

Introduction

Palestinian Refugees and Politics

by Howard Adelman

This special issue is devoted to a retrospective study of the Palestinians as refugees during the first years following their flight. Reflecting the common Western wisdom of the period, it focusses on the attempts to deal with the Palestinian problem as a refugee issue.

Since 1967, a dramatic shift in perspective has taken place in which the Palestinians increasingly came to be viewed as a political nationalist movement; the status and situation of the Palestinians as refugees shifted into the background. The fact is that the Palestinian national movement predates 1967, and even predates 1947, as Ben-Gurion recognized as early as the 1920s. The refugee issue emerged in 1948, and the failure to resolve that issue has been an important factor in perpetuating the struggle between Jewish and Palestinian nationalism.

Normally, most journals, and certainly all issues of *Middle East Focus*, begin with feature articles and place book reviews at the end. In this special edition we have reversed the order. For in focussing on the refugee issue, we did not want to ignore the larger political questions. So we have begun with three long reviews of books which allow us to place the refugee issue within the overall political context.

The review of the book by Teveth provides an historical overview of the Palestinian nationalist issue from the point of view of Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel and one of the most important figures in Zionist development. Teveth's book makes clear

that the slim opportunity for parity with the Palestinian nationalist movement was rejected by the Zionists in 1936 because it would have meant minority status and domination by the Arabs. This, in turn, would have prevented Palestine from serving as a homeland for Jewish refugees fleeing Europe.

Abadi's book looks at the British role in the immediate post-war period and its withdrawal from the Middle East. He argues that withdrawal was a rational decision given Britain's evolving military strategy and the economic crisis. Britain considered that a second option - Britain itself introducing partition - would have been very costly in money and manpower because Britain, given its continued presence in the Middle East and, specifically, its relations with Jordan, would need to enforce that partition. Britain's third option of handing the mandate over to the United States would not have been acceptable to the United States or to the British who were loath to admit the decline in the prestige and status of Britain in the Middle East.

Whether Abadi is correct or not in his interpretation of the motives for Britain's withdrawal of its troops and political authority (and we think he is wrong, for we agree with William Roger Louis that the military and political withdrawal from Palestine were moves to facilitate *remaining* in the Middle East, in particular in Palestine via Jordan, as an economic imperialist without the costs of military coercive imperialism), the

fact is that British withdrawal set the stage for the conflict to be settled one way or another directly between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. The Jews and Arabs then garnered whatever superpower or internationalist support they could to reinforce their side.

Shmuel Sandler and Hillel Frisch's book provides a political perspective on the forces working to weaken Palestinian nationalism since 1948 as effected by the different policies of the Labour and Likud parties, the Jordanian government, and the political leadership of Palestinian nationalism vested in the PLO. It also points to the necessity of understanding how the centering of a nationalist movement in a diaspora refugee community colours that movement's strategy and tactics.

Against this background, we have assembled a series of articles addressing the situation of the Palestinians as refugees. As is true of any refugee population, there are three and only three possible resolutions to the refugee situation: (1) repatriation to the country from which the refugees originated; (2) settlement in the adjacent countries to which they fled; and (3) resettlement in third countries.

Varda Shiffer's article on Israel's offer to repatriate 100,000 Palestinian refugees makes it clear that the offer was initially part of a trade-off for territorial gains - and, incidentally, one which would have seriously compromised the Labour Zionist strategy of creating a state which had an overwhelming major-

ity of Jews. The offer indicates that when a choice between territory and homogeneity arose, the Labour Zionists were prone to choose territory.

The offer was made in response to American pressure. It seriously qualified the policy enunciated earlier that Israel would not repatriate any refugees. Since the Arabs had rejected partition and invaded Israel, Israel could not tolerate the development of a nationality which could act as a fifth column within the nascent state. This position, incidentally, was moderate considering post-war attitudes in general to minorities regarded as inimical to the existence of the state where they resided. Wholesale expulsion had been sanctioned by the allies at Potsdam, who endorsed the eviction of approximately 12 million Volkdeutsche from Eastern Europe resulting in some 75,000 to 100,000 deaths.

