

ERASURES

THREE FOUNDATIONAL MYTHS underlie Israeli culture to this day. These are the ‘negation of exile’ (*shelilat ha-galut*), the ‘return to the land of Israel’ (*ha-shiva le-Eretz Yisrael*), and the ‘return to history’ (*ha-shiva la-historia*). They are inextricably intertwined in the master-narrative of Zionism, the story that explains ‘how we got to where we are and where we should go henceforth’. The negation of exile establishes a continuity between an ancient past, in which there existed Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel, and a present that renews it in the resettlement of Palestine. Between the two lies no more than a kind of interminable interim. Depreciation of the period of exile is shared by all Zionists, if with differing degrees of rigidity, and derives from what is, in their outlook, an uncontested presupposition: from time immemorial, the Jews constituted a territorial nation. It follows that a non-territorial existence must be abnormal, incomplete and inauthentic. In and of itself, as a historical experience, exile is devoid of significance. Although it may have given rise to cultural achievements of moment, exile could not by definition have been a wholesome realization of the nation’s *Geist*. So long as they were condemned to it, Jews—whether as individuals or communities—could lead at best a partial and transitory existence, waiting for the redemption of ‘ascent’ (*aliyah*) once again to the land of Israel, the only site on which the nation’s destiny could be fulfilled. Within this mythical framework, exilic Jews always lived provisionally, as potential or proto-Zionists, longing ‘to return’ to the land of Israel.¹

Here the second foundational myth complements the first. In Zionist terminology, the recovery by the people of its home promised to deliver the *normalization* of Jewish existence; and the site designated for the re-enactment of Exodus would be the territory of the Biblical story, as elaborated in the Protestant culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. Zionist ideology defined this land as *empty*. This did not mean Zionist leaders and settlers were ignorant of the presence of Arabs in Palestine, or mulishly ignored them. Israel was ‘empty’ in a deeper sense. For the land, too, was condemned to an exile as long as there was no Jewish sovereignty over it: it lacked any meaningful or authentic history, awaiting redemption with the return of the Jews. The best-known Zionist slogan, ‘a land without a people to a people without a land’, expressed a twofold denial: of the historical experience both of the Jews in exile, and of Palestine without Jewish sovereignty. Of course, since the land was not literally empty, its recovery required the establishment of the equivalent of a colonial hierarchy—sanctioned by Biblical authority—of its historic custodians over such intruders as might remain after the return. Jewish settlers were to be accorded exclusive privileges deriving from the Pentateuch, and Palestinian Arabs treated as part of the natural environment. In the *macho* Hebrew culture of modern times, to know a woman, in the Biblical sense, and to know the land became virtually interchangeable as terms of possession. The Zionist settlers were collective subjects who acted, and the native Palestinians became objects acted upon.

The third foundational myth, the ‘return to history’, reveals, more than any other, the extent to which Zionist ideology was underpinned by the emergence of Romantic nationalism and German historicism in nineteenth-century Europe. Its premise is that the natural and irreducible form of human collectivity is the nation. From the dawn of history peoples have been grouped into such units, and though they might at one time or another be undermined by internal divisions or oppressed by external forces, they are eventually bound to find political self-expression in the shape of sovereign nation-states. The nation is the autonomous historical subject *par excellence*, and the state is the *telos* of its march toward self-fulfillment. According to this logic, so long as they were

¹ This article is based on part of a longer essay, entitled ‘Can The Subaltern Remember? A Pessimistic View of the Victims of Zionism’, to appear in a volume edited by Ussama Makdisi and Paul Silberstein on memory and violence in the Middle East and North Africa. My definition of the foundational myths is obviously critical. It is informed by Boas Evron, *National Reckoning* [Hebrew], 1986; Yitzhak Laor, *Narratives with no Natives: Essays on Israeli Literature* [Hebrew], 1995; David Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past*, Oxford 1995; Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, ‘Exile within Sovereignty’ [Hebrew], 2 parts, *Theory and Criticism*, 4, 1993, pp. 23–56 and 5, 1994, pp. 113–32; see also my ‘Domestic Orientalism’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 23, 1996, pp. 125–45.

exiles, the Jews remained a community outside history, within which all European nations dwelt. Only nations that occupy the soil of their homeland, and establish political sovereignty over it, are capable of shaping their own destiny and so entering history by this logic. The return of the Jewish nation to the land of Israel, overcoming its docile passivity in exile, could alone allow it to rejoin the history of civilized peoples.

