

Uprooting Trust : Collective Disillusionment Among  
Palestinian Refugees

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**TRUSTING THE OCCUPIER**

*“As a result of several superfluous [Haganah] operations which mainly hurt ‘good’ Arabs who were in contact with us. . . the [Arab] mass exodus from all places was continuing. The Arabs have simply lost their faith. [in our goodwill?].”*

-Senior member of the Jewish Agency Political Department Ezra Danin

The three year anniversary of the most recent Palestinian uprising, known to the Arab world as the second Intifada has resulted in the destruction of an estimated 1162 homes and left 40,115 Palestinians homeless (MIFTAH, 2003). Such consequences of military occupation have been the case for Palestinians, and indeed other oppressed peoples for decades. Yet the experience of Palestinians is unique among groups in the refugee community. While the UNHCR calls for the repatriation of a displaced people at the end of a conflict, the Palestinians are denied this right, and at nearly 3,000,000 people, they are one of the largest (save Afghans), and certainly the longest running refugee populations in history. And this number is increasing daily, as provocations and retaliations stir the bloody brew that is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The following is an

attempt to show the establishment of trust, and lack thereof, as well as the betrayals that have decorated Palestinian consciousness from the late 1940's, to the present day, and consequently precipitated the flight of refugees. These issues of trust and mistrust will include but not be limited to the fledgling Israeli government and military, local and foreign Arab powers, and the international community. Finally, an examination of the effect of these cases on the psyche of Palestinian refugees will show the gradual rebuilding of trust, albeit a communal trust among refugees, which ironically serves to prolong their plight.

At the time of the Balfour Declaration Palestine consisted of a 6% Jewish minority. The Declaration call for “the establishment in Palestine of a national homeland for the Jewish people” was based on the ideals of modern Zionism , fathered by Theodore Herzl (Kazak, 2003). The nature of these principles planted seeds of distrust in the educated populace of Palestine at a critically early juncture in Arab-Jewish relations. Arab suspicions included, according to Israeli historian Benny Morris, that the Yishuv<sup>1</sup> was “bent on expansionism and, ultimately partial or complete displacement” (Morris, 1998 p. 23). In the Jewish camp, David Ben-Gurion validated these fears saying “after we constitute a large force following the establishment of the state- we will cancel the partition of the country [between Jews and Arabs] and we will expand throughout the land of Israel.” (Morris, p. 24) His sentiments were echoed by Yosef Weitz<sup>2</sup> who stated: “There is no room in this country for both peoples...if the Arabs leave it, the country will become wide and spacious for us....there is no way but to transfer the Arabs” (Morris, p.

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<sup>1</sup> Israel's earliest governing body

<sup>2</sup> director of Jewish National Fund's key Land's Department and a major settlement executive

27). Thus, it was under these fundamental principles, that a lasting peace and two state solution was rooted, and conflict erupted.

The UN partition plan, endorsed on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1947 called for a two state partition. Israel immediately began a policy of expulsion of Arabs from the area partitioned for the Jewish state, (and later as we shall see the Arab state as well). Arab resistance took root. The Israeli military then consisted of three main factions, the Haganah, the IZL, and the LHI. The motives and tactics were similar at all levels of the Israeli military command, to intimidate the local populations into flight. In the words of Dr. Jeff Halper, professor of Anthropology at Ben-Gurion University, “The bottom line [was] to make life so difficult for the Palestinians that anyone who want[ed] a future for their children, anyone who want[ed] to get ahead, anyone who want[ed] a normal life, [would] leave” (Occupation 101, 2003). The tactics were quicker and more effective than anyone in the Jewish camp had anticipated, but they greeted the Arab exodus with jubilation, Yosef Weitz, “I think this [flight prone] state of mind [among the Arabs] should be exploited, and [we should] press the other inhabitants not to surrender [but to leave].” (Morris, p. 92). Indeed it was out of “fear of Jewish attack” (Morris, p.53) that increasingly large numbers of villages and communities fled, as IDL commanders put it, “the Arabs live in great fear of our ‘barbarity’ and it would take little inducement to persuade them to abandon their lands” (Morris, p. 248). Before the end of the conflict the “army” was responsible for 34 massacres (Kazak), the most ruthless of which occurred at Deir Yassin, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, and Ad Dawayima on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October<sup>3</sup>. Israeli officials