As Varda Shiffer makes clear, the rationale was the same as the one in post-war Europe – the needs for future peace, stability and security (and not guilt or, as in the case of Europe, vengeance or some other psychological factor), coupled with the need and costs of settling its own nationals. Varda Shiffer could also have mentioned the rationale of population exchange on the model of the arrangements between Turks and Greeks in the 1920s. But her account makes it clear that this was not part of the rationale or thinking of the Eurocentred Zionist leadership of 1948-49, perhaps because the largest movement of Jews from Arab lands did not take place until 1950-51.

The fact is there was no real interest in or possibility of repatriating Arab refugees in any significant numbers. Ironically, 80,000 were repatriated through a family reunification program and illegal infiltration, though Israel received no credit for this.

Another possible resolution of the refugee situation is resettlement in third countries. We had intended to include an article on this possibility, but it would have been very, very brief. It would have consisted of a few accounts such as the very skeptical request by the British to the Australians to

resettle five Palestinian refugee families. The Australian rejection was followed by subsequent rejections from the other Dominions. The racist, Euro-centred immigration policies of the main countries of resettlement, the Western democracies, did not make resettlement abroad a viable option at the time, though for a very short time a very limited number of refugees did go abroad to Canada, Australia, the United States, Latin America and North Africa. Even this very limited, officially-sponsored movement was stopped when the Arab states opposed UNRWA's promotion and facilitation of emigration, offering the rationale that this was contrary to the intent of the UN Resolution of December 11, 1948.

The third option for the Palestinian refugees was settlement in the Arab countries where the Palestinians shared a common language, culture, and, for the most part, religion with the host population. As Varda Shiffer notes in passing, the United States saw settlement in the Arab countries as the only real solution to the problem for the bulk of the Palestinian refugees, even though it pressured Israel to repatriate a significant number.

If the United States pushed Israel on repatriation while accepting the reality of settlement in the Arab countries as the only viable outcome, Britain, according to Ilan Pappé, continued to play a spoiler role, for the bulk of the refugees were in territory controlled and governed by Jordan. Resettlement in Jordan would have been both costly to Britain as the patron and Britain feared it would lead to the Palestinization of Jordan. If Pappé is correct about British policy, the economic integration of and granting of citizenship to the Palestinian Arabs in Jordan was done not with the support and backing of Britain, but in spite of its advice. Though Britain also regarded repatriation as impossible, it did not actively foster resettlement in the Dominions. Instead, Britain supported U.S. efforts to settle the refugees in underpopulated Syria and Iraq at U.S. expense, while the U.S. pressured Israel to repatriate the balance.

What Pappé also points out and Avi Shlaim documents in a

detailed case study of Syria's Husni Zaim is that for a period Arab countries were open to resettlement of Arab refugees as full citizens (as Jordan, in fact, allowed). This belies the myth that from the beginning the Arab governments refused to allow resettlement of the refugees, and only used them as political pawns for their own interests. But the solution to a refugee problem requires speed, otherwise the situation ossifies and the problem of the refugees becomes intractable.

The concept of economic integration was seen as a side route to achieve such a settlement, financed by U.S.-funded development projects. The U.S., in its initial naive entry into the Middle East, bracketed the political questions and believed (since refugees participating in works projects were to acquire the nationality of the host country) that the economic route would produce the same outcome.

It did not, of course. Further, the failure to attend to the fundamental question of citizenship and the political future of the refugees was a key factor in sabotaging regional economic development given the link between development projects and resettlement. The humanitarian solution required a political solution of some type, just as political failure had produced the refugees in the first place. What is more significant, the internationalization of the problem – whatever the motives – led to removing responsibility for the Arab refugees from the Arab countries which initially had accepted that responsibility. Once done, it has never been reversed. Further, this move subsequently undermined the economic development approach to the refugee problem, as Pappé makes clear, rendering even quick economic integration a forlorn hope. Once short-term relief and works became the cover for economic reintegration, which was in turn the cover for resettlement, the whole idea of resettlement became two steps rather than just one step removed from the only solution possible at the time. As Pappé shows, the pity is that everyone who studied the issue – including American members of the Economic Survey Mission – knew

the whole idea was doomed.