Cleansing Palestine

Metaphorically empty, factually inhabited by Arabs, how was Palestine 'emptied' to enable the creation of Israel? Recently, long overdue controversies have broken out over the origins of the present state, prompted by the work of historians who are not committed to its founding myths. This is a welcome development: much hallowed mystification has been cleared away. But there is a danger that debate could become too narrowly focused on the single issue of whether or not there was an Israeli master plan to effect a comprehensive expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs from their homes in 1948.² The moral pressure behind this obsessive question is understandable, and should be respected. But it is also true that it takes for granted that what matters is the framework of the perpetrators, not the perspective of the victims. The existence or otherwise of an explicit Zionist intention to unleash ethnic cleansing, under cover of war, poses problems that Israelis certainly need to confront. But to Palestinians who lost their homes, their goods, their rights and their identities, it matters little whether the disaster that befell them resulted from decisions taken by military commanders and local bureaucrats on the spot, or from an implicit understanding that this was the wish of the Zionist political leadership, or through a diffuse atmosphere and ideology that treated massive expulsions as desirable—or any combination of the above. What counted for the Arabs driven off their lands was the fact of their dispossession and transformation into

² The literature on this question is substantial. For notable examples, see Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, ed., *The Transformation of Palestine*, Evanston 1971; Christopher Hitchens and Edward Said, eds, *Blaming the Victims*, Verso: London and New York 1988; Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–49*, Cambridge 1987 and *1948 and After*, Oxford 1990; Yigal Elam, *The Executors* [Hebrew], 1990, pp. 31–53; Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought 1882–1948*, Washington, DC 1992, and 'A Critique of Benny Morris', in Ilan Pappé, ed., *The Israel/Palestine Question*, London 1999, pp. 211–20. For a recent and qualitative addition, see Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds, *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, Cambridge 2001.

refugees. Retrospective rituals of bad conscience risk becoming luxuries that only the victor can afford, without consequence for the victims who have had to live with the results.

The reality is that the eventuality of massive expulsions was inherent in the nature of Zionist colonization in Palestine long before war broke out in 1948. Consideration of notions of population ‘transfer’ ceased to be just an abstract idea after the report of the Peel Commission in the late 1930s. After all, as Zeev Sternhell correctly observes, Zionism was in many ways a typical example of the ‘organic’—as distinct from ‘civic’—nationalism of Central and Eastern Europe.³ This kind was feral in its demand for ethnic homogeneity, ruling out from the beginning any possibility of the Zionist movement accepting a bi-national state in Palestine. Given the demography of Palestine in 1947, the establishment of a Jewish state inexorably required the removal of Palestinians from their farms and towns. However, the form that this ‘population transfer’ was to take did not need a premeditated plan of expulsion by the Israeli government (as distinct from the calculation of individual officials and bureaucratic agencies). Rather, the crucial decision was *to prevent Palestinian Arabs at all costs from returning to their homes*, regardless of the circumstances in which they had ‘left’ them, and no matter how plainly their ‘departure’ had been envisaged as a temporary move made under duress, in the midst of war. There were, of course, deliberate and massive expulsions. The infamous Operation Danny of July 10–14, 1948, which resulted in a massacre at Lydda and the forcible transfer of the entire population of the townships of Ramlah and Lydda—ten miles south-east of Tel Aviv—to Jordan, is a well-known case in point.⁴ But the really crucial decision, which was fully conscious and explicit, was to make sure that the collapse of the Palestinian community that unfolded under the pressures of all-out war between Israel and the Arab states would be irreversible.

For what followed, we are indebted to outstanding recent research by Haya Bombaji-Sasportas of Ben-Gurion University in the Negev.⁵ In April 1948,

³ Zeev Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel*, Princeton 1998, pp. 3–47.

⁴ Morris, *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, pp. 203–12.

⁵ Haya Bombaji-Sasportas, ‘Whose Voice is Heard/Whose Voice is Silenced: the Construction of the Palestinian Refugee Problem in the Israeli Establishment, 1948–52’, unpublished MA thesis, 2000. I am deeply grateful to the author for making the documents available to me.