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<sup>3</sup> Deir Yassin was a non-belligerent village which was taken by IZL and LHI forces. Cases of slaughter, rape and mutilation were confirmed along with 250 civilian deaths (Morris, 113). Ad Dawayima, near Hebron was the site where according to a soldier eye-witness of the Israeli Mapam party, children were killed “by breaking their heads with sticks. There was not a house without dead.” And “One commander

made clear “there was no possibility of distinguishing between good Arabs and bad Arabs” (Morris, p. 41). Those who fled were met with “shots fired over their heads to speed them on their way” (Morris, p. 102), and for those who surrendered, the best case scenario was martial law and curfew, but in most cases the inhabitants of the villages were expelled (Morris, 1998). Attempts by Arabs to gain the trust of the Israeli military were futile, as was the case for the Caesara Arabs who “had done all in their power in order to keep the peace in their village and around it” and were subsequently conquered and expelled (Morris, p. 54). These moves by the army were the core of Plan Dalet<sup>4</sup>. The aggression however was not simply a security issue, it was aimed at expansion as sentiments pouring out of Tel Aviv confirmed: “Even if a certain backwash is unavoidable, we must make the most of the momentous chance with which history has presented us so swiftly and unexpectedly” (Morris, p. 140).

No single event in the history of the conflict served to develop mistrust as did Israel’s stance on refugees. Following the expulsion of some 78% of the Palestinian population (Kazak) the army pushed forward claiming settlements “on territory earmarked in the 1947 United Nations Partition resolution for the Palestinian Arab state. (Morris, p. 179). The refugees who were promised by the Haganah that “Jewish settlements would safeguard their property and allow them to return home after the war” (Morris, 119) were met later with vehement outcries by Israeli officials that “The abandoned lands will never return to their absentee owners...come hell or high-water”

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ordered a sapper to put two women in a certain house...and then blow up the house with them” Cases of rape and mutilation were also common (Morris, 222-223). In both cases a few witnesses were spared, and given the order to go to nearby towns and tell their fellow Arabs what happened, and that the Jews were coming (Kazak)

<sup>4</sup> an initiative to secure all borders of the Jewish state and begin fortifications for an expected invasion by Arab armies at the termination of the British Mandate, which was to be terminated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1948.

(Morris, 179, 277). Meanwhile, as the refugees lived in squalor in camps or on the road, Jewish immigrants flowed into Palestine to take up their former residences and possessions. In an address in 1961 Martin Buber<sup>5</sup> refers to “miserable Arab refugees, in whose towns we have settled from afar; whose homes we have inherited, whose fields we now sow and harvest; the fruit of whose gardens orchards and vineyards we gather; and whose cities we robbed...” (Lilienthal, 1978 p.168) In Arab discourse this robbery is known as “al Naqba” or ‘the catastrophe’ (Kazak). War in 1967 resulted in the occupation of the remaining 22% of Palestine and an additional 325,000 refugees.

### **ARAB DISSENSION AND MISTRUST**

As I have established, the uprooting of villages and systematic decimation of Palestinian resistance resulted in the refugee crisis. But to a large extent, Arab disunity played into the hands of the Israeli military during this phase. As Benny Morris comments, the presence of hostilities within Arab regional localities afforded the Haganah the capacity to “fight and overrun one area after another without having to face a coordinated multi-regional defense” (Morris). These animosities were the result of a “wide gulf of suspicion between urban and rural Arab Palestine”, which stemmed from Arab societal structure (Morris)<sup>6</sup>. As these suspicions were the norm pre-1948, when the war did break out, villages, fell easily and their populations were routinely expelled.

As the conflict progressed, no attempt was made at any level to establish a unified Arab resistance or national sentiment. Rather than mobilizing, political opponents waged war on one another, resulting eventually of the elimination of the Opposition

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<sup>5</sup> Jewish Philosopher

<sup>6</sup> Rural Palestine was sectioned off into villages, composed of familial clans, from which loyalties were based. Villages were, for the most part, individual entities, controlled mainly by the urban elite.

party, and the subsequent flight of its proponents, namely upper and middle class families.<sup>7</sup> Under military attack it was not uncommon of Arab leaders to desert the village they were defending, as Dr. Husayn Khalidi, of the AHC<sup>8</sup> reflects “Everyone is leaving me. Six [AHC] members are in Cairo, 2 are in Damascus. I won’t be able to hold on much longer” (Morris, 51). The AHC failed to extend a helping hand or offer arms to defenseless villages, and the ALA<sup>9</sup> had no scruples in their treatment of villagers. British observers noted “The locals are getting fed up with the Liberation Army....the officers of the ALA treat the locals like dirt.”<sup>10</sup> The consensus opinion emerged that “the Arabs were weak and the Jews were very strong” which led to “a steady erosion of confidence in Arab military power” (Morris, 59). Indeed, the Arabs were in many ways more afraid of their own leaders than of the Jews.

