

Yes, Netanyahu, Let's Talk About Ethnic Cleansing

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Turning Israeli settlers into victims is the prime minister's most staggering act of chutzpah yet. The only mass ethnic cleansing that took place here was in 1948, when some 700,000 Arabs were forced to leave their lands.

Israel knows a thing or two about ethnic cleansing. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu knows a thing or two about propaganda. The video he posted on Friday proves both points. Here's the real thing — yet another record for Israeli chutzpah: The evacuation of settlers from the West Bank (which has never happened, and presumably never will) is ethnic cleansing.

Yes, the state that brought you the great cleansing of 1948 and that has never, deep in its heart, given up on the dream of cleansing, and that never stopped carrying out methodical micro-cleansings in the Jordan Valley, in the South Hebron Hills, in the area of Ma'aleh Adumim and in the Negev, too — that state calls the removal of settlers ethnic cleansing. That state compares the invaders of the occupied territories with the children of the land who clung onto their lands and homes.

Netanyahu proved once more that he is the real thing, the most authentic representative of the "Israeliness" that created reality for itself: Turning night into day, shamelessly and without any sense of guilt, without inhibition.

In Israel, many people, perhaps a majority, will buy these goods. The settlers of the Gaza Strip became "expellees," their removal "deportation." Not only is an aggressive and violent action — settlement — legitimate, but its agents are victims.

The Jews as victim. Always the Jews, only the Jews. An Israeli prime minister less brazen and arrogant than Netanyahu would not dare to utter the term "ethnic cleansing," given the plank in his own eye. Few propaganda campaigns would dare go so far. Yet occasionally, reality intrudes.

And the reality is razor-sharp. The only mass ethnic cleansing that took place here was in 1948. Some 700,000 human beings, the majority, were forced to leave their homes, their belongings, their villages and the land that had been theirs for centuries. Some were forcibly expelled, put on trucks and removed; some were intentionally frightened into fleeing; still

others fled, possibly unnecessarily. They were never allowed to return, save for a few, even if only to recover their belongings.

Being barred from returning was worse than the expulsion. It is what proved that the cleansing was intentional. Not a single Arab community remained between Jaffa and Gaza, and all the other areas are scarred with the remains of villages, the vestiges of life. That is ethnic cleansing — there's no other term for it. More than 400 villages and towns were wiped off the face of the earth, their ruins covered over by Jewish communities, forests and lies. The truth was concealed from Israeli Jews and the descendants of the deportees were forbidden to commemorate them — neither monument nor gravestone, to paraphrase Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

The number of settlers now exceeds the number of expellees. They invaded a land that was not theirs, with the support of successive Israeli governments and the opposition of the entire world, and they knew that their enterprise was built on ice. They and the Israeli governments not only crudely violated international law, which earns no respect in Israel. They also broke Israeli law, with the support of a subjugated judiciary.

Land theft is even a violation of the law practiced in Israel and the territories. When Israelis, and the world, began to become accustomed to this situation, to accept it as inevitable, along comes the prime minister and takes his chutzpah up one more level: The settlers are actually victims. Not the ones they expelled, not the ones they disinherited of their land. In the reality according to Netanyahu, the settlements that were built for the purpose of precluding arrangements with the Palestinians are not an obstacle, and he equates them with the she'erit haplita — the remnants of the Palestinians that remained in Israel, to borrow a term from the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Language can be twisted to any use, propaganda to any moral perversion. Farewell, reality, you're not relevant here anymore.