

The Real Naqba

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THREE WEEKS AGO was Naqba Day—the day on which Palestinians inside and outside Israel commemorate their “catastrophe”—the exodus of more than half of the Palestinian people from the territories occupied by Israel in the 1948 war.

Each side has its own version of this momentous event.

According to the Arab version, the Jews came from nowhere, attacked a peace-loving people and drove them out of their country.

According to the Zionist version, the Jews had accepted the United Nations compromise plan, but the Arabs had rejected it and started a bloody war, during which they were convinced by the Arab states to leave their homes in order to return with the victorious Arab armies.

Both these versions are utter nonsense—a mixture of propaganda, legend and hidden guilt feelings.

During the war I was a member of a mobile commando unit that was active all over the southern front. I was an eye-witness to what happened.

I wrote a book during the war (“In the fields of the Philistines”) and another one immediately afterwards (“The Other Side of the Coin”). They appeared in English together under the title “1948: A Soldier's Tale”. I also wrote a chapter about these events in the first half of my autobiography (“Optimistic”) that appeared in Hebrew last year. I shall try to describe what really happened.

FIRST OF ALL, we must beware of looking at 1948 through the eyes of 2015. Difficult as it may be, we must try to transport ourselves to the reality of then. Otherwise we shall be unable to understand what actually occurred.

The 1948 war was unique. It was the outcome of historical events which had no parallel anywhere. Without taking into account its historical, psychological, military and political background it is impossible to understand what happened. Neither the extermination of the Native Americans by the white settlers, nor the various colonial genocides resembled it.

The immediate cause was the November 1947 UN resolution to partition Palestine. It was rejected out of hand by the Arabs, who considered the Jews as foreign intruders. The Jewish side did accept it, but David Ben-Gurion later boasted that he had had no intention of being satisfied with the 1947 borders.

When the war started at the end of 1947, there were in British-governed Palestine about 1,250,000 Arabs and 635,000 Jews. They lived in close proximity but in separate neighborhoods in the towns (Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, Haifa), and next to each other in neighboring villages.

The 1948 war was actually two wars that blended into one. From December 1947 until May 1948 it was a war between the Arab and the Jewish population inside Palestine, from May until the armistices in early 1949 it was a war between the new Israeli army and the armies of the Arab countries—mainly Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

IN THE first and decisive phase, the Palestinian side was clearly superior in numbers. Arab villages dominated almost all highways, Jews could move only in hastily armored buses and with armed guards.

However, the Jewish side had a unified leadership under Ben-Gurion and organized a unified, disciplined military force, while the Palestinians were unable to set up a unified leadership and army. This proved decisive.

On both sides, there was no real difference between fighters and civilians. Arab villagers possessed rifles and pistols and rushed to the scene when a passing Jewish convoy was attacked. Most Jews were organized in the Haganah, the underground armed defense force. The two “terrorist” organizations, the Irgun and the Stern Group, also joined the unified force.

On both sides, everybody knew that this was an existential struggle.

On the Jewish side, the immediate task was to remove the Arab villages along the roads. That was the beginning of the Naqba.

From the start, atrocities cast a sinister shadow. We saw photos of Arabs parading in Jerusalem with the severed heads of our comrades. There were atrocities committed on our side, reaching a climax in the infamous Deir Yassin massacre. Deir Yassin, a neighborhood near Jerusalem, was attacked by an Irgun-Stern force, many of its male inhabitants were massacred, the women were paraded in Jewish Jerusalem. Incidents like these formed part of the atmosphere of existential struggle.

Throughout, this was a total ethnic struggle between two sides, each of which claimed the entire country as its exclusive homeland, denying the claims of the other side.

Long before the term “ethnic cleansing” was widely used, it was practiced throughout this war. Only a few Arabs remained in the territory conquered by the Jews, no Jews at all remained in the few areas conquered by the Arabs (the Etzion Bloc, the Old City of Jerusalem.)

With the approach of May and the expectation that the Arab armies would enter the conflict, the Jewish side tried to create a zone from which all non-Jewish inhabitants were removed.

It must be understood that the Arab refugees did not “leave the country”. When their village was shot at (generally at night), they took their families and escaped to the next village, which then came under fire, and so on. In the end they found an armistice border between them and their home.

THE PALESTINIAN exodus was not a straightforward process. It changed from month to month, from place to place and from situation to situation.

For example: the population of Lod was induced to flee by shooting at them indiscriminately. When Safed was conquered, according to the commander “we did not drive them out, we only opened a corridor for them to flee”.

Before Nazareth was occupied, the local leaders signed a surrender document and the townspeople were guaranteed life and property. The Jewish commander, a Canadian officer named Dunkelmann, was then verbally ordered to drive them out. He refused and demanded a written order, which never came. Because of that, Nazareth is an Arab town today.

When Jaffa was conquered, most inhabitants fled by sea to Gaza. Those who remained after the surrender were loaded onto trucks and sent on their way to Gaza, too.

While much of the expulsion was dictated by military necessity, there certainly was an unconscious, semi-conscious or conscious wish to get the Arab population out. It was “in the blood” of the Zionist movement. Indeed, long before the founder, Theodor Herzl, even thought

about Palestine, when writing the initial draft of his groundbreaking book “Der Judenstaat”, he proposed founding his Jewish State in Patagonia (Argentina), and proposed inducing all the native inhabitants to leave.

After the Arab armies entered the war in May, the Egyptians were stopped 22 km from Tel Aviv. A month-long cease-fire was decreed by the UN, and used by the Israeli side to equip itself for the first time with heavy arms (artillery, tanks, air force) sold them by Stalin. In the very heavy fighting in July, the balance shifted and the Israeli side slowly gained the upper hand.

From then on, a political—as distinguished from military—decision was taken to remove the Arab population. Units were ordered to shoot on sight every Arab who tried to return to their village.

The decisive moment came at the end of the war, when it was decided not to allow the refugees to return to their homes. There was no official decision. The idea did not even come up. Masses of Jewish refugees from Europe, survivors of the Holocaust, flooded the country and filled the places left by the Arabs.

The Zionist leadership was certain that within a generation or two the refugees would be forgotten. That did not happen.

IT should be remembered that all this happened only a few years after the mass expulsion of the Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Baltic states, which was accepted as natural.

Like a Greek tragedy, the Naqba was conditioned by the character of all the participants, victimizer and victim.

Any solution of the “problem” must start with an unequivocal apology by Israel for its part in the Naqba.

The practical solution must include at least a symbolic return of an agreed number of refugees to Israeli territory, a resettlement of the majority in the State of Palestine when it comes into being, and generous compensation to those who choose to stay where they are or emigrate elsewhere.