Haifa fell to an Israeli assault. In June, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett—a darling of Israeli ‘moderates’ to this day—said to his colleagues:

To my mind this is the most surprising thing: the emptying of the country by the Arab community. In the history of the land of Israel this is more surprising than the establishment of the Hebrew State itself . . . This has happened amidst a war that the Arab nation declared against us, because the Arabs fled of their own accord—and their departure is one of those revolutionary changes after which history does not revert to its previous course, as we see from the outcome of the war between Greece and Turkey. We should be willing to pay for land. This does not mean that we should buy holdings from each and every [Arab]. We shall receive assets and land, which can be used to help settle Arabs in other countries. *But they do not return. And this is our policy: they do not return.*⁶

A day before, in a letter to an important official in the Jewish Agency, Sharett defined the emptying of the land of its Arab inhabitants as ‘a wonderful thing in the history of the country and in a sense even more wonderful than the establishment of the State of Israel.’⁷

‘Retroactive transfer’

Bureaucrats everywhere have particular ways of thought and forms of expression, which sometimes produce chillingly apt terms. Yosef Weitz, the director of the Jewish National Fund’s Lands Department, and one of the most relentless proponents of transfer, serves as an outstanding example. As early as May 28, 1948, when he headed the semi-official three-member Transfer Committee, he noted in his diary a meeting with Sharett. On this occasion, Weitz asked Sharett whether he thought orderly action should be taken to ensure that the flight of Arabs from the war zone was an irreversible fact, and described the aim of such action as a ‘retroactive transfer’ (*transfer be-di ‘avad*). Sharett said yes.⁸

Weitz’s term underlay the confidential discourse of Israeli officials and politicians of the time. Probably from the seizure of Haifa, and with increasing intensity and ferocity during the autumn of 1948, Palestinian territories conquered by Israeli arms were voided of Arabs, without

⁶ Elam, *The Executors*, p. 31; emphasis added.

⁷ Elam, *The Executors*, p. 43.

⁸ See Morris, *1948 and After*, pp. 89–144.

a master plan being needed to remove them. There was a range of ways in which the land became 'Arabless': flight of the wealthy; temporary escape of civilians from areas under threat of heavy fighting; encouragement of panic by Israeli military violence, terror and propaganda; and full-fledged expulsion.⁹ What is amply documented and demonstrable is the cold deliberation of the policy of 'retroactive transfer' which issued from these movements. This was the fundamental decision that was systematized, bureaucratized and legalized in the 1950s, with far-reaching consequences for both Palestinians and Jews, within Israel and without. To this day, what structurally defines the nature of the Israeli state is the return of Jews and the non-return of Arabs to Palestine. If this dynamic of return/non-return were to disappear, the Zionist state would lose its identity.

Official narratives

The physical implementation of the policy of non-return meant the brutal wartime demolition of occupied villages, and in some cases of urban neighbourhoods; the confiscation of lands and properties; the settlement of Jews in places rendered Arab-free. The results were completed with systematic legal measures in the 1950s, affecting both refugees outside Israel and those within, whom the state defined as its (second-class) citizens. But the erasure of Arab existence in Palestine was not just physical. It was also discursive. A group of officials in command of what was considered expert knowledge of 'the Arab question' was responsible for this side of the operation. It comprised two distinct types of functionary. One had come through the foreign-policy department of the Jewish Agency or the intelligence unit of Haganah, in the pre-state period. These could speak Arabic, had experience of dealing with Arabs, took pride in being field-experts, and were known as Arabists (*Arabistim*). The other contingent were the better educated products of European—mostly German—universities, and/or the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; they knew written Arabic (*fusha*), believed they had a wider and deeper understanding of the enemy than their field counterparts, and were known as Orientalists (*mizrahanim*). Once the state was established, most of them held posts in its intelligence machinery, or in the research and Middle

⁹ See especially Morris's careful attempt to classify each and every case on which he could gather information, in the maps, appendix and invaluable index to the maps, in Morris, *Birth*, pp. ix–xx.