The neighboring Arab world was largely apathetic to the Palestinian predicament and did little to help their cause in the early going. Throughout the war, Arab masses were pouring out of Palestine and into Syria, Jordan and Egypt. As this was the norm, what was happening in Palestine was not lost to the leaders of the country, indeed, they were fully aware of the situation. Truth be told, “for weeks, the Arab world did nothing to react to the evacuation” (Morris, 65). The AHC and Arab neighbors began using the refugees as political pawns. Rather than supply the villages with arms, the AHC allowed the exodus to increase in magnitude. By the same token, Arab states welcomed the exodus as a propaganda tool for their planned invasion of Palestine. Meanwhile, Jordan’s

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<sup>7</sup> Palestinian political structure at the time was governed by two families, the Husayni’s and the Nashashibi’s; the former backing an entirely Arab state in Palestine, the latter supporting a moderate line and two state solution (Morris).

<sup>8</sup> Arab High Commission

<sup>9</sup> Arab Liberation Army

<sup>10</sup> These claims are substantiated by several reports from the field in which officers robbed looted and raped villagers. (Morris)

King Abdullah was involved in a political war with the Husaynis. As Morris illustrates “...King Abdullah....wanted to frustrate the Husyani’s plans for a Palestinian government and sought to avert an ALA victory in Safad...” (Morris, 105). Jordan and Syria absorbed the refugees in hopes of receiving international relief aid, and it was in Egypt’s interest for the refugees to remain a sticking point, as this could weaken Jordan and Israel (Morris).

Attitudes changed however, when in late April, the numbers of refugees and the loss of land reached enormous proportions. Palestinians were given conflicting orders. The AHC threatened villagers with their lives if they did not stay. While the Mufti<sup>11</sup> ordered villagers to flee and wait for Arab intervention (Morris). Faced with late and contradictory orders from their leaders and fear of massacre from the approaching army, the people went followed the trend of the time: exodus.

### **FAILURE OF THE UN AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

*“The failure of more than 600 Security Council and General Assembly resolutions to secure their inalienable rights has left the vast majority of Palestinians embittered and disillusioned”*

-Dr. Daud Abdullah, Senior Researcher for the Palestinian Return Center

Both the hope that the United Nations would execute justice and later, the hope that the international community would intervene proved fruitless. From the outset, the newly formed UN did little to gain the trust of the Palestinians. The UN partition plan of 1947 itself was a slap in the face to Palestinians. The plan called for the designation of

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<sup>11</sup> head of Husayni political party



56.47% of Palestine's best cultivated land and cities for the Jewish minority, and the remaining 42% of the land to the Palestinian majority population, in itself, this proposal was contrary to UN practice as it is unlawful to partition a land against the wishes of the majority population (UN, 2003).

Aside from resolutions 194, 242, and 338 (the most important) Israel stands in defiance of 65 UN resolutions (Findley, 2003). In 1949, the UN Mediator for Palestine issued a decree that Israel "recognize the right of return of residents of Palestine", Israel however responded curtly, declining the request and suggesting rather arrogantly that Bernadotte reconsider his approach (Morris, 142). Annoyed by repeated UN declarations, Israel began to use threats, hinting at mistreatment of any refugees she was forced to accept. Given Israel's record, the UN was forced to take this threat as a certainty.<sup>12</sup> The Israeli government held Yigael Yadin's (General Staff Member) opinion that "we must say with all cruelty: the refugee problem is no concern of the Land of Israel" (Morris, 261). The cycle of demand and refusal carried over to the creation of the PCC (Palestine Conciliation Commission), where member Mark Ethridge<sup>13</sup> commented "only American pressure could facilitate a solution" (Morris, 262). But while the Americans were quick to display dissatisfaction,<sup>14</sup> officials stopped short of any action against the Israeli government. Strategists were keen on the importance of Israel as a Middle East ally, and lobby pressure was paralyzing as is indicated by Turkish PCC representative Yalcin, "[US] diplomatists and officials seemed [not] to have the courage to tell the truth about

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<sup>12</sup> Following the Israel-Egypt Armistice Agreement, Israel promptly violated its terms and displaced 3,000 inhabitants from Faluja. In other instances, the army was ordered to fire on returning refugees. (Morris)

