

NAKBA, WHERE PALESTINIAN VICTIM MYTHOLOGY BEGAN

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On Wednesday, “Nakba Day” was commemorated around the world with even more vehemence than usual as outpourings of hatred against Israel, sprinkled with ample doses of anti-Semitism, issued from screaming crowds.

What was entirely missing was any historical perspective on the Nakba – that is, the displacement, mainly through voluntary flight, of Palestinians from mandatory Palestine. Stripped out of its broader context, the event was invested with a uniqueness that distorts the processes that caused it and its contemporary significance.

It is, to begin with, important to understand that the displacement of Palestinians was only one facet of the sweeping population movements caused by the collapse of the great European land empires. At the heart of that process was the unravelling of the Ottoman Empire, which started with the Greek war of independence in 1821 and accelerated during subsequent decades.

As the empire teetered, religious conflicts exploded, forcing entire communities to leave. Following the Crimean War of 1854-56, earlier flows of Muslims out of Russia and its border territories became a flood, with as many as 900,000 people fleeing the Caucasus and Crimea regions for Ottoman territory. The successive Balkan wars and then World War I gave that flood torrential force as more than two million people left or were expelled from their ancestral homes and sought refuge among their co-religionists.

The transfers reshaped the population geography of the entire Middle East, with domino effects that affected virtually every one of the region’s ethnic and religious groups.

The formation of new nation-states out of what had been the Ottoman Empire then led to further rearrangements, with many of those states passing highly restrictive nationality laws in an attempt to secure ethnic and religious homogeneity.

Nothing more starkly symbolised that quest for homogeneity than the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations signed on January 30, 1923. This was the first agreement that made movement mandatory: with only a few exceptions, all the Christians living in the newly established Turkish state were to be deported to Greece, while all of Greece’s Muslims were to be deported to Turkey. The agreement, reached under the auspices of the League of Nations, also specified that the populations being transferred would lose their original nationality along with any right to return, instead being resettled in the new homeland.

Underlying the transfer was the conviction, articulated by French prime minister (and foreign minister) Raymond Poincare, that “the mixture of populations of different races and religions has been the main cause of troubles and of war”, and that the “unmixing of peoples” would “remove one of the greatest menaces to peace”.

That the forced population transfers, which affected about 1.5 million people, imposed enormous suffering is beyond doubt. But they were generally viewed as a success. Despite considerable

difficulties, the transferred populations became integrated into the fabric of the recipient communities – at least partly because they had no other option. At the same time, relations between Turkey and Greece improved immensely, with the Ankara Agreements of 1930 inaugurating a long period of relative stability.

The result was to give large-scale, permanent population movements, planned or unplanned, a marked degree of legitimacy.

Thus, the formation of what became the Irish Republic was accompanied by the flight of Protestants to England and Northern Ireland, eventually more than halving, into an insignificant minority, the Protestant share of the Irish state's population; that was viewed as easing the tensions that had so embittered the Irish civil war.

It is therefore unsurprising that further “unmixing” was seen by the allies in World War II as vital to ensuring peace in the post-war world. In a statement later echoed by Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill made this explicit in 1944, telling the House of Commons he was “not alarmed by the prospect of the disentanglement of populations, nor even by these large transferences, which are more possible in modern conditions than they ever were before”.

The immediate effect, endorsed as part of the Potsdam Agreements and implemented as soon as the war ended, was the brutal expulsion from central and eastern Europe of 12 million ethnic Germans whose families had lived in those regions for centuries. Stripped of their nationality and possessions, then forcibly deported to a war-devastated Germany, the refugees – who received very little by way of assistance – gradually merged into German society, though the scars took decades to heal.

Even more traumatic was the movement in 1947 of 18 million people between India and the newly formed state of Pakistan.

As Indian novelist Alok Bhalla put it, India's declaration of independence triggered the subcontinent's sudden descent into “a bestial world of hatred, rage, self-interest and frenzy”, with Lord Ismay, who witnessed the process, later writing that “the frontier between India and Pakistan was to see more tragedy than any frontier conceived before or since”. Yet in the subcontinent too, and especially in India, the integration of refugees proceeded to the point where little now separates their descendants from those of the native born.

All that formed the context in which the planned partition of Palestine was to occur. The 1937 Peel Commission, which initially proposed partition, had recommended a mandatory population exchange but the entire issue was ignored in UN Resolution 181 that was supposed to govern the creation of the two new states.