East departments of the Foreign Office, or were advisers on 'Arab affairs' to the Prime Minister.¹⁰

After the war, an early key move of this apparatus was to define the plight of Palestinian refugees as a 'humanitarian' issue tied inextricably to an overall resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict, in the full knowledge that such a resolution would not be forthcoming. Bombaji-Sasportas correctly observes that this strategy was instrumental in cancelling the subjectivity of the victims of Israeli expansion: ignoring their identity, memory and aspirations in favour of a deliberately constructed Gordian knot that has been accepted as a fact of life ever since by Israeli scholarship, whether mainstream or critical.¹¹ In his own way, Asher Goren—an official in the Israeli Foreign Office—also noticed this. In a memorandum of September 27, 1948, summarizing the refugee problem, he concluded, after reiterating that it was pendant on the conflict with the Arab states as a whole: 'The compromise-seekers [among Arab statesmen] want return [of the refugees to their homes]. The warmongers object to it. The will of the refugees is unknown nor does anyone ask them.'¹²

It was the semi-official Transfer Committee headed by Weitz, which submitted its first report in November 1948, that formulated what would later become the official Israeli narrative of the 'refugee problem'.¹³ The Committee's main function was to execute and oversee the policy of non-return by systematic demolition and erasure of Palestinian villages and neighbourhoods, and then the systematic seizure of land and property owned by Palestinians. The report was a massive document containing much detailed information on the Palestinians and the activities of the Committee. Its textual purpose was to enforce the conclusion, laid out with every appearance of authority and objectivity, that the only solution for the refugees was their resettlement in Arab countries. In

¹⁰ See Bombaji-Sasportas, 'Whose Voice is Heard', pp. 17–22; Joel Beinin, 'Know Thy Enemy, Know Thy Ally', in Ilan Pappé, ed., *Arabs and Jews during the Mandate* [Hebrew], 1995, pp. 179–201; Gil Eyal, 'Between East and West: The Discourse on "the Arab Village" in Israel' [Hebrew], *Theory and Criticism*, 3, 1993, pp. 39–55; Dan Rabinovich, *Anthropology and the Palestinians* [Hebrew], 1998.

¹¹ Bombaji-Sasportas, 'Whose Voice is Heard', pp. 31–3.

¹² Israeli State Archives/Foreign Office/Corpus of the Minister and Director General 19–2444, vol. II, p. 6: henceforth SA/FO/CMDG.

¹³ SA/FO/CMDG, 3/2445. This particular file contains documents of the period August–November 1948, including the report of the Transfer Committee, so named by Weitz.

hindsight this report may be seen as the Ur-text of all Israeli discourse—academic, bureaucratic, political—on the fate of ‘those who left’, at least until the publication of Benny Morris’s work in the 1980s and 1990s. It supplied the account that became the standard version of history for propaganda and foreign-policy purposes.

The narrative was fraudulent, and there is reason to believe that it was consciously fraudulent.¹⁴ Its burden was that the Palestinians themselves, their leaders, and accomplices in the Arab states bore sole responsibility for the creation of the ‘refugee problem’. The Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, had advised the Palestinians to leave their homes in order to return with the victorious Arab armies, and claim not only their property but also that of the defeated Jews. It was therefore the responsibility of the Arab states to see that the refugees were resettled there—not just because they had incited their displacement but also because it was a ‘scientific fact’ that Arab societies were now the only appropriate home for such people, since the map of Palestine had been transformed and Israel had its hands full with the absorption of Jewish refugees driven out of the Arab world.

The disappearance of Shaykh Mu’nis

A logical concomitant of this schema was a sustained campaign to wipe out any traces of the Palestinian past on conquered soil. A striking example of how this policy worked in practice is offered by the recent memoir of Zvi Yavetz, Professor Emeritus of Roman History, a founder of Tel Aviv University and a powerful kingmaker in its Faculty of Humanities for three decades. Reminiscing about his role in the early negotiations with academics, politicians and bureaucrats to set up the university, he describes how a decision was taken to move the nascent campus from provisional quarters in the heart of Tel Aviv to Shaykh Mu’nis.¹⁵ It so happens that Golda Meir (then Myerson) also mentioned Shaykh Mu’nis, in early May 1948—just after the fall of Haifa. Speaking to the Central Committee of Mapai, she said she wished to raise the question of

¹⁴ Comparison between the official narrative and the confidential papers of the period strongly suggest deliberate deceit; Yaacov Shimoi, a high-ranking functionary of the time, admitted in 1989 that a ‘fraudulent version’ had been concocted. See Elam, *The Executors*, endnote 17, pp. 48–9.

¹⁵ Zvi Yavetz, ‘On the First Days of Tel Aviv University: Memories’, *Alpayim*, 11, 1995, pp. 101–29.

what was to be done with locations that had become substantially Arab-less. A distinction, she told her colleagues, should be drawn between 'hostile' and 'friendly' villages. 'What do we do with the villages that were deserted . . . without a battle by [Arab] friends?' she asked. 'Are we willing to preserve these villages so that their inhabitants may return, or do we wish to erase any trace [*limhok kol zekher*] that there was a village in a given place?'¹⁶ Meir's answer was unequivocal. It was unthinkable to treat villages 'like Shaykh Mu'nis', which had fled because they did not want to fight the Yishuv, in the way that hostile villages had been treated—ie, subjected to 'retroactive transfer'.