<sup>13</sup> Appointed by US President Harry S. Truman

<sup>14</sup> President Harry S. Truman "The U.S. Government does not. . . regard the present attitude of the Israeli government as being consistent with the principles upon which U.S. support [of Israel] has been based (Morris, 265)

the Jews unless they were in sight of retirement” (Morris, 260). On separate occasions Senator Paul Findley and Admiral Thomas Moorer reacted to Americas refusal to act against Israeli wishes<sup>15</sup>

To silence the international community, Israel embarked on a massive propaganda campaign. In Nazareth, Israeli forces completely changed their policy of expulsion and treatment of inhabitants because of the significance of the city to Christians and the place of the city in the international spotlight. (Morris). Further propaganda was “enabled by a concerted slant in Israeli-Western narratives equating Palestinians with terrorists...” (Siddiq, 1995 p.99). An illustration and confirmation of this view is the August 13th coverage by American media of a recent episode in the Second Intifada.<sup>16</sup> In the interim, Palestinians watched as the world “bought into Israel’s propaganda and applauded her valiant effort on behalf of Jewish ‘refugees’ (Siddiq, 96). As far as the international community was concerned, the Palestinians had been the aggressor in the war, seeking to prolong the plight of the Jews.

Current trends in Arab-Israeli relations have deepened the trust rift. Although negotiations at present call for a Palestinian state by 2005 and international aid for its development, Baseem Eid<sup>17</sup> reports “No amount of money will restore the trust that has been lost. That would take decades” (Radin, 2002). Sharon, a known war criminal

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<sup>15</sup> Moorer “I’ve never seen a President --I don't care who he is-- stand up to them [the Israelis]. It just boggles your mind. They always get what they want. The Israelis know what's going on all the time. I got to the point where I wasn't writing anything down. If the American people understood what grip those people have on our government, they would rise up in arms. Our citizens don't have any idea what goes on.” (Hurley, 1999 p.124). And Findley: “The Israeli prime minister has a lot more influence over the Foreign policy of the United States in the Middle East than he does in his own country.” (Findley, 2003 p. 92)

<sup>16</sup> CNN headlines “Bombs Shatter Mideast Calm” neglecting to mention the bombings were a retaliation for an incursion by the Israeli army which resulted in the death of 4 Palestinians and 6 human rights violations, thus breaking the ceasefire. (MIFTAH, 2003)

<sup>17</sup> Director of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group

(Lerner, 2001)<sup>18</sup> has done nothing to restore trust. Perversely, his government has continued incursions such as the one on the Jenin refugee camp<sup>19</sup>. Arafat, the sworn leader of the Palestinians has bobbed his power and betrayed his people.<sup>20</sup> The Oslo accords, better known as “the most tragic hopeless ‘peace’ in modern Middle East history” (Fisk, 2000),<sup>21</sup> were greeted with umbrage. Viewing the texts of the Oslo accords, it is evident why Annat Kurz labeled the “Oslo process was generated by mutual fatigue...it was exhaustion, and not the consolidation of mutual trust...” that led to the final agreements (Kurz, 1998). As a result of Oslo, any new peace deals, such as the recent “roadmap” is viewed with skepticism by the population. (Nimer, 2003 p. 24). It seems also, according to Ilan Pappé, that the issue of refugees is being cut out of many peace proposals (Pappé, 2000). Furthermore, Israel violated their obligations under the accord, effectively doubling their settlements and withdrawing from only 18.5% of the land (which they later re-occupied) (Kazak).

### **COMMUNAL TRUST AND DESPAIR: REFUGEE PERCEPTIONS**

It is a rather pessimistic outlook to say that trust is nonexistent in the Palestinian state of affairs. Ironically, it the very place where mistrust was rooted, that trust has evolved: the refugee camp. The late Edward Said points out “..Arab nationalism hasn’t

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<sup>18</sup> Israel continued its aggression throughout the 80’s dotted with episodes of mass violence such as the Sabra and Shatila massacres perpetrated by general and now prime minister Ariel Sharon.

<sup>19</sup> Shortly after election, Sharon’s government sponsored an incursion into Jenin<sup>19</sup>, a refugee camp which leveled the entire area ridding it of the majority of its 13,000-15,000 inhabitants (Guntzel, 2002 p.17).

<sup>20</sup> Money (\$20 million) provided to Arafat by the EU to provide cheap housing for the Palestinians, was used to finance luxury apartments for his supporters (Davis, Kuttler 1998)

<sup>21</sup> The OSLO accords essentially cut the West Bank and Gaza into 16 fragments and gave Yasir Arafat and his PA “control” over the areas. The idea is that Arafat can only act under Israel’s interest. “Palestinians are to be given only strictly limited powers in order to use this power on Israel’s behalf” Thus Israel maintains control over the areas without having to expend manpower. Furthermore, Israel is no longer responsible for the living conditions in those areas. (Shahak, 1993)

died, but has all too often resolved itself into smaller and smaller units” (Shami, 1996, p.12). The collective experience of refugees within the camps fostered a trust and a commonality of history and purpose (Peteet, 1995). Take for instance the description by Muna Hamzeh of the Dheisheh camp in Bethlehem.

