with Morris’s denial of a transfer policy. And does it matter in the end whether such a policy was actually formulated, or whether it was just *de*

facto and clearly understood at every level of military and political decision-making?

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

There is a feeling that *faits accomplis* are being created. . . the question is not whether the Arabs will return or not return. The question is whether the Arabs are [being or have been] expelled or not. . . This is important to our moral future. . . I want to know who is creating the facts? And the facts are being created on orders. . . [There appears to be] a line of action. . . of expropriation and of emptying the land of Arabs by force. (1948, pp. 42–43)

It is difficult, using Morris’s own evidence, not to see on the part of the leaders of mainstream labor Zionism a *de facto*, forcible transfer policy in 1948.

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

From the perspective of Morris's "new" historiography, there was no inherent link between the "transfer" of the Arabs and the acquisition of their lands on the one hand and Zionism's long-advocated imperative of accommodating millions of Jewish immigrants in the Jewish state on the other. The nearest thing he says which provides a hint regarding such a connection is the following:

The war afforded the Yishuv a historic opportunity to enlarge the Jewish state's borders and, as things turned out, to create a state without a very large Arab minority. The war would solve the Yishuv's problem of lack of land, which was necessary to properly absorb and settle the expected influx of Jewish immigrants. (1948, pp. 39-40)

Would Zionism have succeeded in fulfilling its imperative of absorbing the huge influx of Jewish immigrants while allowing the indigenous population to remain *in situ*? If not, could the Zionist objective of "transferring" the Arabs from Palestine have been carried out "voluntarily" and peacefully, without Arab resistance or the destruction of their society in 1948? Morris's findings constitute a landmark and are a remarkable contribution to our knowledge because they show that the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians was a result of direct attacks, fear of attacks, intimidation, psychological warfare (e.g., the whispering campaign), and sometimes outright expulsions ordered by the Haganah/IDF leadership. Yet a wider explanatory and theoretical framework within which the exodus can be properly understood must be sought elsewhere.

NOTES

1. 'Al Darchei Medinyotenu: Mo'atzah 'Olamit Shel Ihud Po'alei Tzion (c.s.), Din Vehisbon Male 21 July-7 August (1937) [A Full Report about the World Convention of Ihud Po'alei Tzion]. Tel Aviv, 1938, p. 122.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 100.