But the inhabitants of Shaykh Mu'nis did not gain much from their classification as 'friendly'. Until late March 1948, the leaders of this large village north of Tel Aviv had prevented Arab irregulars from entering it, and even loosely collaborated with the Haganah. Then, however, the Irgun abducted five of the village notables. Thereupon the population fled *en masse*, and Shaykh Mu'nis literally vanished—a disappearance confirmed three months later by IDF intelligence. Golda Meir's seemingly poignant question in early May, in other words, was asked in the full knowledge that it had ceased to exist at the end of March—a typical soul-searching in the manner of Labour Zionism: crocodile tears over a *fait accompli*. What was once Shaykh Mu'nis became part of an affluent neighbourhood in northern Tel Aviv, which took the name of Ramat Aviv. There, in the 1960s, the University of Tel Aviv was built on the site where Shaykh Mu'nis had been less than twenty years before. Yavetz, a well-known 'leftist' veteran of the war of 1948, not to say an eminent historian, utters not a word of this. Shaykh Mu'nis was no longer there, and for thirty years it could not be remembered. But eventually there was one twisted, colonial exception. In the 1990s, as the university grew larger and wealthier, a luxurious VIP club was built on the campus, called the Green House. Its architecture is an Orientalist Israeli version of an 'Arab mansion', and its location is the hill where the house of the *mukhtar* of Shaykh Mu'nis once stood (it is a VIP club, after all). The information on the site's past, and who owned it, may be found in the menu of the Green House.

From the start, Israeli officials were well aware of the significance of memory and the need to erase it. Repression of what had been done

¹⁶ See Morris, *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, p. 133. The translation of Meir's words is mine, from the 1991 Hebrew edition of Morris's book, p. 185.

to create the state was essential among the Jews themselves. It was still more important to eradicate remembrance among Palestinians. Shamai Kahane composed one of the most striking documents of the official campaign to this end. A high-ranking functionary in the Foreign Office, Kahane served as personal and diplomatic secretary to Sharett in 1953–54, and was instrumental in the creation of the huge bureaucratic archive known as ‘Operation Refugee File’.¹⁷ On March 7, 1951, he made a proposal to the Acting Director of the Middle East Department of the Foreign Office, Divon. Here is the text of his memorandum:

PROPAGANDA AMONG THE REFUGEES IN ORDER TO SOBER THEM
FROM ILLUSIONS OF RETURN TO ISRAEL

You should be efficiently assisted by propaganda of photos that would very tangibly illustrate to them [the refugees] that they have nowhere to return. The refugees fancifully imagine that their homes, furniture and belongings are intact, and they only need to return and reclaim them. Their eyes must be opened to see that their homes have been demolished, their property has been lost, and Jews who are not at all willing to give them up have seized their places. All this can be conveyed in an indirect way that would not provoke feelings of vengeance unnecessarily, but would show reality as it is, however bitter and cruel.

Ways of infiltrating such material: a brochure or a series of articles accompanied by photos published in Israel or abroad, in a limited circulation that would not make waves in the non-Arab world, but would find its way to Arab journalists who by prearrangement would bring the pertinent materials within it to the notice of the refugees. Another way: to print the photos with appropriate headings (the headings are what matters!) in a brochure that was supposedly published in one of the Arab countries. The photographic material should draw a contrast between Arab villages in the past and how they look today, after the war and the settlement of Jews in the abandoned sites. These photos ought to prove that the Jewish settlers found everything in ruins and have put a great deal of work into restoring the deserted villages, that they tie their future to these places, look after them and are not at all willing to give them up.

There is a certain risk in this proposal, but I think that its benefits would be greater than any damage it could do, and we should consider very carefully how to carry it out efficiently.¹⁸

Kahane’s memorandum is a faithful illustration of the ruthless state of mind of the Israeli establishment as it set out to transform the

¹⁷ For more details on Shamai Kahane, see Bombaji-Sasportas, ‘Whose Voice is Heard’, pp. 100, 119 and 163–8.