The type of humanitarian solution adopted decreased the chances of arriving at a political solution. Taking full financial and operational responsibility for the economic needs of the refugees, rather than simply supplementing Arab efforts with international funding, and, then, totally separating any political solution from the humanitarian effort, meant that those with responsibility had no authority or influence to effect an outcome, while those who had the authority abrogated responsibility.

Economic and humanitarian approaches do not solve political problems. Humanitarian and economic efforts become less useful and - in the case of the Palestinians - work to the long-term detriment of the refugees if and when they interfere with efforts to reach a political solution. More importantly, they only contribute to a solution of the refugee's dilemma if the political status of the refugee has been resolved. It was not in the case of the Palestinians. We live with that legacy today.

with Weizmann for the first time in opposing a public declaration of support of the parity option before the Peel Commission in 1936. Ben-Gurion offered a three-pronged justification for his opposition: as a negotiating tactic with the British; lest the Arabs reject it simply because the Zionists proposed it; and to retain unity among the Zionists whose right wing elements opposed parity. But to Flapan, "it was not only these tactical considerations that prompted Ben-Gurion to oppose a declaration on parity", but it was "a manoeuvre in the struggle for leadership that Ben-Gurion was to repeat in subsequent years" (emphasis mine, p. 147). Teveth's book sets the tactical shifts within the context of the need to rationalize and justify the Zionist quest while all the time advancing the cause by the creation of "facts", compelled now by events in Germany and Poland. The consistent and prevailing motive was the salvation of the Jewish people.

This book is, however, not about creating facts or the motivation for doing so, but about the rationalization. How does a small minority, a very small minority, justify and rationalize its nationalistic aspirations to a land already inhabited by an Arab majority? What tactics correspond to that rationalization as the minority grows in strength and influence to eventually wrest control of that land from the majority of inhabitants who had been living there for years?

We are not talking only of Arabs. In 1907, the Zionist pioneers constituted only 1% of the *Yishuv* of 55,000 overwhelmingly anti-Zionist religious Jews, who, in turn, constituted less than 10% of the population of Palestine. A very small minority of the Jews in Palestine, who were in turn a small minority of the population, achieved success in less than 50 years. Most minorities seeking national liberation are much larger in proportional numbers and generally constitute the majority population in one part of a territory in which they seek self-determination. The Jewish Zionists enjoyed neither of these advantages. How did they succeed?

REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES

The Tactics of Expediency

Shabtai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs: From Peace to War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 234.

- Howard Adelman

Simha Flapan in his 1979 book, *Zionism and the Palestinians*, noted that "little attention has been paid specifically to the Palestinian component of the (Arab-Israeli) problem", yet "it was specifically the Palestinian issue which played the decisive role in the failure to resolve the ... conflict." (p. 11) For Flapan, this was consistent with the Zionist attitude, in general "initiated by Weizmann and carried out by Ben-Gurion", which ignored the existence of a Palestinian people and nationalism. Teveth's book belies Flapan's charge (as does Flapan's own writing), and demonstrates that Ben-Gurion only ignored Palestinian nationalism in his first phase before the British mandate period,

and then, subsequently, adopted three different tactics for dealing with that nationalism: domination, co-operation and negotiation, and then conflict. Teveth does confirm Flapan's earlier charge that these were just tactical moves within Ben-Gurion's larger Zionist goals and strategic methods.

The central difference between Teveth and Flapan is that Flapan interprets Ben-Gurion's tactical shifts as coloured and ultimately shaped by a thirst for personal political power, while Teveth interprets the motivation as pragmatic shifts to achieve the Labour Zionist aims - an ideological rather than a personal goal. As an example, in the phase of co-operation and negotiation, Ben-Gurion split