

NAKBA

Background

The Nakba, the Arabic word for ‘catastrophe’, refers to the process of ethnic cleansing, forced expulsion and forced flight of Palestinian people from their homes, lands and property in their ancestral land. The Nakba began in 1947, as the British Mandate withdrew from Palestine and Jewish settler-colonialists violently established the Israeli state. This involved the deliberate and systematic campaign to ethnically cleanse Palestine of Palestinians to create a majority Jewish state.¹ It led to the displacement and dispossession of the indigenous Palestinian people. It is commemorated on 23rd May each year.

Scale

From 1947 to 1949, Israeli forces and Zionist paramilitary groups destroyed 531 Palestinian villages and carried out more than 70 massacres against innocent civilians. More than 15,000 Palestinians were killed between November 1947 and July 1949.² 700,000 to 750,000 Palestinians became refugees during the Nakba. 25% of those who remained became internally displaced persons (IDPs). The majority of displaced Palestinians ended up in crowded refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, neighbouring Arab countries and many other countries around the world.

Ongoing Nakba

The Nakba led to the destruction of Palestinian society, allowing Israel to establish a regime of racial domination and oppression over the Palestinian people which persists to the present day. For this reason, the Nakba is deemed an ongoing continuous process of deprivation, marked by population transfer, apartheid rule, and institutionalised dispossession, through policies which never ended and continue to be entrenched today. Referring to Nakba in the past tense is inaccurate and misleading, as it implies that it is consigned to history, rather than the lived reality of the continuous and ongoing violations of Palestinian human rights since 1948.

Israel’s prolonged denial of Palestinian refugees’ right to return, a right guaranteed under UN General Assembly Resolution 194,³ exemplifies Zionism’s settler-colonial logic of elimination and transfer of indigenous Palestinians from their land. It demonstrates the continued effect of the Nakba. Israel has established and maintains a myriad of policies and practices to transfer Palestinians out of Palestine and prevent their return. For instance, Israel uses the Palestinian population registry to deny Palestinians entry and residence, and to coerce Palestinians into permanently leaving areas that it covets for settlement construction.

Demographic transition

The forced displacement of Palestinian people during the Nakba has led to erroneous claims that the Palestinian population has dwindled. In fact, current estimates suggest that the Palestinian world population totalled 13.4 million by the end of 2019, which means it has doubled more than 9 times since 1948. More than half of this population lives in historic Palestine – approximately 6.64 million people.⁴

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) estimates that there are 5.9 million Palestine Refugees, 1.5 million of whom live in 58 refugee camps (10 in Jordan, 9 in Syria, 12 in Lebanon, 19 in the West Bank and 8 in Gaza Strip).⁵ These estimates represent the minimum number of likely

¹ [IMEU \(2023\) Plan Dalet Blueprint for the Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine. Institute for Middle Eastern Understanding \(IMEU\).](#)

² [Ola Awad. The Nakba: Ethnic cleansing, displacement of Palestinians and settler colonialism. Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.](#)

³ [UNGA. \(1948\) United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 \(III\). UNGA/A/RES/194.](#)

⁴ [Ola Awad. The Nakba: Ethnic cleansing, displacement of Palestinians and settler colonialism. Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.](#)

⁵ UNRWA. [Palestine Refugees.](#)

refugees, since many are not registered. UNRWA's definition of 'Palestine Refugees' is "*persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.*"⁶

This number also does not include the Palestinians displaced in the period from 1949 to June 1967. The UNRWA definition of refugees does not cover Palestinians who migrated or those who were displaced after 1967 because of the war and who were not registered refugees. True figures are likely to be higher than official statistics.

Erasure of the Nakba

Since 1948, the Israel Land Authority and the Jewish National Fund physically tried to erase the memory of the Nakba by building parks and settlements in the places where destroyed Palestinian villages were, as well as renaming and 'hebraizing' them. A 1992 study counted 2,780 locations, including 340 villages and towns and 560 wadis and rivers.⁷

Malmab, the Israeli Defence Ministry's secretive security department, carried out official suppression of crucial documents about the Nakba in Israeli archives.⁸ This practice was confirmed by Yehiel Horev, Director of Malmab from 1986-2007, ostensibly to avoid unrest.⁹ A 1948 document entitled 'The Emigration of the Arabs of Palestine' was removed from archives and rendered inaccessible in 1986. The file identified 'whispering operations', 'ultimate expulsion orders', 'fear of Jewish response' and 'military operations by Jewish combatants' as reasons for 'Arab depopulation',¹⁰ a euphemism for ethnic cleansing.

In contrast to the standard Israeli narrative, this shows how Palestinian people were forcibly expelled from their homes and ethnically cleansed. It shows the longstanding pattern of institutional efforts by Israel to suppress evidence and obfuscate the reality of the Nakba.

Legal entrenchment of Nakba erasure: '2011 Nakba Law'

A bill was proposed in the Knesset in 2008 by Alex Miller KM of Yisrael Beiteinu. The bill sought to outlaw all Nakba commemorations, with a three-year prison sentence for such acts of remembrance. The prison sentence provision was dropped but in March 2011, the bill passed under the name Budget's Foundations Act (Amendment No. 40),¹¹ which granted new powers to allow the Israeli government to reduce state funding for institutions that commemorated the Nakba. This shows the institutionalisation of erasure of the Nakba.

⁶ UNRWA. [Palestine Refugees](#).

⁷ M. Amara. (2017). "Hebraization of Arabic Place Names". [Arabic in Israel: Language, Identity and Conflict](#).

⁸ S. Anziska. (2019) Erasure of the Nakba in Israel's archives. [Journal of Palestine Studies](#). Vol. XLIX, No. 1.

⁹ H. Shezaf. (2019) [Burying the Nakba: How Israel Systematically Hides Evidence of 1948 Expulsion of Arabs](#). [Haaretz](#).

¹⁰ S. Anziska. (2019) Erasure of the Nakba in Israel's archives. [Journal of Palestine Studies](#). Vol. XLIX, No. 1.

¹¹ Adalah. (2011) "Nakba Law" - Amendment No. 40 to the Budgets Foundations Law. [Adalah \(Legal Centre for Arab Minority Rights in Israel\)](#).