¹⁸ SA/FO/CMDG 18/2402.

consciousness and memory of its victims. It can be seen as a preamble to a thorough report on every imaginable aspect of 'the refugee problem' that Kahane prepared later that year, with an eye to the activities of the UN Appeasement Committee and a conference it was sponsoring in Paris.¹⁹ This is a remarkable document in a number of ways: evidence of how swiftly the Arab heritage of Palestine had become a transient episode in the official mind; and of how completely any return by the refugees was now presented as an objective impossibility, rather than as an eventuality that the state itself was resolved at any cost to block. Reaffirming the familiar thesis that Arabs were the culprits of their own displacement, Kahane revealed the extent to which Palestine had already become Arab-less for him. 'Nationally', he wrote, 'the growth of an Arab minority will hinder the development of the state of Israel as a homogeneous state.' Repatriation, he added altruistically, would be a misfortune for the refugees themselves:

If the refugees had returned to Israel they would have found themselves in a country whose economic, social and political structures differed from those of the country they left behind. The cities and most of the deserted Arab villages have since been settled by Jews who are leaving their ineradicable imprint on them . . . If the refugees had come back to the realities that have developed in Israel, they would have certainly found it difficult to adjust to them. Urban professionals, merchants and officials would have had to wage a desperate battle for survival in a national economy within which all the key positions are held by Jews. Peasants would have been unable, in most cases, to return to their lands.

Here Kahane was rehearsing the argument of an earlier Foreign Office report, of March 16, 1949, also composed with a view to the Appeasement Committee which had just been set up under UN Resolution 194. Its authors seem to have been Michael Comay, director of the Commonwealth Department in the Foreign Office, and Zalman Lifshitz, former member of the Transfer Committee and adviser to Ben-Gurion on land issues. Written in English and entitled 'The Arab Refugee Problem', this document too emphasizes the impossibility of any Palestinian 'repatriation' in a detached, reality-has-changed, rhetorical register.²⁰ It adds, however, a tragic plotment. In this

¹⁹ SA/FO/CMDG 18/2406.

²⁰ SA/FO/CMDG 19/4222, vol. II; for the identification of the authors, see Morris, *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, p. 255 and Bombaji-Sasportas, 'Whose Voice is Heard', p. 148.

narrative the plight of the refugees is depicted as if it were the result of a natural disaster, whose outcome is mournful, but inevitable and irrevocable. The perpetrator of expatriation, the state for which the document speaks, and which the authors serve, has nothing to do with it. Note the use of impersonal constructions and of the passive voice:

During the war and the Arab exodus, the basis of their [the refugees'] economic life crumbled away. Moveable property which was not taken away with them has disappeared. Livestock has been slaughtered or sold. Thousands of town and village dwellings have been destroyed in the course of the fighting, or in order to deny their use to enemy forces, regular or irregular; and of those which remain habitable, most are serving as temporary homes for [Jewish] immigrants . . . But even if repatriation were economically feasible, is it politically desirable? Would it make sense to recreate that dual society, which has bedevilled Palestine for so long, until it led eventually to open war? Under the happiest of circumstances, a complex and uncertain situation is created where a single state must be shared by two or more people who differ in race, religion, language and culture.

'Present absentees'

Weitz's chillingly precise administrative term, 'retroactive transfer', tells the story of the Israeli drive to transform Palestine into an unreturnable and irrecollectible country for the external refugees who lost their homes during or after the war. Another term, of similar administrative and legal effect, and moral bearing, was coined for internal refugees within the borders of the state. These became known as 'present absentees' (*nokhehim nifkadim*).²¹ Of course, as Bombaji-Sasportas amply demonstrates, in this context 'external' and 'internal' are further markers of the determination of the Israeli establishment to objectify, control and dispossess the refugees.²² If we use them here, it is to show the realities behind them. What the term 'present absentees' designates is the history of the dispossession and displacement of those Palestinians—their number is estimated at 160,000—who found themselves within the state of Israel between 1948 and 1952. It tells of the tacit axis of apartheid

²¹ The haunting nature of this term was also noticed by David Grossman, who duly entitled his Hebrew book on the Palestinian Israelis *Present Absentees* (1992). The English translation is *Sleeping on a Wire*.

²² See especially her discussion of 'the construction of a body of knowledge and the framing of the refugees as a scientific object', and 'the categorization of the refugees', pp. 44–99.

that defines the state of Israel to this day: the interplay between the formal inclusion of Palestinians as citizens and their structural exclusion from equal rights within the state. This is the particular dialectic of oppression—of a population formally present but in so many crucial ways absent—that makes the legal-administrative definition of these Palestinians so coldly accurate.