*“Our refugee camp is so quiet this morning...A few kids in my alley were playing a war game; throwing pebbles at each other and firing toy guns. A few other kids were playing soccer with a flat soccer ball. Poor kids! The loud volume of radio’s and TV’s emanated from the open windows and blended in with the smell of ripe tomatoes, boiled rice and fresh baked bread, the sweet smells that give the camp such a homey feeling...the feeling that we are all one big family” (Hamzeh, 2001 p.9)*

Ingrid Gassner, director of the BADIL resource center, writes of mobilization of refugees to fight for their own rights, a peaceful grass-roots activism that is taking shape, and as Gassner defines it: “initiatives ‘by refugees for refugees’, i.e. the evolution of refugees as a political category distinct from the Palestinian non-refugee population.

But the cumulative effect of the past 55 years has reached its peak, sentiments pouring out of the Dheisheh camp declare “It is either our death or our liberation, there is no third way. We don’t want a third way” (Hamzeh, 12). Arabs complain of having tried Arab Nationalism, only to be invaded in the 1950’s, and the UN to no avail. They feel they have simply become slaves of Israel. (Sarraj, 1996). Drawing on the emotions of Muna Hamzeh we see the collective effect of all levels of mistrust on the refugee psyche. On Israel’s aggression, “What are you going to do? Bomb us some more? Re-occupy us?

Deport us? Imprison us? Demolish our homes? What can you possibly do that previous Israeli leaders haven't already done to us in the past 52 years?" (Hamzeh, 27). On Arab neighbors, "No one here is counting on the Arab regimes to take any action...If they wanted to take action....then they could have responded by closing all Israeli embassies, trade offices....they could have stopped pumping oil to the West" (Hamzeh, 19). On international hypocrisy and negligence "Can you imagine the US and Britain bombing Tel-Aviv like they've bombed Baghdad? Can you imagine sanctions against the government of Jerusalem?" (Hamzeh, 21). And finally on the PA and Oslo, "They [Palestinians] are fed up with Palestinian Authorities corruption; with the shameful 'so-called' peace agreements that have turned this place into an apartheid state" (Hamzeh, 4). It is in this context that we understand the ultimate source of trust of the refugees: guerilla warfare. "No one here counts on the Arab regimes, but they know, with their eyes closed, that they can count on Hizbullah to masterfully plan an operation and then carry it out. "No one wants agreements for a ceasefire. Ceasefires are reached between fighting armies, and we are not an army. We are civilians who are fed up with the occupation of our land. We want to continue with the fight to the end" (Hamzeh, 12).

However, it is precisely this attitude that Israel uses in its own conceptions of trust and mistrust. Namely, how can Israel make peace with guerilla warfare at large? In this way, Israel legitimizes their occupation of the land which escalates the already volatile situation. Take for example this statement by Ben Gurion, "Let us not ignore the truth among ourselves...politically we are the aggressors and they defend themselves. The country is theirs, because they inhabit it, whereas we want to come here and settle down, and in their view we want to take away from them their country...Behind the terrorism

[By the Arabs] is a movement, which though primitive, is not devoid of idealism and self-sacrifice” (Chomsky, 1999, pp. 91-92). In light of this, why hasn’t Israel accepted peace, notably those offered in 1968 or 1988?<sup>22</sup> Ali Kazak Palestinian ambassador to Vanuatu went so far as to provide a simple equation... SECURITY = PEACE = JUSTICE.

The preceding has illustrated the breakdown of trust among Palestinian refugees and the institutions that failed them. The trust that once existed is gone. The road to trust is no longer an option, it diverged long ago. Re-establishing trust is as simple as compliance with internationally accepted UN resolutions. But without this, refugees will trust in guerillas, the only entity to ever fight for their [the refugees] rights.

*“Show me where in history did a people stop dreaming and grappling for independence and freedom?”*

-Muna Hamzeh

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<sup>22</sup> 1968 calling for a “democratic, secular non-sectarian state” and again in 1988 in a peace proposal by the PLO offering a two state solution with the only demands being adherence to UN Resolutions 242 and 338<sup>22</sup> (Kazak)

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