When a majority of the UN General Assembly endorsed that resolution on November 29, 1947, the major Zionist forces reluctantly accepted the proposed partition, despite it being vastly unfavourable to them. But the Arab states not only rejected the plan, they launched what the Arab League described as “a war of extermination” whose aim was to “erase (Palestine's Jewish population) from the face of the earth”. Nor did the fighting give any reason to doubt that was the Arabs' goal.

At least until late May 1948, Jewish prisoners were invariably slaughtered. In one instance, 77 Jewish civilians were burned alive after a medical convey was captured; in another, soldiers who had surrendered were castrated before being shot; in yet another, death came by public decapitation. And even after the Arab armies declared they would abide by the Geneva Convention, Jewish prisoners were

regularly murdered on the spot.

While those atrocities continued a longstanding pattern of barbarism, they also reflected the conviction that unrestrained terror would “push the Jews into the sea”, as Izzedin Shawa, who represented the Arab High Committee, put it.

A crucial element of that strategy was to use civilian militias in the territory’s 450 Arab villages to ambush, encircle and destroy Jewish forces, as they did in the conflict’s first three months.

It was to reduce that risk that the Haganah – the predecessor of the Israel Defence Force – adopted the Dalet plan in March 1948 that ordered the evacuation of those “hostile” Arab villages, notably in the surrounds of Jerusalem, that posed a direct threat of encirclement. The implementation of its criteria for clearing villages was inevitably imperfect, but the Dalet plan neither sought nor was the primary cause of the massive outflow of Arab refugees that was well under way before it came into effect.

Nor was the scale of the outflow much influenced by the massacres committed by Irgun and Lehi – small Jewish militias that had broken away from the Haganah – which did not loom large in a prolonged, extremely violent, conflict that also displaced a very high proportion of the Jewish population.

Rather, three factors were mainly involved. First, the Muslim authorities, led by the rector of Cairo’s Al Azhar Mosque, instructed the faithful to “temporarily leave the territory, so that our warriors can freely undertake their task of extermination”.

Second, believing that the war would be short-lived and that they could soon return without having to incur its risks, the Arab elites fled immediately, leaving the Arab population leaderless, disoriented and demoralised, especially once the Jewish forces gained the upper hand.

Third and last, as Benny Morris, a harsh critic of Israel, stresses in his widely cited study of the Palestinian exodus, “knowing what the Arabs had done to the Jews, the Arabs were terrified the Jews would, once they could, do it to them”.

Seen in that perspective, the exodus was little different from the fear-ridden flights of civilians discussed above. There was, however, one immensely significant difference: having precipitated the creation of a pool of 700,000 Palestinian refugees, the Arab states refused to absorb them.

Rather, they used their clout in the UN to establish the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, which became a bloated, grant-funded bureaucracy whose survival depended on endlessly perpetuating the Palestinians’ refugee status.

In entrenching the problem, the UN was merely doing the bidding of the Arab states, which increasingly relied on the issue of Palestine to convert popular anger at their abject failures into rage against Israel and the West. Terminally corrupt, manifestly incapable of economic and social development, the Arab kleptocracies elevated Jew-hatred into the opium of the people – and empowered the Islamist fanaticism that has wreaked so much harm worldwide.

Nor did it end there. Fanning the flames of anti-Semitism, the Arab states proceeded to expel, or force the departure of, 800,000 Jews who had lived in the Arab lands for millennia, taking away their nationality, expropriating their assets and forbidding them from ever returning to the place of their birth. Those Jews were, however painfully, integrated into Israel; the Palestinian refugees, in contrast, remained isolated, subsisting mainly on welfare, rejected by countries that claimed to be their greatest

friends. Thus was born the myth of the Nakba.

That vast population movements have inflicted enormous costs on those who have been ousted from their homes is undeniable. Nor have the tragedies ended: without a murmur from the Arab states, 400,000 Palestinians were expelled from Kuwait after the first Gulf war, in retaliation for the Palestine Liberation Organisation's support of Saddam Hussein. More recently, Myanmar has expelled 1.2 million Rohingya.

But the greatest tragedy associated with the plight of the Palestinians is not the loss of a homeland; over the past century, that has been the fate of tens of millions. Rather, it is the refusal to look forward rather than always looking back, an attitude encapsulated in the slogan "from the river to the sea".

That has suited the Arab leaders, but it has condemned ordinary Palestinians to endless misery and perpetual war. Until that changes, the future will be a constant repetition of a blood-soaked past.