The category of ‘absentees’ was originally a juridical term for those refugees who were ‘absent’ from their homes but ‘present’ within the boundaries of the state as defined by the Armistice Agreements of 1949. The vast majority of the Palestinians so classified were not allowed to return to their homes, to reclaim their property, or to seek compensation. Instead the state promulgated the Law of Absentees’ Properties in 1950, which legalized the plundering of their possessions. The looting of Arab property was given the guise of a huge land transaction that the state had conducted with itself. A thinly disguised official entity called ‘The Custodian’ was authorized to sell absentees’ land (defined in Clause 1[b] of the Law) to the Development Agency, a government body created specifically to acquire it. This agency then sold it on to the Jewish National Fund. At the end of the chain these lands were privately farmed out to Jews only (this was the procedural significance of the JNF), and gradually became *de facto* private property, while remaining *de jure* in the keeping of the state.²³

Cultural obliteration

If such was the outcome of the legal status of absentee, the fully dialectical notion of ‘present absentees’ was devised in more literary fashion by yet another high-ranking bureaucrat in the Foreign Office, Alexander Dotan. In the early summer of 1952 he was working in its Department for International Institutions when UNRWA wound up its activities in the country and passed responsibility for ‘internal’ refugees to the Israeli government. In July, Dotan was appointed inter-ministerial coordinator and chair of the Advisory Committee on Refugees. After some research, he then wrote a series of memoranda that offered background briefing

²³ The text of this law is rather long, but is accessible in any official collection of Knesset legislation. For critical comments on the law, see Alina Korn, *The Arab Minority in Israel during the Military Government (1948–1966)*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991, pp. 91–6, and Tom Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis*, Jerusalem 1984, pp. 93–5 [both in Hebrew].

and solutions for 'the refugee problem'. The first document, dated November 9, 1952, was specifically concerned with those refugees within Israel who had not been allowed to return to their homes, and many of whom dwelt in other Palestinian villages and towns. Dotan identified and defined these people—for the first time, it would seem—as 'present absentees'.²⁴ The literary features of the memorandum are striking. Tragic emplotment, ostensible empathy and anthropological detachment are all deployed to generate a Realist depiction of the way 'present absentees' are likely to remember the past:

The fundamental problem of the refugee, who is wholly dependent on government policy, is land. The current position is that a refugee will often live in a village in Galilee, adjacent to his deserted lands and village, as if at an observation post. The distance is usually just a few kilometres and, in most cases, the refugees would have been able to cultivate their land from their present place of residence, if they had been allowed to do so, even without returning to the deserted and destroyed village. From his place of observation and present shelter the refugee follows what is happening on his land. He hopes and yearns to return to it, but he sees the new [Jewish] immigrants who are trying to strike roots in the land, or those who have farmed it out from the Custodian, or the way the orchards are gradually deteriorating because no one looks after them. The refugee desires to return to his land, if only to some of it when it is mostly already settled by Jews, and he therefore usually seeks to farm it out from the Custodian, something that is denied to him.

Dotan was adamant that prolongation of these conditions was politically and culturally impossible. His conclusion, however, was not to return the properties and grant real citizenship to the 'internal' refugees, at least. The foundational myths of Zionism made—as they still do—any conjunction of the words 'return' and 'Arabs' or 'Palestinians' unthinkable. What Dotan had in mind was something else: a comprehensive assimilation (*hitbolelut*) of these Palestinians into the Jewish state and society of Israel by obliterating their memory, identity and culture. Dotan deliberately used the very term that was pivotal in the self-justification of the Zionist movement: *hitbolelut* was the disaster that recovery of the land of Israel would prevent—the disappearance of the Jewish people through assimilation in the Diaspora. Such was the future now to be benignly extended to the Arabs within Israel. In a second memorandum, of November 12, 1952, Dotan warned that current state policies could

²⁴ SA/FO/A/2/2445 (a-948 II).

induce the Palestinians within Israel to feel that they were ‘a persecuted national minority that identifies with the Arab nation.’²⁵ To avert this risk, he proposed a new strategy that would aim on the one hand ‘to integrate the Arabs into the state’ by ‘opening the gates of assimilation to them’, while on the other it would ‘fiercely combat those who are unwilling or unable to adapt to the [Jewish] state’. Dotan was aware of the likely objections to such a policy, and met them head on. ‘It may rightly be asked: what are the prospects that the Arabs would assimilate?’ This can be answered only through experience, but if one wished to draw a lesson from history one could say that assimilation has been a very common feature in the Middle East since time immemorial.’

The colonial logic of this conception was spelt out with arresting clarity, as Dotan went on to explain how an irreversible obliteration of Palestinian identity might be achieved:

The realization of such a new policy requires a comprehensive onslaught upon the Arab minority by both the state and the Jewish public in the country, and it seems that an important instrument of it might be the formation of a secular Jewish cultural mission. The mission would act as the emissary of the Jewish people and Israeli progress in the Arab village. Under no circumstances should party politics be allowed within or through it. This mission would establish special training seminars for Jewish counsellors to operate in Arab villages, on the lines of our counsellors in the *ma'abarot* or in the new settlements, and like *the missions to the Indian villages in Mexico*.²⁶ These counsellors would infiltrate the villages together with the refugees, who would begin to settle them, and would accompany the refugees from the first day of their installation . . . Missions of two to three male and female counsellors for every twenty to thirty villages should suffice to effect agrarian changes within them. Such a mission would reside in a village; teach Hebrew; offer agricultural instruction, medical assistance and welfare; supply social guidance; act as natural mediator between the village and the authorities and the Hebrew community; and keep a security check on everything that happens in and around the village. Such a mission could acquire influence on all village matters and fundamentally alter them within a few years.

Dotan’s proposal incurred the wrath of Ben-Gurion’s powerful and ruthless adviser on Arab affairs, Josh Palmon, who favoured the continuation

²⁵ SA/FO/CMDG 2/2445 A (a-948 II).

²⁶ *Ma'abarot*: the transition camps built for the massive Jewish immigration of the 1950s—transitory for Ashkenazi arrivals, less so for Sephardi; emphasis added.

of a notoriously oppressive military government in the hope that this would extend the process of ‘retroactive transfer’—ie, *de facto* expulsion—to the ‘internal’ refugees as well. But Dotan reiterated his argument undeterred. His next report, of November 23, 1952, warning that outside powers might otherwise try to impose ‘cultural autonomy’ for the Palestinian minority on Israel, pressed home his scheme for an Arab *hitbolelut*. There could hardly be a more tangible example of the deliberate attempt to erase the very memory of an Arab Palestine than the final brick of Dotan’s assimilationist edifice. This is what he wrote to the Foreign Minister:

An important tool for us is accelerated reconstruction of ancient geographical names and Hebraicization [*shi ‘abur*] of Arabic toponyms. In this respect the most important task is to disseminate the practical use of the new names, a process that has run into difficulties among Jews too. In Jaffa the name ‘Jibaliyya’ is still current, although ‘Giv’at Aliya’ is gradually disinheriting it. By contrast, a Hebrew name has not been found yet for ‘Ajami’, and some new immigrants still incorrectly call the Arab neighbourhood within it the ‘Ghetto’ or ‘Arab Ghetto’. It is possible, by being strictly formal and with adequate indoctrination, to make the Arab inhabitants of ‘Rami’ [in the Upper Galilee] get used to calling their village, in speech and writing, ‘Ha-Rama’ (Ramat Naftali), or to make the inhabitants of ‘Majd al-Krum’ [also in the Upper Galilee] become used to calling their village ‘Beit ha-Kerem’. From the inhabitants of what the Arabs called ‘Shafa’amer [near Haifa], I have already heard the [Hebraicized] name ‘Shefar’am’.²⁷

Dotan described his second memorandum as a ‘Final Solution of the Refugee Problem in Israel’. The easy use of the term is striking. Here lie the historical roots of the obsessive refusal to concede to the Palestinians the right of return, which—more than the unity of Jerusalem—is the widest consensual basis of Israeli politics today. It is this which explains the genuine—preposterous—belief that withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967 and dismantling of the settlements would be a painful compromise.

²⁷ Cited in Yitzhak Laor, *Narratives with no Natives*, p. 132. Laor’s critical work is the most sensitive attempt to date to show how the literary establishment has been co-opted by the Israeli state to write the hegemonic script that deletes the memories of the Palestinians. See especially ‘The Sex Life of the Security Forces: On Amos Oz’, and ‘We Write Thee Oh Homeland’, pp. 76–105, 115–71.